

Liturgical Musical Ethnography

Challenges and Promise

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1. Introduction

I will address ‘Challenges and Promise of Liturgical Musical Ethnography’ from the perspective of ten years of research which focused on music in the worship of a predominantly African American Catholic community on the east side of San Francisco, California, Our Lady of Lourdes, affectionately known as Lourdes.¹ I was attracted to this community in the early 1990s, aware that at that time liturgical scholars in the United States were paying little attention to the cultural diversity of practice that was unfolding in the American church and to the rich resources of theological and liturgical insight that this practice holds out for our field. Moreover, the Lourdes community, in their embrace of the African American gospel music tradition, was releasing a ‘subversive memory’ into the life of the church, embodying a tradition of ritual music that had been suppressed for several centuries in Roman Catholic practice, reuniting their African-based cultural heritage with their Catholic identity. I sensed that their lived worship and music would enrich as well as challenge my own scholarly assumptions, a process I would later document in *A Precious Fountain: Music in the Worship of an African American Catholic Community*.²

While rooted in the premises of liturgical theology, my methods were shaped in large measure by strategies and theoretical premises drawn from Ethnomusicology and Ritual Studies.³ At the time, methodologies for empirical research in the field of Liturgical Studies were almost non-existent, and the term ‘liturgical ethnography’ not yet coined. My research goals opened a wide lens: to study how music is integral to the very act of worship in the Lourdes community and expressive of participants’ embodied theology. My intent was to allow their voices to be heard: to create a dialogue between their liturgical wisdom and theological acumen and the articulated understandings of liturgical theology, hoping that other studies of this kind would follow.

¹ This address was given as the keynote for a symposium on ‘Liturgical Musical Ethnography: Challenges and Promise’ at the Protestant Theological University, Utrecht, on November 23, 2009.

² See M. McGANN: *A Precious Fountain: Music in the Worship of an African American Catholic Community* (Collegeville 2002) for a more complete portrait of this community and its musical-liturgical tradition.

³ See M. McGANN: *Exploring Music as Worship and Theology* (Collegeville 2002) for a more complete explanation of my method.

Challenges abound in Liturgical Musical Ethnography. I have chosen to focus on five that arise in the practical sphere of doing and writing ethnography, illustrating throughout with examples from my research at Lourdes.

2. Challenge one: negotiating interlocking identities

The first challenge I will address concerns the identity of the researcher, or more accurately, negotiating the interlocking identities of the researcher and the community studied: human encounters that constitute the very grounds of ethnography, relationships that are key to the accuracy and fruitfulness of the outcomes of the research.⁴

Entering the life and worship of an African American community, I was well aware that while an insider to their Catholic tradition, I was a considerable outsider to their cultural heritage – a white American woman of Irish heritage whose liturgical formation was markedly different than their own; a doctoral student with degrees in music, religious studies and liturgy.⁵ Yet in the research situation, I discovered quickly that identities are multiple and changing, fluid and at times ambiguous, able to be mobilized in ways that enhance the research.⁶ This was true not only of my identity, but that of the Lourdes community with whom I was now interacting both individually and collectively. Lourdes is a vibrant community of faith, many of whose members migrated to San Francisco from Louisiana and other parts of the southern United States; ‘cradle Catholics’, whose ritual lives have also been nourished in Baptist and Pentecostal churches; living now in urban neighborhoods marked by consider-

⁴ See J.V. SPICKARD & J.S. LANDRES: ‘Introduction: Whither Ethnography? Transforming the Social-Scientific Study of Religion’, in J.V. SPICKARD, J.S. LANDRES & M.B. McGUIRE (eds.): *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion* (New York 2002) 1-14, p. 6-7. See also M. KISLIUK: ‘Performance Ethnography’, in *Seize the Dance! BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance* (New York 1998) 11-14, p. 13. Kisliuk discusses the problematization of a perceived divide between ‘self and ‘other’, the need to recognize that ‘we are multiple selves and multiple others, constituted relationally’, and the fact that these ‘various identities can overlap and rupture’ in the ethnographic process.

⁵ ‘Border-crossings’, at once physical, ethical, conceptual, ritual, and musical are essential to the research process. See M. PENA: ‘Encountering Latina Mobilization: Field Research on the U.S. / Mexico Border’, in SPICKARD et al (eds.): *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* 113-124. Also Ronald Grimes speaks of maximizing ‘the tension between insider and outsider points of view so that the dialectic of distancing and empathizing can take place’. See his *Ritual Criticism* (Columbia 1991) 59. Hence, the difference between my liturgical-musical formation and theirs became a useful tool in the ethnographic process.

