Musicologica Austriaca
JOURNAL OF THE AUSTRIAN MUSICOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Ethnographing TikTok

Toward an E^{3}thnomusicological Approach to a Multimedia Musicking

Juan Bermúdez
Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Graz
juan.bermudez@kug.ac.at
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5811-739X

DOI: 10.71045/musau.2025.SI.16

Abstract: In this article, drawing on reflections of my ethnographic research on TikToks musicking, I will briefly review the ethnographic model introduced by Alan P. Merriam (1964), in order to introduce to this model the concept of E3 Internet by Christine Hine (2015) looking to understand the internet and its (musical) practices as a daily, highly embedded, and embodied experience. Understanding musicking as a multimedia practice that different actors create and experience in everyday synchronous and asynchronous, physical and digital situations. I will propose a path to an interdisciplinary musical ethnographic model for the study of multimedia and multilocal music practices.

Keywords: TikTok; music and internet; music and social media; digital music; digital methods; digital ethnography; digital humanities; non-media-centric approach; digital embodiment; multimediality

Acknowledgment: Funded within the Post-Doc-Track Pilot Program of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Introduction

It all began on a day like any other. Waking up as usual in the same place as usual. The warm sunlight shines through into an ordinary living room while a little child runs around an old couch. In the middle of this infantile whirl, an old man holding a colorful story book sits down. The child sits next to his grandfather. Together they turn the pages of the book. The child smiles and points to an image, and subsequently tries to zoom it hectically by opening and closing his thumb and index finger. On the other side of the room, his parents are exchanging familiar looks and draw a smile on their faces just

before they burst out laughing. Disconcerted by the reaction, the grandfather asks in a stern tone of voice: "What is there to laugh about?" For a short moment, a slight breather, these words freeze in the air, and a second later the sound of the laughter fills the air. The child keeps on trying; this time he is upset, crying...

This is one of many personal experiences that have made me aware of the role that new technologies and media play in shaping our children's everyday lives. The child interacts with an image in a natural way. The reaction caused by his fingers on the image on the book is different from the one he expects on the basis of his experience with smartphones, showing him a different reality. Meanwhile, his grandfather, who is alien to this digital native behavior, is far from understanding the reaction of the parents. Even though we share a specific lifeworld, we perceive realities differently. In the same way, our children perceive a different reality from the one we perceive as adults, and the realities of our current ethnographical work are different from those experienced in past ethnographical work. My research about musical practices on the smartphone application TikTok, formerly known as Musical.ly, can be seen as an example of this.[1]

In a deterritorialized and digitally interconnected world,[2] a vast number of interrelations between physical and virtual multilocal and multimedia spaces have been developed and established as an inseparable part of our daily lives. This is due mainly to the rise and expansion of the internet, as well as to the development of new devices, new forms of communication, and new platforms. Younger generations, the so-called digital natives, perceive these interrelations as an extension of their own reality. We search for the closest restaurant on Google Maps while chatting with friends who could be in the same place, in Germany, in Mexico, or in any other country. We *like* pictures shared by our family or friends on Instagram, and we show our shopping tour or a concert we are at *live* via Facebook. And in the same way the use of digital media and devices transforms our daily lives, it also influences our musical practices. Musicians use social media among other things to present and market themselves. However, other actors also construct and participate in the discourses of these musical practices. As already seen with the introduction of new technologies in the past,[3] the current appropriation of digital worlds, as well as the development of new digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Spotify) and devices, has not only shaped the interaction between actors but also enabled and reinforced the adaptation and development of

(new) forms of musical practices. My first conscious contact with one of these new multimedia musical practices took place when I discovered the smartphone application Musical.ly, now TikTok.

TikTok is a smartphone application aimed at creating and sharing short videos. It was one of the most downloaded apps in 2023[4] and has a global presence, with approximately a billion users worldwide, offering an interaction space for different music and video practices. One of these practices drew my special attention as I started to get involved with this app and to conduct ethnographic research: the underlying idea of this practice is to film a video with your own cell phone camera in which you lip-sync to a previously chosen track while performing a choreography.[5]

The investigation of a deterritorialized multimedia musicking such as TikTok offers a large number of theoretical implications, while presenting practical and theoretical challenges. In a world where interactions are increasingly taking place beyond physical contact, ethnomusicologists are forced and encouraged to broaden not only their fields of activity but also their approach and techniques for adjusting to these new multimedia realities. In the following pages, I will briefly review the ethnographic model introduced by Alan P. Merriam,[6] as well as the additions made by Timothy Rice[7] and Julio Mendívil.[8] On that basis, I will continue by introducing to this model Christine Hine's concept of E3 Internet[9] in order to understand the internet and its (musical) practices as a daily**,** highly embedded, and embodied experience. With this, I will engage in critical reflection on the meaning of ethnographical work in the research of digital musical practices. I propose to understand musicking as a multimedia practice that different actors create and experience individually in everyday synchronous and asynchronous, physical and digital situations. I aim to develop alternative paths and points for reflexion and therefore create the foundations for an interdisciplinary musical ethnographic model for investigating multimedia and multilocal music practices.

One Model to Rule Them All …

In his book *The Anthropology of Music*,[10] Alan P. Merriam presented a model that would serve as the basis for ethnomusicological work. This model included the study of three analytic levels: *conceptualization about*

music, *behavior in relation to music*, and *music sound itself*.

