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After the Silence of Aesthetic Enchantment Race, Music, and Music Education

Wayne Bowman, Associate Editor

Five Essay Reviews of *Music and the Racial Imagination*,
Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, eds.
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.)

*It is in music that the racial resonates most vividly, with greatest
affect and power.*

-- Radano and Bohlman, 39

In this, the fifth in what has become a series of essay reviews of books that raise issues important to music education and relevant to the ideals of the MayDay Group, we turn our attention to a topic rarely considered or discussed in conjunction with music education: race. Race, assert Radano and Bohlman, is a specter that lurks in the house of music; indeed, music is “saturated with racial stuff” (1). If race haunts music’s house, surely that same spirit frequents music education’s. *How can that be?*

If one follows Radano and Bohlman’s analysis, a more appropriate question would be, *How could it not be?* For according to the view they advance—quite persuasively, one might add—music’s very nature is such that it works hand in glove with the racial imagination. To be clear, this is not to declare all musicians, musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and music educators racists. The whole process is much more subtle than that. In fact, such subtlety and elusiveness are among the reasons for characterizing it as ghost-like. It hovers mostly beyond our purview, casting an ethereal shadow over our altruistic engagements, our scholarly endeavors, our methodological efforts. We scarcely notice it. But it’s there: an ineluctable force borne of music’s power to signify and its remarkable fluidity and multivalence.

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Primary among this book's purposes, then, is to render central and visible something whose systematic neglect suggests things about human nature and our interests as scholars we would apparently prefer to ignore. We (or, at least, some of us) now acknowledge music's social nature as we formerly would/could not; but we seem reluctant to confront the further fact that the racial is (or has been constructed as) a fundamental part of the social. We musicians like our disciplines, our artistic endeavors, our styles, and our cultures tidily bounded—the very categorizing predilection that begets “race” as a way of sorting people into sames and others, us and them (refined and primitive, good and bad. . .). And that is precisely Radano's & Bohlman's point, I think: that music and race have grown up in the same home, the same family, as manifestations of the same basic habits, impulses, and tendencies.¹

This book is not about “race” per se, however; nor is it about the neatly opposed blackness and whiteness that term so readily conjures up. Rather, it is a book about the *racial imagination*: the “shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as part of the discursive network of modernity” (5). This shifting ideological matrix is “ever on the loose,” and this very instability contributes substantially to its power.² So the racial imagination is not so much about blackness/whiteness as it is about “the ideological supposition that informs this reflex” (1).

What is and is not racial musically, and in what way, is not obvious at all. The assumption that racial and non-racial music are easily differentiated is part of the ideological machinery with which this book concerns itself. We owe to modernist aesthetic theory³ the idea that there exists a “music in itself” which manifests itself most authentically in “works”: our legitimate object of disciplinary concern. Musics tainted by extra- or non-musical or processual meanings are less valuable or worthy of our attention. Only, this act of sorting works by a kind of sleight of hand that renders invisible the

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supposedly extra-musical implications of “our” musics, or, more specifically, by situating their value in structural/formal attributes deemed musically pure. “The rest” is, for legitimately musical purposes, dispensable. This same impulse informs the racial imagination, the reflex that gives us discrete “races” (which, of course, manifest themselves in varying degrees of purity). But the further point Radano and Bohlman want to make is that music and race have been intimately and reciprocally involved in each other’s formation, historically: Music contributes to our construction of race in virtue of its capacity to “sound” Jewish, black, French (or what have you), while race informs our constructions of what is and is not “musical.” As Radano and Bohlman put it, music “participates in many of the aesthetic and discursive constructions of race, and race provides one of the necessary elements in the construction of music” (8).

