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Dear Diary: Confessions of a Nice White Girl

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The following events are true.

Monday, October 4, 1965

Dear Diary,

I SOOOOO love first period mixed chorus! I think I would hate school if it weren't for chorus. Charlie is such a great teacher. He doesn't even make us call him "Mr. Smithson" – he actually WANTS us to call him Charlie. Some of the other teachers complain about that, saying we should show him more respect. He always just says that without us, the singers in the chorus, he's just someone waving his arms in the air like a crazy person. The music we end up making is the result of our group effort, and that includes him as no better, no worse, than the rest of us. I love that!

Today we started a new piece and I've been thinking about it all day. I got caught daydreaming in geometry class (I was SO embarrassed!) because the music was playing in my head and all I could think about were those lyrics: "March over meadows where grasses in the wind are waving, Red Army soldiers death are braving, all their people from oppression saving. . . ." I bet Charlie is going to get into trouble for teaching this song – people are so worried about communism "taking over" our country. But like Charlie said this morning, the reason he wants us to learn the song, besides the fact that the music is beautiful (and it is!), is because it tells the story of how people in Russia loved their country as much as we love America. And that people were oppressed under the Czars and fought a revolution to change that – just like the American Revolution was about England's oppression of the Original Thirteen Colonies. I keep thinking, the people in Russia were willing to die for what they believed. And then I thought, it doesn't matter which army you fight for, you probably think you are doing the right thing or else you wouldn't be able to fight. So, how do you know if you are on the "right side" of the war? And what's wrong with singing Russian music to help us understand what Russian people think and feel? I wonder what the song sounds like in Russian? Our copies only have English lyrics.

Wednesday, October 13, 1965

I knew it! Charlie told us today that some people were worried because we were singing March Over Meadows in mixed chorus – they were afraid he was trying to turn us all into communists. We talked a lot in class this morning instead of singing. We talked about why it might be okay to sing March over Meadows, and whether or not singing it meant we believed the Bolsheviks were “right” or if we were just singing about something that really happened in history. I think Charlie was trying to make sure we could explain it to our parents if they asked us about the song. I don’t think my mother or father would worry about it too much. My dad came to the United States in 1929 when he was 19 years old, and I can tell from things he has said that he felt very confused during World War II. He hated Hitler and the Nazis, I know, but he still loved Germany. He hated that so many places that he remembered from his childhood were destroyed by the Allies. He doesn’t have very much family left in Germany – a lot of them died during the war. He still gets angry watching movies about the war and the way the Germans are always the bad guys. Somehow, singing March Over Meadows helped me to see how confusing it must be for people like my dad. I hope we get to do this song on our next concert, but I bet we don’t. . . .

Friday, December 3, 1965

What a great concert! Mixed chorus sounded great. I think we must have the best high school choir in the state! If only we could look as good as we sounded -- those stupid dresses! They are so awful and uncomfortable. Mine is so itchy – and I feel like it is going to fall off. I certainly wasn’t built to wear a strapless evening gown. . . .the guys look great in their tuxes, though.

Too bad we didn’t sing March Over Meadows – it sounded so good in rehearsal on Wednesday. I guess our principal, Mr. Warden, was afraid of what people would think if we sang it. How does someone get to be principal of such a large high school, and not understand that singing a song about the communist revolution doesn’t mean we believe in communism?

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Friday, April 5, 1968

What an awful day! I don't want to be here at all. Someone shot Martin Luther King, Jr. last night in Memphis. Everybody at school is crazy today. Some people are laughing and making jokes about him; some people are saying they are glad he is dead. I can't stop crying. What makes anyone think that killing someone is a good way to solve a problem? Just when I thought maybe white and black people in this country were beginning to learn to get along with each other, someone kills Martin Luther King. Now what is going to happen? I bet whoever is responsible will try to convince us all that Rev. King was shot by one crazy person acting all alone. Maybe it's possible. I wonder if I'll ever find out who really killed John Kennedy? I probably could believe Lee Harvey Oswald did that all by himself except that I watched him executed on live TV. I remember my dad saying exactly that as we watched Oswald bleeding: "if he dies we'll never know the truth." He died.

I had a really hard time concentrating at school today. I wish my mom hadn't made me go – she knew I was upset but she thought going to school would take my mind off Rev. King's assassination. She doesn't realize how rotten a place school can be sometimes. If it weren't for chorus and my music theory class I would absolutely hate it. . . . Oh well, only two more months until we graduate. . . . I guess I can stand it that much longer.