> The sound has structure, and it may be a system, but it cannot exist independently of human beings; music sound must be as the product of the behavior that produces it. … But behavior is itself underlain by a third level, the level of conceptualization about music. In order to act in a music system, the individual must first conceptualize what kind of behavior will produce the requisite sound. … It is at this level that the values about music are found, and it is precisely these values that filter upward through the system to effect the final product.[11]

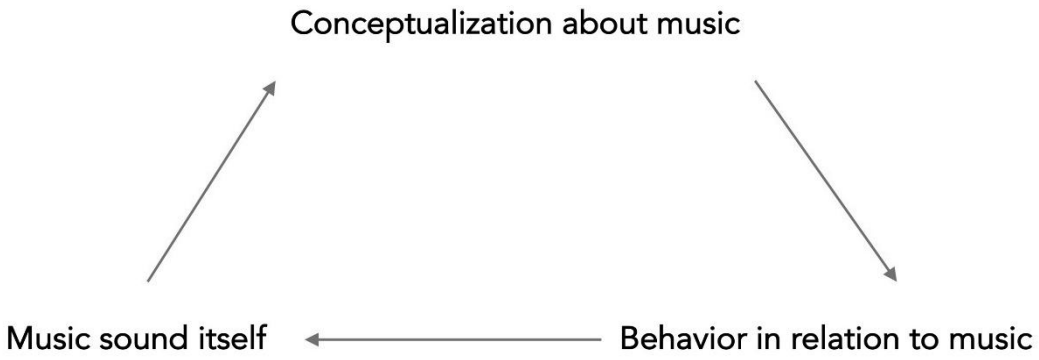

Figure 1: Merriam's model (1964), illustration by author.

In the 1980s this model was expanded by Timothy Rice, influenced by the work of Clifford Geertz.[12] Rice added a focus on individuals and their experiences in the process of making music, as well as a diachronic perspective. When music is historically constructed and its experience is conveyed to the present, its social preservation is a logical fact. Music is constructed historically by people; it is socially maintained and individually created and experienced.[13] Rice argued that

> "symbolic systems … are historically constructed, socially maintained and individually applied" ([Geertz 1973:]363–364). … Here was a three-part model, analogous to Merriam's that was easy to remember and that seemed to balance social, historical and individual processes and forces in ways that seemed immediately and intuitively satisfying. … Simply put, I now believe that ethnomusicologists … should ask and attempt to answer this deceptively simple question: how do people make music or, in its more elaborate form, how do people historically construct, socially maintain and individually create and experience music?[14]

Rice's expansion of Merriam's model conferred to it an additional dialectical level by considering the role between the creation and the experience of the

actors of different musics even more strongly.[15] This level mainly focuses on the role of musicians and the audience but not on other actors that formed part of the auditive knowledge construction and negotiation. In 2016, Julio Mendívil drew attention to this limitation and proposed the adoption of the *musicking* concept introduced by Christopher Small.[16] He explained that "such an approach allows us to analyze the historical formation of sound's structures, behaviour and concepts as a particular process in a given time and place, which involves all the actors *musicking* (not only playing and hearing, as Rice defines it)."[17]

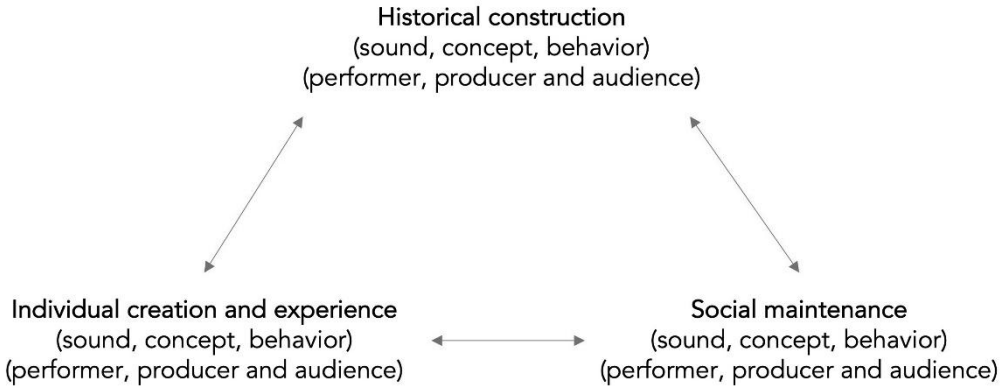

Figure 2: Merriam's model remodeled by Rice (1987) and Mendívil (2016), illustration by author.

With these two extensions, Merriam's model provided an excellent basis for the research of musical practices, especially because with this approach it was possible to avoid "getting caught up in one facet or another of music—sociology without attention to sound, analysis of performance without attention to social processes, the study of music that ignores movement, and so forth."[18] Moreover, this model made it possible to explore the dynamic interrelations between different processes of auditive knowledge and generation of musical practices, as well as the creation and experience of this knowledge through the actors in a specific space and time over a certain period of time.

However, the analysis of multimedia musical practices such as those found in TikTok requires more than a successful ethnomusicological model. Exploring these practices demands methods and approaches that allow an analogue

and virtual conceptualization beyond the dichotomy[19] and that can see digital media as practice.[20] The musicking of TikTok does not only exist digitally in the application. Like other musical traditions, TikTok musicking involves countless physical interactions between actors: schools and parks become meeting places where TikTokers come together to watch, analyze, learn, and practice different choreographies; meetups between TikTokers and their followers are developed in diverse physical contexts; and friendships and partnerships are taken beyond the platform in the physical world or vice versa; among many others. In the musicking of TikTok, the physical and the digital are not only in continuous contact, but they are an inseparable part of the daily lives of the TikTokers. Here, there are no exclusively digital practices or exclusively physical practices but rather practices in a multimedia whole intertwined in the daily lives of the performers.