⁶ See M.J. NEITZ: ‘Walking between the Worlds: Permeable Boundaries, Ambiguous Identities’, in SPICKARD et al (eds.): *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* 35.

able violence and economic struggle. As African Americans, their history spoke loudly of oppression, of others 'taking from them' – mining their physical strength, cultural wealth, and spiritual dynamism for a gain that left them impoverished. Hence, my attention to power issues was critical.⁷ I chose to keep in low profile my research agendas and educational status, while maximizing my genuine fascination with their gospel performance and my willingness to learn. At the same time, I embraced an ethical commitment to find multiple ways in which the Lourdes community would benefit from the research.⁸

Throughout my years at Lourdes, I was aware of stages, thresholds, points of passage in our interlocking identities; moments when trust was built and understandings were deepened. One year into the research, an unexpected 'initiation' took place – a welcome into the gospel choir that had significant consequences for my research. Prior to this I had attended choir rehearsals, transcribing their aural learning processes from my place in the fifth pew of the church. Indeed much would change.

I was looking forward to this moment – a warm September Sunday in 1994. Ever since Louise Wood burst into a choir rehearsal in late February announcing that the choir *must* learn the song 'Perfect Praise', the choir had rehearsed it intermittently. These past weeks, they had worked in earnest. Today they would offer it as a 'Communion Meditation'. A sense of expectation settled over the room as the choir fanned out across the sanctuary. The pianist modulated into a gentle, stately introduction. I could almost feel the choir members getting into the piece as they began their silent, rhythmic sway from side to side. Just then, Ernestine Harris peered out at me from the soprano section and motioned me to come into the sanctuary. Stunned, I watched her gestures become more emphatic. 'Come up her, Sistah!', she said in a stage whisper. My body felt immobile, glued to the third pew. She turned to Pat Goodall, the choir director, and said: 'Get Sistah to come up here. She sang this song with us on Thursday, she can sing it with us now!' Pat turned around and motioned to me. Embarrassed by the confusion, I realized that I had no choice. I was exposed! Yes, I had asked to 'try out the song' with them in rehearsal, but to sing with them this morning? Sheepishly, I walked forward and slipped into the choir line between Ernestine Harris and Rita Turner, feeling conspicuous as I stood among the blue-robed singers without a 'wedding garment'. But no matter. The song was underway and a sense of reverence had returned. My heart pounded as we began softly: 'Oh, Lord, how excellent! How excellent! How

⁷ See K. McCARTHY BROWN: 'Writing about "The Other", Revisited', in SPICKARD et al: *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* 127-133, 127-128. Brown explores the significance of power issues to her study of 'Mama Lola', and underscores the importance of 'extended, intimate, and committed contact between researcher and subject' that can 'undercut the colonial mindset' in anthropological writing which assumes that 'the greater social power of the researcher overwhelms the subject' of the research. See K. McCARTHY BROWN: *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley 1991).

⁸ See McGANN: *Exploring Music* 43-44, for a discussion of ethical concerns and procedures.

excellent!' Then like a geyser shooting its burst of water toward the sky, 'How excellent is your name!!' Questions raced through my mind. Had I paid enough attention on Thursday? Did I remember the soprano entrances? I fixed my gaze on the choir director, relieved to notice that her gaze was intent on me, ready to prompt me should I falter. My body relaxed a bit and the song began to take over. Once more we began in hushed tones: 'There is none like You, none like You, none like You!' Only to spiral again through ascending intervals and a sudden crescendo: 'Jesus, excellent is your name!' I glanced out into the church, startled by the scene before me – row after row of faces seemingly entranced by the song. But quickly I looked back at Pat, afraid I would miss the subtle timing of another 'Excellent!' By now the tenors were leaning into their repeated exclamation: 'In all the earth, in all the earth, in all the earth...' The altos took it up with a new melody. Now it was the sopranos' turn. My eyes watched Pat to catch the split second, off-beat entry: 'Every knee shall bow, and every tongue proclaim that He is Lord!' 'Jesus, excellent!' we concluded together. I hardly remember how many times we layered those three lines of music into a great contrapuntal dance. But by the time we swelled to our last 'Jesus, excellent in your name!' a roar of applause burst out. People were shouting: 'Excellent!' 'He's excellent!' When I finally looked out, I could see that the whole church had risen to its feet, exhilarated by the volcano of praise into which they had just been drawn. The air was tingling. The intensity of those high pitched 'Excellents' were still bouncing off the wooden rafters of the vaulted ceiling, reverberating from the tiny 'rose window' I could now see at the rear of the high gallery. Some one hugged Pat, I don't remember who. Choir members were in tears, exhilarated by this burst of praise and relieved that they had navigated their way through a new piece. In the midst of the commotion, someone walked up to me and said emphatically: 'Chil', you need a choir robe!'⁹

Coming into the choir was not simply a change of performance venue, but at least as significantly a change in relationships.¹⁰ Indeed I was now positioned in the sanctuary, able to see the entire worshiping assembly, and observe their manifold ways of engaging in the music – a significant boon to my research. More importantly, they had welcomed me into a new place in the community, entrusted me with a valued ministry, increased my vulnerability as a learner, but at the same time affirmed my progress in understanding their music. I was now a part of their common mission of 'singing the gospel', judged to be better able to understand what they valued most deeply in their worship practice.

