Becoming Audible!
Asylum seekers, participatory action research and cultural encounters

Helmi Järviluoma
University of Eastern Finland

Taru Leppänen
University of Turku

Abstract
This paper draws on the participatory action research project Becoming Audible!, which was carried out between 2002 and 2004 by musicology students at the University of Turku, Finland, their teachers, and the asylum seekers of the Finnish Red Cross reception centre in Turku, Finland. The project activated asylum seekers to develop new musical and dance skills and maintain their functionality during the asylum process. In this paper, the focus is on racial, ethnic and cultural differences in the production of knowledge within Becoming Audible!.

Keywords: music of asylum seekers; participatory action research; music ethnography.

Introduction
The ordinary assumption of music being a universal language, which transcends boundaries and bonds people, has been questioned by music researchers, both musicologists and ethnomusicologists, over and over again. However, music seems to have a capacity for functioning as a resource for connecting people in a transna-
tional setting in a way which is specific for music in comparison with language or other means of communication. This capacity might be of value in the context of action research in a transnational setting.

This paper draws on the participatory action research project *Becoming Audible!*, which was carried out between 2002 and 2004 by musicology students at the University of Turku, Finland, their teachers Helmi Järviluoma, Taru Leppänen and Jouni Piekkari, and the asylum seekers of the Finnish Red Cross reception centre in Turku.

In the autumn of 2002, when we started the project, the Turku reception centre hosted 190 asylum seekers from twenty-five different countries. The core of our project consisted of asylum seekers from Ruanda, Nigeria (Biafra), the Balkans, Cuba, Pakistan and Congo. The *Becoming Audible!* project grew out of a sub-project of a larger Finnish project, *Becoming Visible!* , which aimed at enhancing the dialogues between asylum seekers and local residents. The goal of *Becoming Visible!* was to create opportunities for asylum seekers to study and work while in Finland. The European Social Fund’s EQUAL programme funded this project’s attempt to develop new co-operation models between educational institutions and reception centres. The project activated asylum seekers to develop new skills and maintain their functionality during the asylum process.

*Becoming Audible!* shared the same aims as *Becoming Visible!* Additionally, we tried to create networks, which hopefully would be useful for immigrants when seeking working opportunities or hobbies in Finland, but also if they are not given the status of a refugee or residence permit and thus a permission to stay in Finland. In the course of the project, the musical and dance skills of the asylum seekers have been developed: the time spent at the refugee centre could be very long – four years in one case, and one year was a very common case.

Since *Becoming Audible!* was a meeting point of several cultures, colonialist and imperialist power relations were constantly present, when knowledge within the project was produced. Several of these power relations are, to a certain degree, already negotiated in our culture: the researcher and the informant, citizen and asylum seeker, woman and man, adult and child, and “first world” and “third world”. This setting was extremely challenging because of the plethora of simultaneous differences. Instead of wiping these differences out and acting as if they did not exist, we considered it essential to critically examine and deconstruct the differences involved in the project. In this paper, the focus is on racial, ethnic and cultural differences in the production of knowledge within *Becoming Audible!*.

*Becoming Audible!* carried out a lot of activities, including fortnightly meetings and rehearsals in the centre, recordings, playing in an orchestra and dance activities, performances and workshops. We also encouraged asylum seekers to act as teachers for outsiders. During the project the members of the group shared and expressed their musical worldviews, and shared linguistic and musical knowledge and abilities. In 2003 we recorded a demo-CD, which was called *Becoming Audible!* Moreover, musicology students and teachers ran a seminar, where books and articles were presented and discussed.
STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

As researchers and teachers, it would have been easy to present ourselves as advocates for tolerance, defending against, for example, racist prejudices. Simultaneously our subjectivity is unavoidably constructed within Eurocentric and ethnocentric discourses produced by universities and the discipline of musicology among other Western institutions.

Within the humanities, there are usually separate areas allocated for the study of “indigenous knowledge systems” (Harding 1998) and ethnosciences, which, within music research, are usually represented by ethnomusicology. As one of the writers of this article is an ethnomusicologist, the other a musicologist, we have empirically noticed that the above-mentioned division of disciplines serves for an institutionalised construction of othering within academic spheres. The terms “musicology” and “ethnomusicology” refer to a certain kind of understanding of epistemology. Musicology, which has traditionally examined Western, white classical music, does not, as implied by its naming, study any specific ethnic group’s music. On the other hand, ethnomusicology, where Western classical music is only one possible research subject among other music cultures, connotes and reminds of ethnic specificity of music cultures (Leppänen 2000). Insomuch that ethnomusicology has been conceived, partially inaccurately, as addressing non-European music cultures rather than Western classical music, the naming of these disciplines has had substantive implications. The names of the disciplines have defined the white mainstream culture as non-ethnic and the remaining music cultures as othered.