For this reason, and to overcome the associated challenges, I propose to understand the internet and its (musical) practices, as postulated by Christine Hine, as an embedded, embodied, and everyday experience—the E3 internet. She emphasizes that the internet

> is embedded in various contextualizing frameworks, institutions, and devices, that the experience of using it is embodied and hence highly personal and that it is everyday, often treated as an unremarkable and mundane infrastructure rather than something that people talk about in itself unless something significant goes wrong.[21]

Through this shift to thinking in terms of the meaning of internet in the everyday lives of the actors and their musical practices, as well as the recognition of internet as an embodied experience,[22] is possible to expand Merriam's model to a new level, reflecting the realities of a deterritorialized and multimedia world. In this way, it is possible to take into account concepts, behaviors, and sounds that different actors of specific musicking (musicians/dancers, audiences, producers,[23] and other musicking actors) historically construct, socially maintain, and individually create and experience in everyday synchronous and asynchronous multimedia situations.

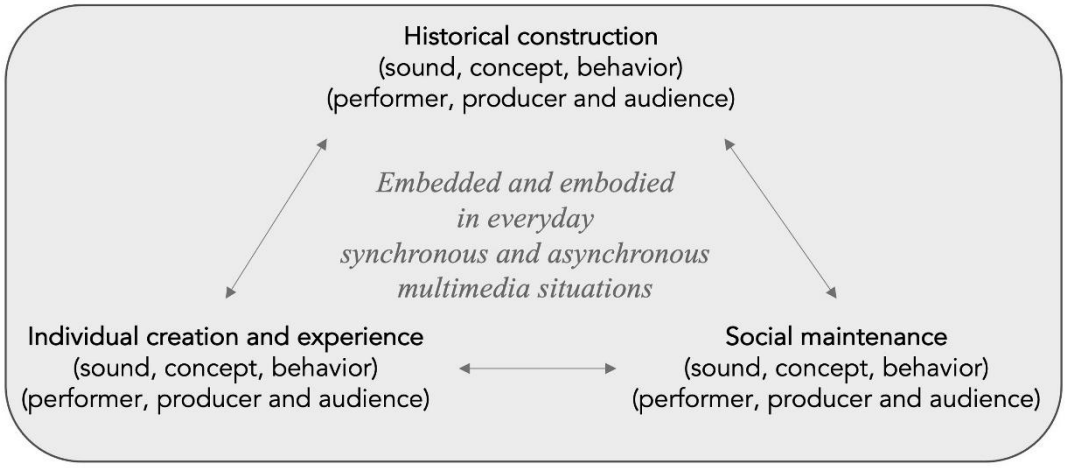

Figure 3: E[3]thnography, illustration by author.

This model, which I call *E[3]thnography*, enhances the possibility to explore music cultures that are constructed through physical and digital interactions. Below, I will discuss a path that leads to an interdisciplinary musical ethnographic model—E[3]thnography—for the investigation of multimedia and multilocal music practices.

Always Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday—toward an E[3]thnography

E[3]thnography is based on the idea that the field is only constructed and negotiated once the constant multimedia interaction of physical and digital actors has taken place, and that these practices can only gain a tangible and limitable "territory" through (re)production of and immersion in the musicking being studied. This makes it necessary to focus on the knowledge and experience of the actors and our experience as researchers while constructing and acquiring knowledge and studying these practices, instead of focusing on the physical place/space[24] where these practices are possibly happening. By focusing on what actors *do* under different circumstances and contexts *with* and *in* digital media, we can discover and observe the practices taking place in an asynchronous multimedia environment and thus exemplify the interrelations produced by the field and its multimedia locations.

Musicking as Multimedia Practice

To explore mediatized musical practices such as those found in TikTok, it is crucial to understand digital and analogue media as practices that are created, negotiated, and experienced in everyday multimedia situations and contexts in a synchronous or asynchronous way. We need to focus on what people are actively doing *with* and *in* a mediatized environment and thus go beyond a discourse that sees media exclusively as a channel of communication or representation used by physical actors. I discard a discourse that ignores the active participation and discussion of living people who physically interact behind these multimedia interactions, and who also experience the multisensorial virtuality of this apparently passive practice while acting actively.

Although one can be in favor of the idea of multilocality in musical practices, assuming that a prevalent physical interaction exists in these practices can become a "problem" for research of music traditions with multilocal physical and virtual spaces of interaction, such as TikTok. The problem is that we often still tend to think of the ethnographic field in the way that Malinowski experienced and conceived it, namely, as consisting

> mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages. It is very nice to have a base in a white man's compound for stores, and to know there is a refuge there in times of sickness and surfeit of native. But it must be far enough away not to become a permanent milieu in which you live and from which you emerge at fixed hours only to <do the village>. It should not even be near enough to fly to at any moment for recreation. … And by means of this natural intercourse, you learn to know him, and you become familiar with his customs and beliefs far better than when he is a paid, and often bored, informant.[25]

However, many of our contemporary musical practices show us a reality very different from the one that originated this ideal.[26] Clear examples of this phenomenon can be found in the research by Julio Mendívil on German Schlager music, Alejandro L. Madrid on Nor-Tec Collective, Katherine Meizel on *American Idol*, or Noriko Manabe on protest music in Fukushima.[27] The locality of many of these practices either is not clearly physical or only exists as an abstract and imagined construct.[28] Additionally, many of these practices do not need physical contact among actors to retain the mechanisms of production and the experience of its auditive knowledge.[29] In other cases, as

Peter Wicke has noticed, these practices barely experience a specific location in the moment of its reception,[30] processes that have made the synchronous experience of physical performance unnecessary for actors. For example, a TikTok video performed in Austria on a summer day may be watched and commented on by someone in Brazil several months later. Perhaps at the same time, someone may be analyzing this same video and using it for musical learning ("learning to TikTok"[31]) in a park in Spain, while another person may be doing a duet with it and creating a new trend in Italy. This situation shows that the practices that form the musicking of TikTok cannot always be clearly delimited in a concrete physical geography or in a specific temporal space.