Beyond the worship itself and events like rehearsals that surround it, many of my encounters with members of the community were in informal and familial settings, not the formal interviews I had anticipated and had tried so hard to set up, to no avail. Sharing home-made gumbo at the kitchen table of a choir member; conversing with the choir director as I drove her home to her apartment after Sunday liturgy; catching a quick supper at a local café with the pianist before a rehearsal. In these familial places we could talk openly, freely, un-

⁹ McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 86-88. Adapted for reading at the symposium.

¹⁰ McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 88.

selfconsciously. Around these tables they became partners in the research process, true collaborators in my search to understand their musical-liturgy, while teaching me things I never set out to learn. Over time, these tables opened to me a new image of how and where liturgical theologizing takes place – of where local theologies come into being. Couched in conversations about life's trials and tribulations were narratives of God's redemption and the Spirit's transformation that could elucidate what I saw, felt and heard in the lyrics of the songs and the words of worship that I witnessed each Sunday morning.¹¹ Indeed my identity as a woman and a scholar was being changed by this process.

3. Challenge two: full performance ethnography

The second challenge I want to take up is that of full performance ethnography. Two assumptions are implicit in this challenge: first, that music and liturgy are performative by nature – they exist in performance; and second, that musical idioms are not only sonic traditions but carriers of social customs, ritual expectations, historical shapings, spirituality and cosmology – all of which unfold dynamically in performance.¹²

Aware of these premises, I found myself continually challenged to meet the demands of full performance ethnography: that is, accounting for the whole range of human experience and interaction that transpires in musical/liturgical events;¹³ staying focused on the particularity of each performance of a song or a worship event, while bringing a whole range of performative, analytical and contextual information to bear on my appreciation of what was taking place.

The description of Lourdes' performance of the song 'Perfect Praise' on the day I was invited into the choir, just narrated, assumes a broad background of information:

- how new pieces come into the repertoire – typically, as this one did, suggested by a choir member, a fact that increases the personal connection the community has with each of its songs;
- how musical choices are made by the choir about how songs will be performed, always calibrated to increase the spiritual impact of the music;
- how the scriptural quality of these particular lyrics would increase their significance in the devotional life of the community,
- and how images of *praise* that pervade this piece would find resonance within the larger tapestry of the community's iconic meanings.

¹¹ See McGANN: 'Speaking Theologically', in IDEM: *A Precious Fountain* 259-271, for a more complete theological exploration of the theological narratives that unfold in the performance of this community's Sunday worship.

¹² See McGANN: *Exploring Music* 9, 37-39.

¹³ See KISLIUK: *Seize the Dance!* 12-13.

Three strategies were helpful to me in meeting the challenge of full performance ethnography: first, entering the performance medium directly; second, bringing multiple analytic frames to bear; and third, gathering contextual information about the repertoire of songs, and the community's life and history.¹⁴

3.1. Entering the performance medium directly

In accomplishing the first strategy, I was fortunate that before joining the choir, I had engaged in the music from multiple places within liturgical gathering. Gospel music assumes that the whole performing community is part of the music ensemble. Moreover, I had learned the range of bodily modes of engagement that are considered integral to the music itself – singing, hand clapping, shouts, vocal interjections, dance-like bodily movements – all of which are a means of heightening the intensity of the event, the personal engagement in the faith communication set in motion musically, and the possibility that the Holy Spirit will visit the participants.

Once located within the choir, close to the generating center of the music, I was better able to identify the multiple and overlapping schemes at work in a single musical process. I came to see that songs like 'Perfect Praise' are intended not only to praise God – which is the expressed purpose of *all* music sung at Lourdes – but also to create an experience of solidarity among the members; a reassurance of the community's oneness in faith that can sustain the fragmented, even violent reality of their urban lives. This experience of felt-solidarity is orchestrated musically, as diverse voices and bodily expressions are gathered up into one rhythmically pulsing body; and as devotional energy, carried on musical crescendos and spiraling melodic lines, galvanizes participants in a common shout of praise to a God who is excellent, who is trustworthy, who is source of their strength and survival.