Monday, April 8, 1968

Today in Mixed Chorus Charlie started teaching us a new piece of music that he wrote. He spent the whole weekend writing it just for us! It's a medley of civil rights songs. I know some of the melodies from my friends who sing in a folk group. Some of the songs I've heard on TV on the news when they show stories about the demonstrations – people are singing the songs as they march. I remember hearing We Shall Overcome when Rev. King gave the beautiful I Have a Dream speech in Washington. Charlie did a really good job writing this piece – it isn't easy but we'll be able to make it sound really good soon, I think. We worked a lot today on trying to put a particular kind of sound into our voices for this medley. He played a recording for us of the Morehouse College choir from Atlanta. I think we still sounded like a bunch of white kids but it felt SOOO good to sing those songs. It felt like something I could do to honor Dr. King. I know some of the kids in chorus didn't really want to sing this medley, though – rednecks! Although once they stopped griping and started singing, I think maybe they liked the way the songs felt. It seemed really special to be standing together singing: "and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free." I wonder how Olisya Martin felt when she was singing. It must be hard to be the only black girl in a high school with

over 2000 students. What kind of integration sends 3 black kids into a school with over 2000 white kids – especially when so many of them are rednecks? I can't imagine how hard that must be. I don't think I could do it if I were forced to go to a black high school. I know I couldn't.

Friday, June 7, 1968

My last concert at CHS! I can't believe it! Sometimes these last 4 years seem to have just flown by – but most of the time it seemed like forever. The concert tonight was a good example of why I hate high school and what I like about it all rolled into one. At Wednesday's rehearsal, Charlie told us that he had to take Songs for Freedom off the program. Mr. Warden had gotten complaints from some parents about singing "negro political songs." Charlie was choking back tears when he told us he had pretty much been ordered not to include the songs on the program. He says he doesn't know if he'll be back to teach next year or not. I hope he does come back – I think he's the best teacher in the whole school. It makes me mad to think how much people don't understand about what he does in music classes. They say he's too "political" and that he should stick to teaching music. But when I think of all the different things I've learned just from singing different kinds of music it makes me wonder what they think teaching music is! Music makes me think about politics. Music makes me think about people who live in other countries in the world. Music makes me worry about how lonely Olisya must feel every day at school. I've tried to talk to her a few times in history class because she sits right behind me – but she's so afraid she's going to get in trouble that she always just tells me to hush up and leave her alone. Maybe it's hard for her to realize that I really would like to get to know her better. I wish she had been in the alto section in chorus – maybe then I could have sat with her and we could have sung together. But she's a soprano, so. . . .

So tonight's concert felt strange. We sang really well (we always do), and the audience gave us a standing ovation. But I knew that there was a big hole in the program – those five minutes when we should have been singing Charlie's medley of civil rights songs. But after we sang our encore, after Charlie had left the stage, and people in the audience were beginning to leave, something really special happened. A few people in the choir started singing the Songs for Freedom. I don't know who started, it wasn't me but I sure joined in as fast as I could. All of a sudden there were about 10 of us standing together singing Charlie's piece with all of our hearts. I looked off into the wings and saw Olisiya standing there, and she was crying. I started to cry, too. More and more people from chorus started to come back on stage to join the singing. In the end there were probably 15 or 20 of us. We sort of sang directly to Mr. Warden who was standing at the edge of the stage by this time and looking very uncomfortable. I think he wanted to stop us but

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didn't know how without creating a scene. Heaven knows, we can't have a SCENE on CHS' impeccable record. . . . Charlie came back onstage and gave every single one of us a hug when we finished. There were tears in his eyes. I'll never forget that.