On the other hand, just as the synchronous experience of a performance seems to be superfluous in some musical practices, its synchronous sound production may also be superfluous. As in the case of TikTok mentioned above, sound may be created, processed, and experienced autonomously at different times and in different spaces. Practices such as DJing, remixing, mashups, or karaoke process and treat asynchronously prefabricated auditive products during performances.[32] Practices like air guitar or lip-syncing require an additional performance as an existing auditive product that is complemented by a mimic performance. Practices based on joint performances of a rock concert where musicians connected via internet use plastic guitars, as in the case of *Guitar Hero*, show a different understanding of what it means to make music.[33] In this sense, the musicking of TikTok is no exception. While we can find musical performances in a "classic" sense, in TikTok's musicking there are also duets, challenges, and other types of performances that show us different types of networked creativity and that go beyond a traditional vision of what "making music" is, using the technical possibilities of the application to expand and/or create new forms of musical performance.

Although the role of digital media in musical practices is considered to be a widely studied topic, studies that see new musicking practices primarily taking place in digital spaces as music of the same value are rare exceptions in the ethnomusicological discourse.[34] This leads in academic practice to a discourse in which digital media is viewed solely as a channel of communication or representation for physical actors, and the multimedia interactions and resulting auditory knowledge construction and exchange between their cultural cohorts are relegated to a marginal position. This creates the

impression that we perform in physical spaces, whereas we only "pretend" in digital spaces. This implies the need to view the paradigm of digital media "not as a text or production economy, but first and foremost as practice."[35]

Hence, as a result of the preference for a strict dichotomous separation of reality and virtuality, we construct a discourse that does not perceive digital media as part of a knowledge practice but rather more as a passive representational practice. Under this paradigm, we risk reducing the experience of the users in digital media to simply obtaining information from the web. By doing so, we exclude the active creation and interaction processes of the actors that are physically acting behind these multimedia interactions and that experience the virtuality of this apparently passive practice with all senses while discussing actively, a trend that may lead to a new kind of armchair ethnomusicology.

A different approach to the relation between reality and virtuality can be found in scholastic philosophy: "In scholastic philosophy 'actual' and 'virtual' exist in a dialectical relation rather than in one of radical opposition: the virtual is not that which is deprived of existence, but that which possesses the potential, or force of developing into actual existence."[36] On the basis of reflections about the difference between the possible and the virtual by Gilles Deleuze,[37] Pierre Lévy invites us to think the virtual not as something false or illusionary but as "a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation."[38]

> The virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization. … Actualization thus appears as the solution to a problem, a solution not previously contained in its formulation. … It implies the production of new qualities, a transformation of ideas, a true becoming that feeds the virtual in turn.[39]

That said, the virtual is not something lacking actual reality but rather a way of being that produces "a change of identity"[40] through a practice of actualization. By understanding real and virtual in this way, we can observe that actual multimedia practices—imagined as a phantasmagorical reality—are experienced through a dialectic process of virtualization and actualization. The abstraction of space-time brought on by modernity[41] transformed "a specific and circumscribed activity into a delocalized, desynchronized, and collectivized functioning"[42] and therefore kept virtualizing our relations between humans and non-humans, turning

them into phantasmagorical relations. The practices and interpersonal relationships in the musicking of TikTok do not take place in a concise physical space and time but are developed in diverse places and times. As seen in the previous example, TikTok practices can be performed synchronously or asynchronously, at a specific physical location or throughout a global network of creativity facilitated by connection infrastructures. Conversely, practices that allow the articulation, negotiation, and configuration of our cultural cohorts, as well as the processes of inhabiting our *social spaces*,[43] are the ones that let us translate this phantasmagorical reality into actual reality. Practices such as meetups, in which TikTokers meet physically, allow them to relocate and embody the phantasmagorical practices of this musicking by turning them into an actual embodied reality, creating these strong bonds of reciprocity and belonging.

If we are indeed living in a world where the virtual and real are interlaced, then that is also the case for the way in which we relate with the world (being-in-the-world), and therefore our way of inhabiting and (re)creating it. "The virtualization of the body is therefore not a form of disembodiment but a re-creation, a reincarnation, a multiplication, vectorization, and heterogenesis of the human."[44] Following this logic, Marie-Laure Ryan accurately illustrates that

> the difference between "being in space," like things, and "inhabiting" or "haunting space," like the embodied consciousness, is a matter of both mobility and virtuality. Whereas inert objects, entirely contained in their material bodies, are bound to a fixed location, consciousness can occupy multiple points and points of view, either through the actual movements of its corporeal support or by projecting itself into virtual bodies. … When my actual body cannot walk around an object or grab and lift it, it is the knowledge that my virtual body could do so that gives me a sense of the object's shape, volume, and materiality. Whether actual or virtual, objects are thus present to me because my actual or virtual body can interact with them.[45]

By considering our body—either virtual or physical—as an entity that finds itself in constant movement through space and time, rather than as a static entity anchored to a physical location, we can gain a better understanding of the way in which we inhabit our space through the constant multimedia interaction created by different physical and digital actors scattered throughout different spaces on the globe. It is through the practices that our embodied consciousness performs that we give meaning to our world. It is through practice that we shape communities and social

spaces. In the same way that we walk, think, talk, or play an instrument, using digital means is a practice that allows us to make sense of the world in which we live. Although TikTokers are not always physically next to each other when performing their musicking, their embodied consciousness is co-present[46] and interacts with other performers to perform their musical practices together. When TikTokers perform duets with other TikTokers (either synchronously and physically or synchronously and digitally), when they interact by commenting, stitching, or "liking" a TikTok, when they analyze a choreography and practice it in a park with other friends, and so on, what we are observing is not just a simple representational practice but a multimedia relationship and practice between embodied consciousnesses. Musicking in TikTok is not just about representing a physical reality. It is a practice that is experienced through our embodied consciousness together with a phantasmagorical multimedia reality with the purpose of inhabiting and making sense of it, turning it into actual reality as its practices are carried. As Tim Ingold puts it, "we do not have to think the world in order to live in it, but we *do* have to live in the world in order to think it."[47]