3.2. Bringing multiple analytic frames to bear

This second strategy allowed me to assess the performance from various vantage points: temporal, spatial, sonic, social, ritual, to name a few – trying not to privilege one aspect as dominant but holding them in tension.¹⁵ One early discovery in this analytic process was that at Our Lady of Lourdes, a porous boundary exists between preaching and singing. I noted this in the similarity of bodily expressiveness used by singers and preachers, the semblance of melodic range and emotional energy they employed, and the clear intentionality of both to enable the gospel to directly impact people's lives. This insight was corrobo-

¹⁴ See MCGANN: *Exploring Music* 37-57.

¹⁵ See C.A.M. HERMANS: 'Empirical Liturgical Research: Interdisciplinary Theory Building in Conjunction with Ritual Studies', in B. KRANEMANN & P. POST (eds.): *Modern Ritual Studies as a Challenge for Liturgical Studies* (Leuven 2009) 233-257, p. 234-239, for a discussion of analytic frames.

rated by spontaneous comments made by singers, especially the women: 'It's about a message!', I heard them say, 'We're singing the gospel!', 'Sometimes it feels like we're preaching!', 'We're disciples!', 'We're sending out a message so that people can get some kind of healing, some kind of release...to let them know that God is really there with them!'¹⁶ Analysis of the confluence of what are often considered two discrete liturgical acts – singing and preaching – enabled me to conclude that singing at Lourdes functions to stretch the preaching ministry more extensively throughout the Catholic rite than its traditional place in one homiletic moment; and that singers – assumed by the community to be preachers of the Word of God – are afforded a liturgical 'authority' rarely rendered to musicians.¹⁷

Analysis also pointed me toward the concentration of songs that cluster around the time of Communion – the time of sharing consecrated bread and wine that occurs late in unfolding of the Catholic rite – and which at Lourdes is the most densely musical part of the service: two songs performed sequentially and a third usually added as a 'special request' for someone who 'just needed to hear that song!'¹⁸ Unlike the upbeat singing that characterizes much of the Lourdes' liturgy, Communion songs are chosen from the slow gospel repertoire – songs stretched, sustained and embellished in such a way as to 'bring you down' and hold you in a place of quiet and heart-felt intensity. Comments participants made about this time in the liturgy elucidated what I was noticing in my analysis: 'By [Communion time], enough has happened...' 'We've been through something together...' 'I feel so connected to everyone in the church...' 'Something has happened – we're ready to receive a new message...' I came to realize that at Lourdes, everything in the liturgical action moves toward Communion. The whole way the community engages in worship moves them toward this moment. You can't rush it, they say. It needs to be prepared. But once there, music holds the community in an extended time of 'communion' and solidarity with each other and with God.

3.3. Gathering contextual information about the music and the community

This third analytic strategy always threatened to get out of hand, given the enormous complexities and extent of the material. My several-year search to estimate the size and shape of the Lourdes oral repertoire turned up an amazing collection of some two hundred fifty songs, all learned aurally by the choir, with no inventory or cataloging and no authoritative hymnal to consult.¹⁹ More important to my research than a list of titles was how these songs had come into

¹⁶ See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 106-118.

¹⁷ See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 106-118, 220-233.

¹⁸ See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 185-194.

¹⁹ While hymnals are consulted from time to time by those in musical leadership and choir members, the transmission of songs is done aurally and orally.

the Lourdes repertoire. Who selected them? How they were learned? What occasions gave rise to incorporating them in worship? These were the keys to the 'social history' of the music that could unlock dimensions of the meaningfulness that community members find in their repertoire. This information unfolded gradually as I prodded people with my questions. Oral histories with elderly members of the community brought abundant insights not only about the history of the community but also about the evolution of their musical style, and the contexts from which the music sprang. One of these elders, Deacon Jesse Banks, referred to affectionately as Brother Banks, described his young life on a plantation in the rural south of the United States just one short generation after the emancipation of African slaves. With tears in his eyes, he described the prayer gatherings, the heartfelt singing that sustained them in hard times, and the sound of his mother's voice as she sang songs of praise such as 'O, How I love Jesus' that are today part of the liturgical repertoire of Lourdes and are being intentionally handed on to younger generations.²⁰

4. Challenge three: epistemology

The third challenge I will touch on is an epistemological one. What kind of knowledge is important for ethnographic research? How do we come to know what we know about the communities we study? And how do we account to others for that knowledge?