During the project, we have often pondered, in the spirit of bell hooks (1994, p. 48), why so many enlightened people seem to think that it is somehow naïve to believe that our lives should be vibrant examples of our politics. To note that theorisation is always practical and that practice always embodies theories appears not to be a sufficient solution to this problem. In addition to this, we have asked, what does it mean to live the politics of doing research besides the conventional ways of doing research – thinking, reading and analysing the data for writing, in a transnational setting.

Being conscious of the unpleasant fact that our own ways of action are constructed in colonialist and imperialistic discourses is implied in participatory action research. In this kind of research, methodological choices include inevitably more of getting lost and tottering than the conventional ways of doing research.

One of the ideals in participatory action research is to strive after the epistemological equality in knowledge production. This provides the researcher with an opportunity of getting lost in methodologically fruitful ways. Getting lost is important in finding and taking new routes. What if epistemological equality turns out to be a mere daydream? What are then the possibilities of striving for a change by doing participatory action research within the transnational framework? The Brazilian pioneer of participatory action research, Paolo Freire, has been concerned in his texts with the relationship between the researcher and the informants. A researcher, who analyses the activities of their informants and briefs them on the grounds of his or
her analyses, treats the informants as objects. For Freire, reflection calls for action and action entails reflection.

Activism of Western women in transnational settings, where women of the “third world” are involved, has been widely discussed and also, mostly justly, questioned within feminist theorization and ethnographic research. The power relationship in these situations is fundamentally asymmetric. So how is this power relationship between white, Western researchers and asylum seekers negotiated?

In her book *Strange encounters*, Sara Ahmed (2000) situates stranger fetishism, which is often committed by those who embrace multiculturalism, nearly at the same place as the fear of a stranger. Ahmed conceptualises the terms “other” and “otherness”, which are essential for postcolonial theorisation, in fresh and fruitful ways. Ahmed’s thinking opens up a useful means for the evaluation of the encounters between strangers and non-strangers and their historical contexts within *Becoming Audible!* Ahmed shifts her focus away from the concept of the other to discuss the more flexible concept of the stranger. Certain bodies are defined as strangers, which is an essential way of constructing communities. The stranger does not reside outside of the self. In addition to this, the stranger is not the other of the self. Instead, it is an essential constituent of the self.

*Becoming Visible!* was funded by the European Union, which is, in addition to the Schengen Agreement, substantially restricting the possibilities of the people of the “third world” to take up residence in Europe. No doubt *Becoming Visible!* and *Becoming Audible!* have opened up new scope for action for the asylum seekers. In spite of this, it is important to think about the above-mentioned paradox: is it possible to reconcile the interests of Finland’s integration into the European Union and its restrictive politics and the interests of the asylum seekers?

The refugee politics of Europe and Finland as its member had very substantial and concrete consequences in *Becoming Audible!* During the autumn term of 2003 we worked mostly with refugees from the Balkans – Albanians, Bosnians, etc. – and lost all Bosnian accordionists and singers within a few weeks, when they got a negative decision of their status as refugees from the Finnish government. In the spring term of 2004 our project consisted of asylum seekers from Africa and Cuba. During the spring two of the members of our orchestra were deported: a rap singer from Congo and a young lady from Algeria, our singer and dancer.

**Negotiating knowledge production in the Africa workshop**

When Jouni, who was the only member in our group with experience in participatory research, watched the group’s rather clumsy attempts to learn the salsa steps, which Raysa from Cuba was teaching us, an idea came to his mind. He suggested that he could give us a workshop in African music. He had studied African music for more than fifteen years and had stayed and done fieldwork in Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania. The aim of the workshop, according to Jouni, would be two-fold: firstly, to help us Finnish participants of the group to grasp the “rhythms” of African and Cuban music; and secondly, to give an impression to the asylum seekers about how to
teach clumsy Finns foreign music and dance steps. Furthermore, a group of students from Helmi’s World Music course in the department of musicology attended the workshop as well as an Iranian women journalist, who was an asylum seeker, and workers from the reception centre. There were also children endlessly interested in everything that was happening in the centre or taking part in the workshop.