In this sense, the performance of locality can be seen as part of this inhabiting process (see Aguilera in this Issue). An example of this can be observed in the performances that TikTokers make out of *Oachkatzlschwoaf*[48] from @martyaustria. In this example, locality is on the one hand thematized directly through the text: "*Oachkatzlschwoaf, jeder Österreicher kennt den Oachkatzlschwoaf*" [squirrel's tail, every Austrian knows the squirrel's tail]. On the other hand, it is thematized through the dialect used in the song: *Oachkatzlschwoaf* refers to "squirrel's tail" in Austrian German. What is particularly interesting here is not the word itself but the use and importance that this word has received in Austria to indicate a particular sense of *true* belonging. According to the generalized discourse, only *true* Austrians can *correctly* say *Oachkatzlschwoaf*, and therefore *Oachkatzlschwoaf* is used as a symbol for *true* Austrian identity.[49] This idea is reinforced by the *Oachkatzlschwoaf* text, which lends a particular sentimental and erotic value to this emic knowledge: "*Jeden tåg und jede nåcht måchst du mi richtig schoaf weil du sågst Oachkatzlschwoaf*" [Every day and every night you turn me on (this could be also understood as "you make me horny") because you say squirrel's tail]. In this example, it is not necessary to use the text fragment in which the TikToker is an *Österreicher* [Austrian] to position oneself as such. Rather, TikTokers can adopt an emic position just by understanding what this

dialect, or specifically, this word, implies: *Österreicher* are the only ones able to correctly say (and thematize) *Oachkatzlschwoaf*. Through these performances, TikTokers create and negotiate a sense of community by positioning their own physical locality through the presentation of a physical place and thematizing this locality. In this way, they make sense of the phantasmagoric reality of TikTok. Thus, the musicking of TikTok becomes a multimedia practice that is not exclusively experienced in a global and digital way but is strongly entwined with the realities and facework commitments of TikTokers.

When the interrelation between real and virtual consists of a dialectical relation rather than a dichotomic contradiction, our musical practices—which take place mainly in digital spaces—also experience a similar interrelation between experienced realities and potential or imagined realities. The interaction and interrelation between the actors of these musical practices also take place in a dynamic flow between physical and digital worlds. A "non-media-centric approach"—-the focus on what actors do under different circumstances and contexts with and in digital media—is necessary because of "the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other."[50]

Musicking as Individual Experience

Second, an e^{3}thnographic approach requires a strong focus on individuals and their experiences as individuals or within the group in the process of making music. Yet the focus should also lie on the performative creation of individual musical personae and on the discussion of cultural behaviors related to them. Following Mark Slobin's idea that "we are all individual music cultures,"[51] I agree with Rice when he speaks about "subject-centered musical ethnography."[52] That said, I propose an e^{3}thographic approach in which the individual and the physical and digital personae related to them represent the access and central point of research. As a result of the focus on people who create and experience the auditory knowledge of a musical practice, is it possible to find and observe the dialectical interplays that occur as part of the implementation of musical practices in the interaction spaces beyond the physical world.

Following the logic of Appadurai's idea that "the configuration of cultural forms in today's world [is] fundamentally fractal,"[53] we can then say that the actors of what Kenny would refer to as communities of musical practice[54]

should also be understood as "fractal." While our physical body is difficult to understand and to practice as fractal, our *self* can easily be conceptualized and practiced as such. Following Turino's proposal to understand our self "as comprising a body plus the total sets of habits specific to an individual" and our identity as "the partial selection of habits and attributes used to represent oneself to oneself and to others by oneself and by others," we can then understand cultural practices "as the habits of thought and practice that are shared among individuals."[55]

Considering cultural practices as "habits of thought and practice" that are developed, experienced, negotiated, and shared among people allows us to understand that these cultural practices cannot be reduced to a single homogeneous culture within a particular society. If we consider that "individuals develop habits from their personal experience," a homogeneous culture would mean that all members of a certain society have "similar experiences and [are] in similar social positions and circumstances in relation to the environment,"[56] a situation that could not be sustained in our contemporary world. Moreover, this way of conceptualizing the self and our identity allows us to conceptualize the actors of our musicking as fractal actors. This allows us to understand the physical body not as a unique and inseparable object but rather as a container space and the starting point for an intertwining of multiple virtual identities, thus dissociating it from its intrinsic relationship with physical geography. This in turn allows us not just to think in more dynamic cultural configurations but also to create configurations—musical geographies—in a much more fractal sense, which can overlap or be superimposed by other cohorts through online, offline, and mixed spaces.[57] Additionally, the idea of habit allows us to think of those configurations as "grounded not in ideas, but in *everyday action*, that is, in *practice*: the reality in which we as human beings act and that we articulate by our interaction,"[58] which enables us to focus more easily in the existing dynamic processes of negotiation and articulation in musical practices.[59]

In a non-media-centric approach that perceives the interrelation of different media processes and our everyday lives beyond the real/virtual or digital/analogue dichotomy, interacting actors of these practices and their multimedia interrelations assume a significant role in the generation of ethnomusicological knowledge. The actors do not interact only in physical settings but also in digital or virtual interaction spaces. Just as interactions can take place in spaces beyond the real/virtual dichotomy, interactions are

not tied to a physical body but much more to the varied characteristics of the actors' identities.