It is my assumption that what is religiously important to the communities we study resides not simply in their intellects, but in the whole spirit-mind-body of the participants,²¹ and in the complexities of human-persons-interacting-in-community.²² To say this another way, the rich, holistic human knowing that takes place in ritual and music making is indeed *body*-based.²³ As Theodore Jennings has noted, 'ritual knowing' is 'more corporeal than cerebral.' In ritual 'the body minds itself.'²⁴ Participants engage in what Raymond Williams describes as 'the affective dimensions of consciousness' and in 'social processes

²⁰ See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 52-67.

²¹ M.B. McGUIRE: 'New-Old Directions in the Social Scientific Study of Religion: Ethnography, Phenomenology, and the Human Body', in SPICKARD et al (eds.): *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* 195-211, p. 200.

²² See H. BLUMER: *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Methods* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1969). As noted in McGANN: *Exploring Music* 27.

²³ See McGUIRE: 'New-Old Directions' 200-209; also McGANN: *Exploring Music* 31.

²⁴ T.W. JENNINGS: 'On Ritual Knowledge', in *Journal of Religion* 62,2 (1982) 111-127, p. 115.

[that] tightly interweave thought and feeling,' such that feelings are thought and thoughts are felt.²⁵

Hence, coming to *know* the significance of the practice of the Lourdes community meant paying attention not only to the experience others were having, but to my own inner intuitions as well; cultivating a critical self-awareness of the emotional, intuitive, and empathetic responses that were engendered in me, so that these might serve as bridges to the experience others were having.²⁶ Sympathetic action – engaging with musicians as a fellow performer, 'feeling with' them as a way of 'knowing with them' – became a critical epistemological tool, that entailed

- learning a new vocabulary of feeling and expressiveness in my own body, more visceral and extraverted;
- tuning into emotional responses, noting not only moments of release and enjoyment, but also of dissonance and resistance;
- 'reading' the non-verbal dimensions of a song as an indication of the spiritual significance of what was taking place.

I did not need to 'have' their experience, but I did need to have an experiential ground for discerning what *they* were coming to know in the music-making, and for understanding the narratives they wove about the value and meaning of this experience.²⁷

For example, singers at Lourdes often stress the importance of singing 'soulfully', of 'letting your soul flow out with your words', indicating that 'soul' is essential to the efficacy of the music. I came to understand this more deeply one evening as I watched the choir director work with an inexperienced singer, inviting her over and again to 'dig down deep', gesturing to her to find the impassioned strength she needed to sing the song deep within her own body. The empathetic response engendered in my *own* body, as I watched and 'felt' this process unfold, made it clear to me that 'soulfulness' is more than a quality of vocal timbre. Rather, it requires a reaching down within oneself; discovering the core of one's vitality; touching the place where faith gives birth to song; and finding the inner authority from which to witness to God's action and the physical strength to capture in voice and body a 'faith that is incarnated, embodied praise'.²⁸

Another example springs likewise from a choir rehearsal: an evening when I began to grasp intuitively the connection people at Lourdes often make between music and the Holy Spirit.

²⁵ *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977) 132. As quoted in M. AUNE: 'The Subject of Ritual: Ideology and Experience in Action', in M.B. AUNE & V. DE MARINIS (eds.): *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations* (Albany 1996) 164.

²⁶ McGUIRE: 'New-Old Directions' 197-198.

²⁷ McGUIRE: 'New-Old Directions' 200-206.

²⁸ See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 220-233.

I arrived late that Thursday evening, caught in the snarl of traffic on the San Francisco Bay Bridge. As I slipped into the 'church-house', rehearsal was well under-way. I was still new to Lourdes, so I took my usual place several pews from the front. The choir was working intensely on a new song. Suddenly, Pat Goodall stopped everything and exclaimed: 'It's *dry*! It's *dead*! Let's go back to the top and start again!' I mused the next day on how striking Pat's images were for what was missing in the music – the opposite of dry is moist, fertile, refreshing. What began to change that evening as the choir continued to rehearse was not the tempo, the pitch or the rhythm of the song, nor even the arrangement of voices – these were already in place – but the energy singers seemed to invest in the singing. Their bodies became more engaged, their voices more confident, their concentration more focused, their singing more vibrant and soulful. It was as if the song began to sing itself, as if they were tapping some inner spiritual power that infused the music with a new vitality. Sitting there in the empty church, I could feel it. 'That's great! That's fine!', remarked Pat as the song came to an end, clearly satisfied. 'Let's go home!'