After Helmi had told Taru about the idea of the workshop, Taru wrote in her field diary:

When I for the first time heard about the Africa workshop from Helmi, she told me that Jouni had said that ‘we need a workshop on African music’. Helmi explained, that when Jouni had seen us performing with Becoming Visible orchestra, he had noticed that we had difficulties with African rhythms etc. Of course, I knew he was in a sense right. However, I couldn’t help feeling somehow offended by Jouni’s suggestion. I thought: Who are the ‘we’ who are in need of an African music workshop? Why do we need it? I heard immediately and loudly a voice of my postcolonial and feminist conscience when I tried to adjust to Jouni’s suggestion. Why should I take part in an African music workshop taught by a white male ethnomusicologist while we had several Africans participating [in the] Becoming Visible project? (Leppänen 2003)

Two weeks before the workshop, Helmi, the asylum seekers and the students had a meeting with the music group at the reception centre. They were planning the activities for the forthcoming spring. Helmi brought up the question of Jouni giving us a workshop on African music. Stanley, an asylum seeker from Biafra, Nigeria, asked: “Who?”. He was quite amazed. Helmi said more about Jouni. “He can’t teach us African music”, Stanley said very clearly, almost annoyed. His eyes showed astonishment.

Helmi was laughing; she touched Stanley’s shoulder and said: “Good, Stanley, you are right!”. Helmi explained for the group that Jouni had been studying African music for quite a while. After this, Stanley agreed: “Perhaps he can know about some areas of African music”. Helmi suggested that Stanley and some other Africans of our project would participate in teaching the workshop. Everybody was happy about the solution. Later Helmi (Järviluoma 2004) wrote in her field diary: “Empowerment – Yes! The reaction of Stanley made me proud about the fact that he has not been beaten down yet. That’s how I felt”.

The possibilities of representing “Others” have been widely discussed within postcolonial studies. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) asked: “How can the investigator avoid the inevitable risk of presenting herself as an authoritative representative of subaltern consciousness?” According to Spivak, “the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation”. Some clues towards the ways in which this can be done fruitfully are offered by Paulo Freire, and also by bell hooks (1994, p. 53), who considers Freire to be a crucial example “of how a privileged critical thinker approaches sharing knowledge and resources with those who are in need” (ibid.). Freire (cited in bell hooks 1994, p. 54) states:
Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality they seek to transform. Only through such practice – in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously – can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped.

In the course of *Becoming Audible!*, when we got to know the participants of the project and got involved in their fates, we often experienced significant need to help the asylum seekers in the difficult phase of their lives. The idea of helping inevitably involves power relationships. Consequently, this became a challenge for us in the Africa workshop. Thus, we tried to solve this asymmetrical power relationship inscribed in helping with the means suggested above by Freire.

**The evaluation of the Africa workshop**

The Africa workshop was carefully planned by the teachers: Stanley and Elizabeth from Kongo, Helmi and Jouni. Then, after the workshop we interviewed two of the asylum seekers, Celine and Stanley, who told us that they were genuinely happy about the occasion. Stanley, who, at first, had been very critical, said that he felt that all the teachers had “equal playing ground”. Even if the time for the workshop was limited, all the teachers were able to “showcase their musical capabilities”.

Both Stanley and Celine seemed to be very impressed about the fact that Jouni had gone to so much trouble for learning things about African music. Also, they found Jouni’s practical and dialogical teaching style impressive, especially his way to teach the Tanzanian dance “Ngoma ya selo”.

In the interview, Stanley made an interesting observation: he said that if he was to go back to Nigeria, and meet a group of Finns there, he would be very proud that he could show what he has learned about Finnish culture, music and dance, and the Finns would be happy.

While evaluating the workshop in the interview, Helmi raised the rather delicate question of Stanley’s first reaction. We used a lot of laughs and other methods of softening our talk.

Stanley: Yeah, it was good. […]
Helmi: Your FIRST […] reaction when talked about Africa workshop was that Jouni
Stanley: Okei
Helmi: Jouni that Jouni how can he (laughs) (teach) us
Stanley: Okei, okey that was why I commented that day […] I was thinking he was going to […] talk about African music without really getting anything, you know, the first impression that I had you know […] ‘what does he know about African music’. But I didn’t know that he had done a lot of homework. So that was why I was so amazed that. That was why I commented him so much, be-
cause he has learnt a lot, even those dancing steps he was displaying, so I was impressed, really
Helmi: Hm, yeah (P) So your experience about the workshop was positive
Stanley: yeah (very) exactly
Helmi: and I think for us it was very good that you said what you said because then we came to think that exactly, he can’t do it alone, because we have other experts,
Stanley: erm
Helmi: like Stanley, Elizabeth
Taru: and in fact we had already thought about it
Helmi: erm
Taru: that it was somehow a strange thing to do that a Finnish person would teach African music to=2
Stanley: =and
Taru: African people
Helmi: (laughs)
Stanley: and of course we would put our hands and be looking like (Stanley puts his hands on his chest; everybody is laughing)

Stanley and Celine, the persons we interviewed, had been active dancers in their countries. Stanley had been an occasional member of the dance group of his local clan in Biafra and Celine had been dancing as a member of an amateur Rwandan folklore group, which was put together after the Rwandan genocide.