For multimedia musical practice research, the focus on a physical and synchronous interaction between actors represents the construction of a unilateral interaction picture that regards digital media as a passive representation practice and does not perceive it as a practice that generates knowledge. Contrary to this, the focus on the "*partial* selection of habits and attributes used to represent oneself to others by oneself and by others"[60] enables a better understanding of multiple existing and potential identities of the performers beyond their physical bodies. The interaction of these multiple identities of the actors encourages the development of specific performative identities, which may lead to the creation of a musical persona.[61] These musical personae make up a recognizable cultural construct beyond the concept of body in the form of an individual. In multimedia musical practices like TikTok, it is possible to observe a similar phenomenon: the performers, so-called TikTokers, try to construct a recognizable musical persona through their performances, so-called TikTok(s).

Similar to musical personae as defined by Auslander,[62] TikTok personae exist in different scenes and (digital) media, and not only in their usual environment or scene. This means that TikTok personae also perform outside TikTok's environment, and they can be experienced in these other environments too.[63] A TikToker, for example, publishes a TikTok and then shares it as a reel on her Instagram account. On this same platform, the TikToker announces a meetup in a shopping mall through a story and writes a post announcing the release of her new video clip on YouTube and inviting her followers to go to her concert. The interesting thing is that multimedia practices like TikTok are not only global and deterritorialized phenomena but are strongly connected with local realities. The actors interact in a dynamic flow between physical and digital worlds woven into one.

I was able to observe an example of this type of multimedia interaction one day on my way home: Four youngsters were sitting around a table on the train; a smartphone was lying on the table. I observed a typical practice of TikTok musicking: just as in my own experience, these youngsters were watching a performance, but unlike me, they were watching it as a group. After a short time, these young people started to analyze the performance, imitate the sequences, and criticize its aesthetic properties. They played the

same musical TikToks repeatedly and correlated them with other versions elsewhere on the platform, as well as on YouTube. Then they started to explore different possibilities of making individual or group versions of the same TikTok, a discussion that would end thanks to a WhatsApp message from "Julia" from school saying that it would be better if they met the next day to do a duet after class. This story shows that the interactions and interrelations of TikTok musicking do not just occur through the TikTok app but also on and among other digital platforms and out in the physical world.

It is interesting to observe that the use and experience of digital social media or of smartphone applications is a very intimate practice, although they may represent a public practice due to their deterritorialized and asynchronous access possibilities. The creation and experience of a TikTok persona in a multimedia environment, like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram, facilitates a co-presence between the TikTok persona and its audience or followers. The interaction of these actors does not require a physical presence to create a sense of closeness. Even though users are separated by thousands of kilometers, they interact with a certain persona as if they were physically present and as if they were not only a digital representation of the real world.

The creation and experience of a TikTok persona within a multimedia environment facilitates an increasing co-presence between the TikTok personae being perceived and their audience. This creates a certain *public intimacy*[64] that suppresses the increasing deterritorialized and multimedia condition of interactions and interrelations of digital practices, a process that enables a performative construction and maintains a musical world, although it is not tangible. However, this co-presence is intensified by the inclusion of local realities in multimedia environments, as well as by a conscious and more physical togetherness. Important in this context are the spontaneous or organized gatherings of TikTokers and their audience, which aim, aside from economic aspects, at constructing a more intensive embodied integration between the actors, which I refer to as *empathic co-presence*.[65] In many cases this connection is protected by public intimacy, which awakens and influences the behavior of the users through physical movements—for example moving the cell phone towards the body or protecting the screen from being viewed by third persons. In other cases, these synchronous or asynchronous encounters are either shared or commented on physically or digitally.

Musical Geographies through Practice

Third, I propose to devise a reconceptualization for our field and a new approach[66] due to the deterritorialization and multimedia reality of these musical practices. Since there is no pre-existing space to step into in these practices, and in our field it is only possible to construct and interact through the continuous multimedia interaction of physical and digital actors or personae, we need to increasingly focus on (1) interactions continuously created and experienced by the actors of this musicking; (2) the interrelations built, discussed, and experienced by the actors of this musicking throughout time; and (3) the processes that enable the creation, discussion, and experience of personal and public multimedia locations.

Although deterritorialized music practices take place through complex distribution processes in completely different spaces scattered over the world, the creation and exchange of certain auditory knowledge, as well as several interactions between actors, occur in virtual and physical "local" situations.[67] Additionally, Christine Hine points out that the internet "is embedded in various contextualizing frameworks, institutions, and devices, that the experience of using it is embodied and hence highly personal and that it is everyday,"[68] for which its practices find themselves influenced by these contexts and infrastructures. For that, it is important to first keep in mind that the articulation, negotiation, and maintenance of musical (and non-musical) practices developed through the internet find themselves embedded not just on devices but also in local contexts and infrastructures.

Although the musical geography of TikTok can be inhabited along multimedia spaces scattered around the world, the practices that are developed by its actors are strongly framed and influenced by at least three aspects[69] that cannot be separated from their physical location: (1) device embodiment; (2) connection infrastructures; and (3) national laws and regulations.

Device embodiment: Just like traditional musical practices, musical practices developed in multimedia environments need physical devices for their realization. In TikTok, these are predominantly smartphones. Although the use of computers, smart TVs, and/or other portable devices is possible, they are used much less frequently. In the same way as with musical instruments, these tools generate a new embodied relation that performers must acquire and maintain to effectively and satisfactorily perform their musicking. This embodied relation directly influences the way in which TikTok musicking is

developed. On the one hand, the embodiment generated by interacting with the device determines the way in which certain practices may or may not be developed. On the other hand, this interaction with the devices allows the creation of embodiment in the relationships between actors, thus helping the creation of an embodied sense of locality and community in this musical practice.