I began to listen more carefully to the images Pat and others used to describe how music sounds and feels when it's 'good'. A cluster emerged over time – 'good' music has energy; it flows, it builds, it's alive, it's pulsing, it touches, it gives comfort, it brings joy. Certain songs 'bring out the fire in me', remarked Corey Monroe in one conversation. 'They touch me... They give me energy. ... You get warm inside! ... You can feel it!' These images, I came to see, were remarkably similar to those used by members of Lourdes to describe their expectations of the Holy Spirit. Music becomes Spirit-like when it stirs, when it moves with an inner potency, when it surges with life that can draw you down or raise you up – music that is not dry but moist, fertile, refreshing. Perhaps it was no accident that a few weeks later I stumbled on these words of the mystic musician Hildegard von Bingen, written centuries earlier: 'Music has the power to soften even hard hearts, and by rendering hearts moist, it ushers in the Holy Spirit.'²⁹

5. Challenge four: accessing processes of meaning-making

The fourth challenge I will address has to do with meaning – more specifically, how ethnographers access the meaning-making that takes place as communities engage in music and worship. My approach is based on two underlying premises: 1) that the meanings we seek in ethnographic work are not simply lying dormant, waiting to be mined; rather, they are constantly arising and being appropriated by participants, in and through their social interaction, on this occasion, in this place;³⁰ and 2) that a ritualizing community has a unique power to

²⁹ McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 171-172. Adapted for reading at the symposium.

³⁰ See McGANN: *Exploring Music* 27-28. Also R.M. EMERSON, R.I. FRETZ & L.L. SHAW: *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago 1995) 4.

hold multiple, diverse, even contested meanings in a performative tension – never yielding to a final resolution, never giving way to a single meaning.³¹

These premises were underscored for me at a moment of crisis in the life of the Lourdes community when the neighboring parish was closed by the archdiocese, displacing a large Samoan community who worshiped there. Members of Lourdes grieved with their Samoan neighbors and friends over their loss. At the same time, they were dismayed at the prospect that Lourdes might double in size overnight should the Samoans choose to join them, and agonized over the stress it would put on the pastor and the challenge it would pose of integrating two very different styles of worship.

Late in the liturgy on the Sunday after the closure was announced, Lourdes' choir director suddenly changed the scheduled Song after Communion, replacing it with a beloved piece in the repertoire: 'Lord, Give Me an unwavering Faith!'³² One of the long-term members of the choir stepped forward and began to carry the community on the rich tones of her contralto voice in a sung-prayer for 'faith to climb that mountain, faith to climb that old, old rugged hill! Faith to insure God will answer, if I only do his will!' Within the complexities of what ensued as the song unfolded – expressive lyrics, moving bodies, tears, embraces, shouts, and heart-felt pleas begging God for direction and staunch faith – were polyphonic forms of *meaning-making*, never totally separable from the musical action itself nor translatable into other forms of discourse. I was reminded of the great modern dancer Martha Graham, who, when questioned on the meaning of a new dance she had choreographed responded: 'If I could have told you what the dance means, I wouldn't have had to dance it!'

Rather than elucidating single 'meanings,' I found it helpful to look for patterns of meaningfulness that cluster around certain images and experiences.³³ The image of 'home', for example evoked strong resonance for Lourdes' members:

- treasured songs in the repertoire had often been learned 'at home', sung by mothers and grandmothers;
- deceased members were referred to as being 'at home with God';
- the church-house itself was often referred to as 'home' – a 'home away from home' for those who had migrated from the South; a place where one can be 'at home' among family and respond in familial ways during the worship service.

Recognizing this pattern of meaningfulness that clusters around 'home', I was better able to understand the emotional energy, the shouts and clapping that

³¹ See C. BELL: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford 1992) 114-117.

³² See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 207-208.

³³ See F.W. CLOTHEY: 'Toward a Comprehensive Interpretation of Ritual, in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 2,2 (1988) 147-161, for a discussion of meaning and meaningfulness.

erupt each time the concluding verse of a particular song was sung. The lyrics of the verse claim that this 'earthly race ... will soon be over ... and there will be no more race for me to run, Lord! Then as I stand before Gods throne, all my heartaches will be gone, when I hear my Savior say *'Welcome home!'*'³⁴ Placed within a larger pattern of meaningfulness, the communal exuberance and unbridled joy that break out every time these words are sung are more than performative embellishments. They are a theological assertion, couched in simple familial language: an expectation of eschatological fulfillment imaged as 'home' and 'welcome'.³⁵

Related to the meaningfulness that emerges and is embedded in musical performance is the *discourse about meanings* that people weave around their worship and music: interpretations of practice and narratives of significance they create interpersonally in conversation. A brief example: I noticed at one point in my research that images of 'the blood of Jesus' occurred often in Lourdes' songs, and that participants responded strongly to these images. The blood of Jesus, as the lyrics of one song assert, 'reaches from the highest mountain, ... it flows to the lowest valley; the blood that gives me strength from day to day, it will never loose its power!'³⁶ I asked one of the community members, Irma Dillard, to explain.