This is not to say that all music is inherently racial. In fact, while music has the remarkable capacity to “become” or embody different racial significations, it also has the capacity to (and it often does) occupy spaces *between* races. This fluidity or hybridity, however “does not signal a move away from racialized metaphysics, but rather *serves to reinforce that metaphysics*” (8, emphasis mine). That is to say, the very idea of hybridity, the life-blood of musical growth and development, often derives from presumptions of pure types from which it constitutes a departure.⁴ Thus, to bring this part of the discussion closer to home for music educators, the notion of musical/cultural authenticity has deep roots in beliefs that there are natural (perhaps even biologically determined?) musical practices, to which our educational practices evince varying degrees of veracity—veracity by which the educational validity of our instructional efforts can be gauged. And the notion of “multicultural” music education doesn’t so much move us away from that culturalist perspective as reinforce its fundamental assumptions. To pluralize culture is not necessarily to de-essentialize it, one might say. Both authenticity and hybridity (purity and novelty/creativity?) subscribe to the same conceptual—or

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perhaps better, discursive—framework, one that requires for its existence static, essential, natural categories: musical or cultural types.⁵ Culturalist and multiculturalist discourses have the effect of making essentialist assumptions *appear* benign and divorced from racial stereotypes and categories: but it is a matter of appearances.⁶

To conceive of music as non-signifying (the modernist aesthetic-theoretical strategy that urges musicians and musician-educators to attend to “the music itself” and ignore the sociopolitical trappings in which it is so often and so conspicuously ensnared) is possible, Radano and Bohlman maintain, *only if one ignores the distinctive potency of musical practice* – its power “to attribute and ascribe multivalent meanings” (43) of the kind with which their book is concerned. A momentous ideological move occurs at precisely the moment music is designated a non-signifying practice: for “music acquires its very powerlessness as an object” (43). Powerlessness is, note, something music has to acquire though; an acquisition made possible by its reduction to an object. There is “an alternative to listening to the music that is so inseparable from the racial imagination,” conclude Radano and Bohlman, “but we would struggle against invoking it. That alternative is, of course, silence” (37).

Modernist aesthetic theory has cultivated a kind of enchantment with a mythical *Musik an sich*, an idea whose very possibility silences discourse about enormous ranges of musical (and, in turn, pedagogical) significance. Radano and Bohlman urge us to end the silence, to commit to rewriting our parts in what William Edward Burghardt DuBois once characterized as the “propaganda of history”: “those lies agreed upon . . . [which] allow no room for the real plot of the story” (Radano & Bohlman, 39). “It is silence,” Radano and Bohlman remind us, “that has historically posed the greatest danger to confronting the insidious destruction of racism, silence as the hopeful belief that racism will just come to an end” (37).

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The book is an edited collection of essays: no fewer than 21 chapters by 20 impressive scholars. Its 700-plus pages (“the big book,” Radano and Bohlman aptly refer to it in their foreword) are divided into sections entitled Body/Dance, Hybridity/Mix, Representing/Disciplining, History/Modernism, and Power/Powerlessness. It is an interdisciplinary project, consisting of committed or engaged scholarship.

As the five review essays published here will make clear, this volume is an undertaking significant both in scope and size, a fact that invites review or critique from a very broad range of perspectives. As usual, our reviewers were given free reign, and asked to write essays that analyzed or expanded on any theme or aspect of the book they found intriguing. They were also given considerable latitude with regard to length and style, a fact evident in the essays that appear here.

Rinaldo Walcott’s essay offers an admirably clear and concise introduction to the promising possibilities and the obligations that follow from interdisciplinary cultural studies, in which race studies are rightly considered central. The promise is that music education (and music studies more broadly) will encounter “its own very public crisis of knowledge.” Such an opportune crisis, if I may call it that, will require that we renounce our presumptions of neutrality, learn to ask different and more difficult questions, and commit to doing things whose significance extends beyond the narrow, rigid, comfortable boundaries of our discipline as traditionally understood. What is at stake, Walcott asserts, is nothing less than learning “how to use music as a tool for thinking about and assessing human life.” Walcott’s treatment of hip hop explores some of the concrete manifestations of these claims. Rap is, he explains, a fundamentally appropriative form that also lends itself to appropriation,⁷ and whose attraction is located in “the ongoing cultural, but now revised, notion of black primitiveness.” It is, Walcott asserts, Martin Luther King’s dream