Connection infrastructure: Many of the practices developed in TikTok's musicking, like see, record, share TikToks, and so on, require an internet connection. This might seem trivial, but access to the necessary infrastructure nonetheless has a great influence on the way in which musicking is articulated and negotiated between actors, as well as on how important these practices are. For example, although theoretically anyone can partake in TikTok's musicking, it may make a great difference whether one observes this from an Austrian context or a Cuban one. Such aspects must be further contemplated in relation to what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejías call *data colonialism*.[70]

Another related aspect is the cost of the service itself. Similarly to problems regarding access, service costs have a great influence on our musicking practices. The way we use different digital platforms that are connected to the internet would not be the same if they meant a lower or higher economic cost to us. This situation leads us to give different meanings and importance to these practices. One example would be the difference in use and importance that I have personally observed in the use of WhatsApp in Mexico and Austria. In Mexico, for example, WhatsApp has become a "replacement" for telephony (e.g., many businesses do not have a phone number but a WhatsApp account) due to the high cost of mobile phone service, because the use of WhatsApp is much cheaper than a call or a text message. In Austria, due to the low cost of mobile telephony, WhatsApp is just another application among many others, and it has not "replaced" mobile telephony. This idea of connection can also be extended to the specific needs of each device, for example regarding battery performance and how it gives rise to specific behaviors.

National laws and regulations: A particularly influential aspect that cannot be completely separated from the physical location of the actors is the fact that actors find themselves framed under the conditioning of national laws and regulations. Clear examples of this influence are whether the platforms are permitted or not or whether they have certain features or not, but also how the users are bound (or are not bound) to specific norms, such as the

requirement of tagging a post as "publicity" when explicitly mentioning a brand. In other cases, we can observe direct interventions by authorities in musicking development, such as the potential ban of TikTok in the United States and other countries or the "Kulikitaka-Challenge," in which users frightened cows, leading to its removal from Austrian TikTok on July 7, 2020, after a public call made by Austrian Federal Minister Elisabeth Köstinger.

Understanding that TikTok's musicking is embedded in the previously mentioned embodiments, infrastructures, laws, and regulations allows us to see some of the mechanisms and processes that set up a local frame of action for the practice of phenomena that are considered global. This also helps us to understand the dialectical interplay between macro (global) and micro (local) processes of knowledge construction.[71] On this basis, we can then examine and discuss the different strategies used by the actors of TikTok's musicking to inhabit, transform, and make sense of the musical geography of TikTok, in my case from the Austrian context.

Similarly to usual interpersonal interactions, the interrelation of the actors involved in multimedia music practices is influenced and determined by the forms of interaction between the participants and also by the discourses, times, objectives, and so on. The kind of interaction between the actors depends on circumstances, contexts, and positions of their analogue/digital interrelation. In the case of my exploration of TikTok's musicking, these multimedia observations result in encounters and interactions, as expected, but surprisingly also in other interrelations and interactions that would have been difficult or impossible to observe with a media-centered approach.

Conclusion

I am convinced that ethnographic thinking, especially Merriam's model,[72] forms an excellent basis for the exploration and research of any music culture of the world from a culture-relativistic perspective. This assumption has been shared by many music scholars and researchers and made evident from their observations, ideas, discussions, and reflections in different contexts. The further development of Merriam's model by Timothy Rice[73] and Julio Mendívil[74] has enhanced the way in which the realities of turn-of-the-century musical worlds have been included in the model. My current suggestions intend to bring this model closer to the realities of musical worlds experienced

by a new generation.

With the rise and expansion of the internet and all the resulting developments, new devices, communication forms, and platforms, numerous interrelations between physical and virtual multilocal and multimedia spaces experienced a huge transformation, allowing new generations (digital natives) to perceive many of these multimedia interrelations and spaces as an expansion of their own reality. Many of our contemporary musical practices do not possess a clear physical location or only exist as an abstract imaginary construct, while others create at the same time an understanding for other forms of making music by creating, processing, and experiencing sounds in different times and spaces and independently of each other.

In combination with approaches like Christine Hine's[75] and a research paradigm that does not see digital media as a passive channel of representation or an economic product but rather as a practice, Merriam's model receives the support and opportunities needed to overcome the challenges posed by contemporary music practices. An E^{3}thnography makes it possible to observe and experience how concepts, behaviors, and sounds are historically constructed by the actors of a certain musicking in different contexts, how they are socially maintained, and how they are individually created and experienced in everyday life in synchronous or asynchronous multimedia situations.

Notes

1. Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances & Meanings in a Mobile Application: An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikToks Musicking" (Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2022); Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context*, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025).

2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Public Worlds 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

3. Alfred Smudits, *Mediamorphosen des Kulturschaffens: Kunst und Kommunikationstechnologien im Wandel*, Musik und Gesellschaft 27 (Vienna: Braumüller, 2002).

4. Sensor Tower, https://sensortower.com/; all links accessed January 16, 2025.

5. For further information regarding TikTok: Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Trevor Boffone, ed.,

TikTok Cultures in the United States, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2022); Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikstrom, eds., *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022); Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok.*

6. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

7. Timothy Rice, "Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology," *Ethnomusicology* 31, no. 3 (1987): 469–88; Timothy Rice, "Time, Place, and Metaphor in Musical Experience and Ethnography," *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 2 (2003): 151–79.

8. Julio Mendívil, "The Battle of Evermore: Music as a Never-Ending Struggle for the Construction of Meaning," in *World Music Studies*, ed. Regine Allgayer-Kaufmann (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016), 67–91.

9. Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

10. Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*.