In the interview, both Stanley and Celine told us that, because of the workshop, they had realised that they could start to learn both music and dance more seriously. During the interview, Celine developed the idea that perhaps she could start to teach the other members of the group Rwandan dances. She said that we could create more difficult choreographies in the group. In the next practices after the interview, Celine started to teach us quite complicated choreographies.

The workshop, which at first seemed like a forthcoming total catastrophe, ended up as a good experience for everybody. It became one step on the road to giving the asylum seekers more and more responsibility in the learning processes. The asylum seekers taught us their music all spring. In the workshop they had to do the same for a broader audience. In fact, during the next study year the asylum seekers organized a dancing course for a broader audience. This is one of the basic ideas of the participatory approach: making the facilitator or animator useless, not needed in the end.

When different cultures and discourses were encountering each other in the Africa workshop, the knowledge was produced in co-operation with all the people involved. Our group produced knowledge together, even if within certain institutional and discursive conditions. Max Elden and Morten Levin (1991, p. 133) have used the term “cogenerative dialogue” when referring to this kind of knowledge production in participatory action research. Cogenerative dialogue becomes an arena, where different kinds of frames of reference are enriching all the stages of the research process by constructing new frames of reference and theories. Method-
ology can be seen as an arena or a playground of instructive setbacks based on the politics of knowing and being known (Lather 2001, p. 204).

**Questioning institutionalised othering**

I’m sitting all alone at a trailhead in the woods of Pansio. I’m waiting for 80 day nursery children, who are attending a ‘toleration tour’ organised by a social pedagogy student. At the first control point in the woods the children get their names written in Russian, at the second point they have a taste of food from Kosovo, at the third point they play Irish games, at the fourth they were supposed to get acquainted with sounds from foreign cultures. But how come things occurred like this? Not a single asylum seeker is anywhere around introducing their musics to the kids. Facilitation was only done by halves, preparation was done by halves, and even now I could be writing that article to a scholarly journal. (Järviluoma 2004)

One of the central questions of cultural studies still remains to be solved today: how to bridge the gulf between the theoretical and empirical in new ways? Is it possible to negotiate power relations between the researcher and the researched and their knowledge anew by means of participatory music ethnography? Our tentative answer is yes, although provided that the participants regard the participatory method and their own conventions critically, innovatively and with reflection.

In the project *Becoming Audible!* we have coupled participatory research and critical ethnography. For us, it has been necessary to act and problematise our action simultaneously. We have had to accept being assertive and chaotic at the same time. If being assertive has been forgotten, it has led to inchoateness, as can been seen in the situation described above: the (co)-researcher got lost in the forest all alone with her drum.

In our work it has also been indispensable to reflect upon the politics of research reporting. Feminist ethnographer Patti Lather speaks on behalf of texts that both reach toward a generally accessible public horizon and yet deny the “comfort zone” that maps easily onto our usual ways of making sense. Political writing is a form of cultural intervention against mimetic ways of representation (Lather 2001, p. 213; see also Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkko 2003, pp. 107-117). When participatory action research is concerned, not only texts but also the action should be considered as an end product of the study.

Easy categories of us and them, where “us” is the concerned and voyeuristic and “them” are the objects of our pity, fear, and fascination, should be avoided. Likewise, the striving for murderous sameness or factitious communities is not worth much.“The danger is to steal knowledge from others, particularly those who have little else and use it for the interests of power” (Lather 2001, pp. 214, 221).

Interestingly enough, the asylum seekers seem to have become empowered in the “wrong” fields of art, when we think about music research. Even if we, so far, have clearly concentrated on music and dance, almost half of the asylum seekers partici-
pating in the group have expressed their desire to write either their autobiographies or their experiences in Finland in the form of a book, and they have asked for help from us. Writing the stories of their lives might offer an opportunity that Sara Ahmed has called for, namely the bringing of historical context as part of the definition of the stranger. When we commit ourselves to the participatory approach we have to, also, accept the digressions and crossing of borders by the asylum seekers, sometimes toward directions that challenge our own academic positioning.

This does not mean that we would not have the right to write. When writing we do not have to reach for anything more extraordinary than a good enough ethnography, sufficient facilitation and unstable knowledge; something to think alongside with, rather than a brilliantly mastered thesis. By “good enough” (Lather 2001) we mean practices rupturing, at least a bit, the hegemonic power relations. At the same time, “good enough” research deconstructs the dichotomy between the steely perfection and failure of science. Between these options, and outside them, the possibilities of doing research are plentiful.

ENDNOTES

1. This paper was initially presented at the IASPM 11th Biennial Conference Practising Popular Music (Montreal, 3-7 July 2003).
2. “=“ means that the next turn follows immediately, almost overlapping.

REFERENCES