

***Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing.* By Judith Becker. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xii+194, notes, bibliography, index, compact disc, ISBN 0-253-34393-3, cloth.)**

Gordon E. Smith

Volume 27, numéro 2, 2005

Terrains disputés  
Contested Geographies

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014054ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/014054ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Smith, G. E. (2005). Compte rendu de [*Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*. By Judith Becker. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xii+194, notes, bibliography, index, compact disc, ISBN 0-253-34393-3, cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 27(2), 274–278.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/014054ar>

Bear's caveat comes to mind, that in fifty to seventy-five years there will be no status Indians left in Canada but the Indian Act will endure.

Steve George  
Memorial University  
St. John's, Newfoundland

## References

- Adams, Howard. 1989. *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers.
- Bruchac, Joseph. 2001. *Bowman's Store: A Journey to Myself*. New York: Lee & Low Books.
- Campbell, Maria. 1983. *Half-Breed*. Halifax: Goodread Biographies.
- Carriou, Warren. 2003. *Lake of the Prairies: A Story of Belonging*. Toronto: Anchor Canada.
- King, Thomas. 2003. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: Anansi.
- Kim Anderson and Bonita Lawrence, eds. 2003. *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival*. Toronto: Sumach Press.

---

***Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing***. By Judith Becker. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xii+194, notes, bibliography, index, compact disc, ISBN 0-253-34393-3, cloth.)

Contemporary Western ideas surrounding trance are linked to stereotypes and entrenched models. Generally, trancers are people who lived before (i.e., the distant past, the Age of Enlightenment, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), or, in current contexts, trancers are people who exist on the fringes of global societies (i.e., they practice marginalized religions, suffer from emotional or mental instability, or are attention seekers). An important part of this modeling is that trancing is often and typically gendered (i.e., practiced mainly by women). In *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, Judith Becker explores connections between neuroscience and music rituals in different world contexts, thereby dispelling many of the myths that surround trancing, as well as demonstrating the multiple roles that music plays in trancing rituals. Largely due to Becker's work, trancing is a new domain in

ethnomusicological enquiry, and within this context of exploring the unknown, I found this book to be informative and engaging.

*Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* is the result of years of Becker's intensive research in different field contexts, including India, Indonesia, and the United States. She is an authority on the music of Southeast Asia, director of the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan, and is co-founder of the Centre for World Performance Studies, also at the University of Michigan. Becker is the author of numerous publications, notably the books *Traditional Music in Modern Java and Gamelan Stories: Tantrism, Islam and Aesthetics in Central Java* and *Karawitan: Source Readings in Javanese Gamelan and Vocal Music* (1984-1999), a three-volume groundbreaking set of translations of musical works written by Southeast Asian scholars and musicians. Becker's recent research deals with the synergies between music, emotion and trance in institutionalised contexts. As an ethnomusicologist, she is concerned in this research with exploring resonances between humanistic, cultural and anthropological approaches, and scientific, cognitive and psychological approaches.

The perspective of searching for common ground between science and music, specifically neuroscience and music in cultural contexts, is the overarching theme in *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*. The book is organized into six chapters, an introduction, and postscript, and has an accompanying compact disc with nine sound excerpts that illustrate particular rituals Becker discusses in the text. An especially informative addition to this study are the eight colour prints, gathered together at the book's midpoint. Another aspect of the book I found to be especially helpful was the listing of sources, including literature from a collection of disciplines, ranging from music to philosophy to biology to psychology.

In the book's acknowledgments, Becker emphasizes the collaborative nature of her work, pointing out how difficult it is to articulate really original ideas, especially when one has had the experience of studying and working with others over long periods of time: "Many thinkers have influenced me so much that I have internalized their teachings and believe them to be my own" (xi). Here, and throughout the book, Becker is generous in her acknowledgement of the work and support of other scholars, host musicians, and friends in her challenge to weave together different strands of theory and experience with respect to understanding trancing. *Deep Listening:*

*Music, Emotion, and Trancing* is a single-authored book, but clearly, Becker's research processes embodied discovering and experiencing the perspectives of many groups and individuals.

In the book's introduction, Becker outlines her critical model for studying trancing. This includes consideration of multiple scientific perspectives, as well as religious, philosophical dimensions, and ideas related to articulating inner emotion and the expression of human feelings. Her title — *Deep Listeners* — is borrowed from the American composer, Pauline Oliveros' concept of the same name, referring to musical listening that “goes below the surface,” and is predicated on the notion that sound is a relative, socially constructed concept. For Becker's work on trancing, “*deep listeners* is a descriptive term for persons who are profoundly moved, perhaps even to tears, by simply listening to a piece of music” (2). Becker also presents the reader with other important concepts to her study, such as music cognition paradigms, ideas of “Languaging, Musicking, and Trancing” (note her verbal use of these terms), as well as what she refers to as three “Multiple Senses of Embodiment,” or ways the human body acts in trancing modes (e.g., as a physical structure, as an embodiment of a unique, personal inner life, and as an entity that interacts with other bodies, or what she describes as “being-in-the-world”). Following the introduction is a valuable background on trancing in Europe and the United States, with documentation of significant historical points and individuals in the history of trancing: saint Augustine, the Roman Church in the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, the work of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815; see the subsequent expression “mesmerized” derived from Mesmer's work), Jean Martin Charcot (1825-93), Pierre Janet (1859-1947; hypnosis), and the recent revival of interest over the last thirty years in multiple personality disorder.