11. Ibid., 32–33.

12. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Harper Torchbooks 5043 (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

13. Rice, "Remodeling of Ethnomusicology," 469–88.

14. Ibid., 473.

15. Alan P. Merriam recognized the dynamism of musical practices, as well as the dialectical play between the creation and experience of the actors in his model. However, this dialectical level does not play a crucial role as in the expanded model by Timothy Rice.

16. Christopher Small defines musicking as "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing." Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

17. Mendívil, "Battle of Evermore," 73.

18. Anthony Seeger, "Lost Lineages and Neglected Peers: Ethnomusicologists outside Academia," *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 2 (2006): 229.

19. See, among others, George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117.

20. Nick Couldry, "Theorising Media as Practice," in *Theorising Media and Practice*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill, Anthropology of Media 4 (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 35–54.

21. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*, 32.

22. It is important to emphasize that the experience is influenced and determined by forms, discourses, times, objectives, etc., and by the interactions between the human and non-human actors.

23. Here we can also talk about *produsers*. See Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, And Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, Digital formations 45 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

24. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115–30.

25. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1922), 6–7.

26. Sara Cohen, "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music* 2 (1993): 123–38.

27. Julio Mendívil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat: Ethnologische Beobachtungen zum deutschen Schlager*, Studien zur Popularmusik (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2008); Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nort-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music From Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

28. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

29. Mendívil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat.*

30. Peter Wicke, *Von Mozart zu Madonna: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Popmusik*, Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch 3293 (Baden: Suhrkamp, 2001), 25.

31. Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties)"; Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok*.

32. See Kevin Brown, *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015); and Rubén López Cano, *Música Dispersa: Apropiación, influencias, robos y remix en la era de la escucha digital* (Barcelona: Musikeon Books, 2018).

33. See Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, Oxford Music/Media Series (New York: Oxford University, 2012).

34. See René Lysloff, "Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (2003): 233–63; Miller, *Playing Along*; Boffone, *Renegades*; and Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok.*

35. Couldry, "Theorising media as practice," 35.

36. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Text," in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 88.

37. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul R. Patton, Bloomsbury Revelations (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

38. Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 16.

39. Ibid., 24–25.

40. Ibid., 44.

41. See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

42. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual,* 44.

43. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

44. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual,* 44.

45. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 54.

46. See Juan Bermúdez, "It's All About 'Being There': Rethinking Presence and Co-presence in the Ethnographic Field during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of World Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (2023): 19-35.

47. Tim Ingold, "Human Worlds are Culturally Constructed: Against the Motion (1)," in *Key Debates in Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 2005), 97.

48. MartyAustria (@martyaustria), "Oachkatzlschwoaf official," TikTok.

49. These statements are based on my own experiences and confrontations with these aspects of *authenticity* and belonging after more than fourteen years living and researching in Austria.

50. David Morley, *Media, Modernity and Technology: The Geography of the New* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 20. See also Shaun Moores, *Digital Orientations: Non-Media-Centric Media Studies and Non-Representational Theories of Practice*, Digital formations 101 (New York: Peter Lang, 2018).

51. Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), ix.

52. Rice, "Time, Place, and Metaphor," 151–79. See also Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137–62.

53. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 46.

54. Ailbhe Kenny, *Communities of Musical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

55. Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 95.

56. Ibid., 110.

57. See Bermúdez, "It's All About," 19-35.

58. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 21.

59. See Juan Bermúdez et al., „Von Klang(-)Wissen und anderen Fischen. Auditive Wissenskulturen von Konzertfach- und Musikologiestudierenden im Vergleich," in *Auditive Wissenskulturen: Das Wissen klanglicher Praxis*, ed. Bernd Brabec de Mori and Martin Winter (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 286–88.

60. Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 95.

61. See Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 102–4.

62. Ibid., 100–119; and Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

63. Juan Bermúdez, "Performing Beyond the Platform: Experiencing Musicking On and Through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram," in *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music*, ed. Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas and João Francisco Porfírio, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 187-202.

64. Sarah Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2016).

65. I understand the concept of "empathic co-presence" as the affective and highly bodily association created after the conscious re-embedding in a physical and synchronous space, a participation and interaction previously experienced as multimedia and asynchronous by the actors in the context of a musicking. Bermúdez, "It's All About," 29.

66. The need for theoretical-methodological thinking that reflects the multimedia realities of the cultural practices in ethnographic work has been long discussed in different academic disciplines. To learn more about these different perspectives, see, e.g., George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117; Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*; Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015); Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography*; Urte Frömming et al., eds., *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*, Media Studies (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017); Anna Pertierra, *Media Anthropology for the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, *Digital Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020).; Juan Bermúdez, "¿Qué música? Si nadie toca… si nadie sabe…: Reflexionando el etnografiar de un musicking digital," *Boletín Música* 52–53 (2020): 51-60; and Liz Przybylski, *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and in Between*, Qualitative Research Methods 58 (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2021).

67. Andreas Hepp, *Deep Mediatization*, Key Ideas in Media and Cultural Studies (London: Routledge, 2020).

68. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*, 32.

69. It should be clear that there are, without a doubt, many other aspects that are influenced by the physical location of the actors; among them various aesthetic-cultural aspects of their

own performances (sign system, aesthetics, etc.) and/or digital intersectionalities of the performers (gender, class, race, digital literacy, etc.). However, these aspects can only be treated in specific performative cases and moments. Therefore, they are not addressed in conjunction with the aspects discussed in this article.

70. Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejías, *The Cost of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*, Culture and Economic Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 83–112.

71. Bermúdez et al., "Von Klang(-)Wissen," 286–88.

72. Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*.

73. Rice, "Remodeling of Ethnomusicology."

74. Mendívil, "Battle of Evermore," 67–91.

75. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*.