She looked at me with a look of truth-telling – reminding me of how important blood has been in the history of her people; reminding me of the powerful memory of blood shed by Black Africans on the American continent; blood shed through lynching, beating, assassination; blood shed for the sake of liberating a people yoked by slavery and racism. Moreover, she added, the blood of Jesus *is* the guarantee that the liberation they died for is already accomplished.³⁷

I had my answer.

A final word about meaning-making. Anthropologist Roy Andrade contends that *meanings do things*: they 'represent the world'; they 'create cultural entities'; they 'direct one to do certain things'; and they 'evoke certain feelings'.³⁸ African American musical traditions are based on a similar premise: a 'functional aesthetic' that assumes that music is meant to *do* something – to move, to touch, to

³⁴ F.C. BARNES: 'Rough Side of the Mountain', ©1984 Sony/ATV Songs LLC. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203. All rights reserved.

³⁵ MCGANN: *Exploring Music* 79.

³⁶ A. CROUCH: 'The Blood will never lose its power', ©1966. Renewed 1994 by Manna Music, Inc., 35255 Brooten Road, Pacific City, OR 97135. All rights reserved.

³⁷ MCGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 223. Adapted for reading at the symposium.

³⁸ R.G. D'ANDRADE: 'Cultural Meaning Systems', in R.A. SCHWEDER & R.A. LE VINE (eds.): *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (Cambridge 1984) 88-119, as quoted in AUNE: 'The Subject of Ritual' 162.

heal; and that herein lies its meaningfulness.³⁹ Judging the meaningfulness of music at Lourdes by what members say it *does* reveals a rich tapestry of meanings: music nourishes, feeds, sustains, and enables them to praise; it brings release, binds them together, opens them to God, and connects them with generations of believers, especially their own foremothers and -fathers; it enables the Holy Spirit to give comfort, guidance, and strength for the journey; it brings light, healing, and deep joy. In sum, music in Sunday liturgy gives them, in their words, ‘something to feast on all week!’

6. Challenge five: portraying lived worship

The final challenge I want to address concerns the writing of ethnography: how to portray lived worship, not only for other academics, but for multiple communities of interest who will read our ethnographic texts.

Over the past few decades, anthropologists have wrestled with concerns about representation – how the communities we research are portrayed and what these representations accomplish.⁴⁰ Their probing offers three important perspectives: 1) that ethnographic texts are always ‘partial truths’⁴¹ – never complete pictures of the communities we describe; 2) that they are ‘cooperative and collaborative’ by nature – co-creations that tell us as much about their authors as about the community studied;⁴² and 3) that they are both ethical and political texts – impacting the communities studied in either positive or adverse ways, as they portray these communities to others.⁴³

These perspectives underscore that the task of writing musical-liturgical ethnography is not to represent an ‘aesthetic system’, neatly coherent, but rather ‘culture in flux’⁴⁴ and liturgical tradition-in-the-making.

As narrators, ethnographers must be willing to claim their place in the performance space, writing in the first person, making it clear that they are part to the interpretive process, claiming their complicity in the hermeneutical outcome, and *always* taking into account how their representation will affect the people they describe.

³⁹ O. WILSON: ‘Black Music as Art’, in *Black Perspective in Music* (1983) 1-22.

⁴⁰ See SPICKARD & LANDRES: ‘Whither Ethnography?’ 8-9.

⁴¹ J. CLIFFORD: ‘Introduction: Partial Truths’, in J. CLIFFORD & G.E. MARCUS (eds.): *Writing Culture: The Poetics and politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley 1986) 1-26, p. 7.

⁴² S.A. TYLER: ‘Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document’, in CLIFFORD & MARCUS (eds.): *Writing Culture* 122-141, p. 127

⁴³ SPICKARD & LANDRES: ‘Whither Ethnography?’ 9.

⁴⁴ KISLIUK: *Seize the Dance* 12.

With these in mind, let me comment on three aspects of my own writing. First, my primary accountability was indeed to Lourdes – to the trust they had invested in me and the work of collaborative scholarship they had helped me to create. I assumed throughout the project that they were the *subjects* of the study and indeed the first interpreters of their worship.⁴⁵ At various stages of the research I had invited individuals to read what I was writing, asking them to point out my biases and misinterpretations. The process became more formal in writing the final ethnography when I invited four persons to engage with me in a ‘dialogic editing’⁴⁶ of the entire work, reading each chapter and giving me feedback. My goal was to release their voices in concert with my own, to serve as a bridge to other readers, a midwife, if you will, to the birthing of our shared understandings.