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as nightmare. Its study requires that the “overwhelming disciplinary policing of music scholarship” be circumvented;⁸ that we confront and revise our assumptions about what music is supposed to do, what it is good (and bad) for; and that we learn to live with a “host of contradictions, disappointments and pleasures” as well. In the study of hip hop, he concludes provocatively, “Music scholarship’s repressed have returned to uncover and make central to its founding the place of race, racism, and raciological thinking.”

Naomi Andre’s review expresses her considerable enthusiasm about the prospect of musicology entering, as she puts it, *the present*. Writing from the perspective of a music scholar concerned about our discipline’s traditional conservatism and reluctance to confront current social issues, the essence of her response to Radano’s and Bohlman’s effort is: “Finally!” Andre would have liked more of what one might call editorial presence in the volume—to help stitch things together more tightly, and to better clarify how the various chapters relate to the editors’ primary points—and perhaps less of the oblique, cultural studies vocabulary in which its arguments sometimes become encumbered. But she sees the book as a hopeful beginning to what she hopes will become a future as rich, diverse, and influential as the one to which early feminist work has led and is continuing to lead. The promise, Andre suggests, is that forays into racism and ethnicity will change music scholarship: both in terms of what gets discussed, and in terms of who is allowed into the conversation.

Eric Akrofi focuses his comments on a particular chapter, Masolo’s “Presencing the Past and Remembering the Present”—and in particular, on two issues raised in that chapter. The first is Masolo’s suggestion that the adjective “African” has, in many instances, become “the huge dumpster for things not quite acceptable within mainstream definitions,” the idea that designating areas of popular culture uniquely African is often merely another manifestation of colonial discourse (360). Akrofi makes the point (with which one suspects Masolo would agree) that this is not invariably and need not

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necessarily be the case. Akrofi's arguments actually underscore and illustrate several of the broader points made by Masolo and the editors of this book: that both music and words about music are exceedingly slippery signifiers; and that talk about the racial in music is a very complex endeavor. Akrofi also takes issue with what he argues is an overly "rosy" portrayal of trends toward inclusion of traditional African music in African school curricula. In so doing, he highlights the remarkable tenacity of racist and colonial influences, and hints of the elusiveness, fluidity, and pervasiveness of the networks through which hegemony perpetuates itself.

Elizabeth Gould takes an imaginative and thought-provoking approach to her essay whose underlying theme is perhaps best encapsulated in her facetious questions: "It's about the music—right?—It's not about us. Right?" Gould's more focal concern is with the various markers of difference: the ways these lead to identity and sorting, not just along racial lines, but others as well. A case in point: heteronormativity. Where, she asks, in terms of the racial imagination, am I? She devotes the remainder of her essay to elaboration of what she calls, with thanks to Radano and Bohlman, "the lesbian imagination"—an orientation that would foreground "approaches to teaching and learning music that are situated, fluid, collaborative, caring, and giving." Gould is critical of Radano and Bohlman to the extent that, in her view, their approach to race "obscures" the ways in which other signifiers of difference (class, age, ethnicity, physical ability, gender, etc.) interact and interfere with race, and with each other. Since the editors' concern is ultimately with *everyone* silenced by discourses of power, Gould reasons, they need to exercise caution lest "the racial imagination" appear to portray race "as an uncontested source of difference." For their parts, it warrants noting, Radano and Bohlman claim that "We are not arguing for or against any of these elements [in the all-too-familiar litany of differences]; on the contrary, close scrutiny reveals that they interact and interfere with each others' signification. Rather, we are pointing out how the

occlusion of race ... has meant that those realities have actually been denied” (10). Perhaps, then, they are not so much suggesting that race supercedes other differences as they are suggesting that musical scholarship which responsibly acknowledges the intimate relation between race and music would be a music scholarship open to consideration of a broad spectrum of differences. Gould’s point, in turn, is probably that since systems of oppression intersect and interlock, the study of one such system necessarily implicates the others.