In “Rethinking Trance,” the book's first chapter, Becker begins with acknowledging the central source (prior to her work) on music and trancing, Gilbert Rouget's *La Musique et la transe: Esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession* (1980; English translation, 1985). As Becker points out, Rouget's study was groundbreaking in that it helped to dispel some of the myths surrounding trancing. For example, there are many kinds of trance, some more associated with music than others, and there is nothing intrinsic in music that can cause trancing, thereby placing the emphasis on cultural factors as determinants. Using subheadings such as “Trancing

and Culture,” “Trancing and Language,” “Universals of Trance Experience,” “Trancing and the Body,” and “Defining Trance,” Becker problematizes concepts and questions surrounding trancing. For example, *believability*: as Becker states, “trance can be faked; it can be simulated. The legitimacy of trance is not only challenged in Western countries. Trance is always contestable. One cannot know another’s inner state. Lying, pretending, or play-acting can sometimes gain one prestige and attention” (30). One of the many strengths of Becker’s study is that she draws consistently on historical and contemporary case studies (i.e., most of the latter from her field study) to illustrate the points that she makes in this and subsequent chapters. Light is shed on the believability question within the context of trancing as an institutionalized part of religious observances through Becker’s discussion of the Sufi *sama* ceremony, and the *Yak Tavil* ritual from southeastern Sri Lanka; the latter ritual are all night sessions to cure demon-inspired illness. Becker’s photograph showing *Yak Tavil* musicians playing cylindrical drums (*yak bera*) is one of over thirty figures spread throughout the book.

Emotion aroused by music in trancers, and broad issues of musical meaning and human response, are the focus of the book’s second chapter, “Deep Listening.” Becker provides definitions of emotion, and then relates neurological and psychological findings of recent music and emotion studies (i.e., the work of Damasio, Nyklicek, Blood and Zatorre, among others). The Indian *rasa* concept serves as an important illustrative framework. For this reader, a most interesting, and valuable part of the book is Chapter three, “Habitus of Listening.” Here, Becker borrows Bourdieu’s *habitus* idea, and adapts it to processes of listening. In her words, “The term I have adapted from Bourdieu, *habitus of listening*, underlines the interrelatedness of the perception of musical emotion and learned interactions. Our perceptions operate within a set of habits gradually established throughout our lives... the evolving situation of being-in-the world” (71). Drawing on different cultural contexts (the griot tradition, the *rasa* concept, the Sufi *sama* ritual, and *qawwali*), Becker emphasizes the idea of emotion as a cultural construct, and different ways musicians and trancers are “in-the-world.” In “Trancing Selves,” the book’s fourth chapter, Becker builds on her *habitus of listening* notion through an exploration of what *happens* to trancers when trancing occurs. Drawing on two seemingly remote contexts, evangelicals in colonial Virginia, and transvestite priests (*bissu*) in Sulaewsi, Indonesia, she explores the notion that only certain individuals, or “selves,” can

participate in trancing. Becker observes that notions of the Western concept of the “self” as a bounded, unique entity are a hindrance to understanding the trance experience, which often involves the surrender of self, and the capacity to think of trance as a reasonable, even natural, kind of consciousness (89).

“Being in the World: Culture and Biology,” Chapter five, is the most scientific section of the book, and assumes a basic knowledge of musical cognition and related literature. Theories by Edleman (Neuronal Group Selection), biological phenomenology, and structural coupling, are examples of topics treated in this chapter. In the book’s final chapter, “Magic Through Emotion: Toward a Theory of Trance Consciousness,” Becker explores neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s two-layered theory of consciousness (“core” consciousness and “extended” consciousness), and its ramifications for establishing a theory of trance consciousness. As Becker writes: “I suggest that while trancing, core consciousness is unaffected, but that the autobiographical self, extended consciousness, is temporarily replaced by a trance persona, a trance consciousness... Damasio’s theory links both forms of consciousness to emotion, placing emotion at the center of our sense of self” (11-12). Becker continues by emphasizing the importance of emotions in trancing, meaning emotions aroused by music. This process, she contends, may play a central role in the production of trance consciousness.

*Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* should be of serious interest to ethnomusicologists and folklorists, and indeed to anyone who is interested in understanding processes of musical meaning, sound and context, and gnostic aspects of musical culture. Becker’s book stands out for its far-reaching interdisciplinarity, and specifically for her model of trancing linked to biological and neuroscientific theories of consciousness. What is also striking about Becker’s work is that it provokes other dialogues about thinking and understanding music culture, dialogues that bring us closer to the unimaginable and unspeakable dimensions of our lives as human beings.

Gordon E. Smith  
Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario

---