Second, finding an appropriate genre, form, and style of writing by which to do this was indeed a challenge. I searched for ways to unlock the power of language to create experience,⁴⁷ to develop a performance-based writing style that could capture the vividness, effervescence and complexity of Lourdes’ lived practice. I chose to make narrative central to the final text and not simply illustrative, so as to immerse readers in the experience of worship and music as they unfold dynamically, inviting readers into the meaning-making process itself, and *showing* them, as much as telling them, how and what I learned in observing, conversing, sensing and interacting with this community.⁴⁸

Interrupting the narrative, I inserted periodic sections of analytic writing that allow me to view the experience from certain vantage points – time, space, words, flow and embodiment – and to engage a range of scholarly sources – theological, cultural, liturgical – as conversation partners in my interpretation. Indeed, the whole text is a ‘collage’⁴⁹ – a juxtaposition, a setting things side by side: performance, conversation, commentary, contextualizing circumstances and focused analysis, all situated in relation to each other, interacting in the text as they do in life, confronting and illuminating each other.

The third and final aspect of this challenge – one that I contend is an essential part of liturgical musical ethnography – was returning to liturgical theology to address the significance of what I had learned for our discipline, speaking now in the theological terms of the academy, and thematizing the community’s em-

⁴⁵ See MCGANN: *Exploring Music* 19.

⁴⁶ The image is taken from ethnomusicologist S. FELD: *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia 1990²) 260.

⁴⁷ M. Kisiuk states that the ‘ethnographer must spark and then engage her readers’ poetic and kinesthetic imaginations so as to bring the text to life’. IDEM: *Seize the Dance* 13.

⁴⁸ See McGUIRE: ‘New-Old Directions’ 198.

⁴⁹ Anthropologist James Clifford speaks of collage as ‘making space for heterogeneity, for historical and political, not simply aesthetic, juxtapositions’. See his *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1997) 3.

bodied practice – their embodied and lived theology – so as to create a dialogue, a place of mutuality, where meanings could inform each other.⁵⁰

Of all the rich insights into sacramentality, pneumatology, Christology, ecclesiology and eschatology that emerged in my research into Lourdes' music and worship, one of the most striking is the community's pervasive sense of the power of the Holy Spirit active in the worship – animating individuals, gifting persons for ministry, bringing Jesus alive in their midst, enlivening the action of worship, and bonding community members as a living body of faith.⁵¹ The worship event as a whole is understood by participants to be epicletic – the Holy Spirit is expected, welcomed, invoked, responded to and cooperated with so that an essential 'synergy' of spirits can empower them for discipleship and conform them to Christ. These perceptions reach deep into their African religious roots, where 'the main thrust of religious practice is to achieve harmony with the spirits of the High God and empowerment by the spirits'.⁵² They have been nurtured through generations of African American religious practice – rooted in Biblical perceptions of the Spirit as the life-giving energy of God, poured out in a great *kenosis*, transforming Ezekiel's dry, dusty field of bones into living, dancing beings and a group of fear-filled disciples gathered in Jerusalem into a courageous band of witnesses. This same Spirit, invoked and expected in worship at Lourdes, *requires* the co-action of the community who actively receive the Spirit's power and are unafraid of its manifestations.

Indeed, these perceptions, performed in song, dance, prayer and preaching, offer a rich fare of pneumatological insight and wisdom to our liturgical theologizing.

7. The promise of liturgical musical ethnography

Challenges abound in liturgical musical ethnography. We have touched on only a few. Yet the promise it offers to the field of liturgical studies is also great. Implicit in each of the challenges I have explored are intuitions of the future, hints of promise, intimations of how empirical studies are changing the discipline:

- new collaborative models of scholarship are emerging that involve scholars and local communities working together;

⁵⁰ See McGANN: 'Speaking Theologically', in IDEM: *A Precious Fountain* 259-271; also 'Creative Dialogue with Liturgical Studies', in IDEM: *Exploring Music* 58-81.

⁵¹ See McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 262-264.

⁵² C.J.R. RIVERS: *The Spirit in Worship* (Cincinnati 1978) 37. As quoted in McGANN: *A Precious Fountain* 263.

- focused attention is being given to how liturgical-musical traditions are in being shaped by worshipping communities and handed on to future generations;
- holistic approaches to research are being employed that enable liturgical scholars to access the embodied liturgical-theological practice about which we speak more systematically;
- ethnographic studies are giving access to the rich tapestries of meaningfulness woven by diverse communities, each of whom draw on their unique cultural and religious heritage;
- and new ways of building bridges between practice, theory and theology are being generated.

There is much promise in all of this!

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