Deborah Bradley gives us a poignant, first-hand account of the complex and subtle ways race insinuates itself into music and our educational practices. She reminds us of the politics of schooling and of the many forces that seek to keep music education “pure” and disengaged, undefiled by social matters like politics and race. Interestingly, as a student Bradley found her music classes an escape from the often “rotten” realities of schooling and life outside school. Yet, at the same time, they helped her think through things like politics and race, and to experience them in ways that clearly were deeply meaningful. Her experiences in music exemplified “why I hate high school and what I like about it all rolled into one.” Recognition of such tensions is an important part, I think, of what her essay offers to those who read it closely. On the one hand, her choir students relate that “their skin color matters in their lives at school and on the street but somehow it doesn’t matter in choir”; yet, on the other, it is an important factor in the choir’s reputation and success. This simultaneous capacity for race in music not to matter and yet to matter a great deal may be precisely what leads Radano and Bohlman to characterize it as ghostlike. We music educators have been very carefully taught (and we, in turn, teach our students) *not to hear major parts of what music has to say, and to ignore major parts of what it does*. Bradley helps us see that ignoring or suppressing the sociopolitical and the racial in music does not change the fact or the extent of its political

complicity. That is an evasive maneuver, itself a political act, and one with very real (often undesirable) human consequences.

In their response to these reviews, Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman...

It is difficult for music educators to talk about race. But we can learn. And the alternative is difficult to justify.

Notes

¹ I will not say instincts.

² Deborah Wong, in her insightful chapter entitled “The Asian American Body in Performance,” has this to say about race: “Race is a constructed sign of historical injury that must be productively maintained and refashioned over time. The body will not stay still Race is not disinterested, let alone natural—it’s hard work to maintain its categories” (87).

³ Which, note, manifests important family resemblances to the essentialism behind racial sorting.

⁴ Christopher Waterman’s chapter, “The Excluded Middle of the American Racial Imagination,” defines racism as the “family of ideologies” concerned with “the relationship between biological ‘destinies’ and cultural ‘essences’.” He then argues that an effective way to understand the logics of inclusion and exclusion in which music is complicit is to “examine music that springs from, circulates around, and seeps through the interstices between racial categories.” This helps us see musicians and audiences “not as instances of idealized types, but as human beings working under particular historical conditions to produce, texture, and defend certain modes of social existence” (167-68).

⁵ Peter Manuel writes, in his chapter, “Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Indo-Trinidadian Music,” of “centrifugal ethnic revivals and centripetal syncretic hybridity” (341)—a phrase that seems to encapsulate nicely the dynamic tensions at play here.

⁶ Although I take this to be the view advanced by Radano and Bohlman, multiculturalism need not carry the full weight of the problems associated with culturalism. Not all understandings of multiculturalism, for instance, necessarily subscribe to essentialism: the term may be and often is used to refer to openness toward diversity and pluralism (not that music educators have been all that clear about what they mean when invoking the term “multicultural”!). For a discussion of the problems associated with culturalism in the context of music education, see Thomas Regelski’s essay, “Critical Education,

Culturalism, and Multiculturalism” in volume 1 (April 2002) of *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* (<http://www.siue.edu/MUSIC/ACTPAPERS/ARCHIVE/Regelski.pdf>).

⁷ Deborah Wong writes, “The possibility of racial impersonation is essentially at center stage in hip hop” (84). Elsewhere (85) she observes that “Hip hop culture recognizes ownership, owns up to racialized authority, and yet allows encroachment on those terms.”

⁸ This is probably one of the primary reasons the vast majority of scholarly consideration of hip hop happens outside Schools of Music.