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Saturday, November 12, 2004

Am I ever going to finish this--dissertation? It is so hard to put personal feelings about my experiences with the youth choir I now conduct into academic-speak. As I write, I'm aware that I am writing about real kids and real experiences. I don't want to abstract my kids into "data." They are real people who trusted me enough, as their teacher, to let me see into their personal selves and trust me to put it into writing in a way that is real. It's terrifying! These kids are white, brown, black and every shade in-between. Their skin colour matters in their lives at school and on the street but somehow it doesn't matter in choir. They have repeatedly told me this in their interviews--that they don't feel as though race is an issue in our choir, and I see it in the way they act with and react to each other in rehearsals, in concerts, and when we travel together. . (And then I remind myself: My choir is popular at local charity events because of our "diversity." City event organizers hire us to appear at public events because we "reflect the face of Mississauga" while so many other choirs in this immediate area are "white." I make sure that, in our self-produced print media, it is obvious we are racially mixed and include kids with physical challenges. . . .) Yet, I feel convinced that at least for two hours every week at our rehearsals, the boundaries of race that my students experience at school and elsewhere are lessened temporarily. At least, that is what I want to believe. Still, I have to ask, what do my students get out of my teaching, out of my repertoire choices, out of the types of concerts we perform?

I'm not sure I'll ever know the answers, but throughout my reading of Music and the Racial Imagination, I kept thinking about Amber and many other students who talked about a single event in their choir experiences as especially meaningful to them. In her interview, Amber described the way she felt at a concert presented by my choir (the Mississauga Festival Youth Choir), for the opening ceremonies of the Prison Fellowship International quadrennial convocation in August 2003. There were over 900 people from 180 countries in the audience that night. When the choir sang the first few notes of one of our favourite pieces, a South African freedom song entitled, "Haleluyah! Pelo Tsa Rona," the entire South African delegation in the audience spontaneously leapt to their feet and sang and danced with us. It was an emotional moment for those of us on stage, for the South African delegates, and I think for the whole audience as we were

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collectively swept away by the palpable power of the moment. As Amber describes that moment:

It just felt really good – especially at the Prison Fellowship thing – I remember everyone was laughing and having fun at that, and I sort of felt like we were sharing part of their world, you know what I mean? Like, just a small edge, like the tip of the iceberg, but it was like, for a minute, these people who were delegates from South Africa. . . these people who have virtually completely different lives, these delegates from a country half-way across the world from us, it was like it was one common thing – for a minute there it was like there was nothing between us.

One common thing; nothing between us – here are the flashes of a common humanity, the seeds of a future that is possible, even if very distant. Such moments are very rare and normal everyday circumstances are not conducive to their development. Yet they do occur, and are felt profoundly by those who experience them. Such moments are hard to talk about, to write about, in a way that makes sense to those who were not there to experience them, but they are real and the memories of such moments encourage me to continue to strive toward that future.

Diary, I need to sign out now. I have to choose some repertoire for my choirs . . .

[Coda](#)

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Coda

Music and the Racial Imagination (Radano & Bohlman, 2000) triggered the reminiscences from my teens described in the foregoing “diary,” memories that undoubtedly played a role in my decision to enter an undergraduate music education program at the age of 40. These and other memories have been called up in a variety of contexts more recently over the course of my doctoral research in music and anti-racism education. The ways in which humans make use of music to construct race, nationality, gender, and other fixed identities troubles me, because I sincerely believe in such constructions, we look through only one of music’s prismatic facets, closing ourselves to its multiple possibilities. My doctoral research investigates the ways engaging with world music in the choral setting may work to disrupt the formation of identities based upon race or nation among adolescents, perhaps setting us on a path to become “multicultural human subjects.” The question itself is drawn in part from my high school experiences as they led me, both then and now, to question hegemonic assumptions and the status quo. I seek some hope that through our music making we can locate spaces of common ground on which we may stand with other human beings, moving beyond mere tolerance of each other to true acceptance (recognizing that “mere tolerance” would be a significant achievement in itself).

Glimpses of a similar hope are seemingly held by many of the contributors to *Music and the Racial Imagination*, and may be found throughout its pages. Deborah Wong’s opening essay about Asian-American rappers was one example of the sort of musical “transruption” (Hesse, 2000) that reinforces my faith in our human ability to get over ourselves, when she states:

As an Asian American scholar, I want to believe that Asian American incursions into African American forms are conscious attempts to link different ways of knowing and reconfiguring race (2000, p. 89).

The belief that it is possible to link to different ways of knowing, to reconfigure race through our experiences with world music drives both my doctoral research and repertoire choices for my youth choir. Throughout *Music and the Racial Imagination*, the links to different ways of knowing are evident, but often countered with official discourses whose aim is to maintain boundaries, to discourage cross-over as unacceptable musical performance, and to construct identity through musical practices that are supposed to remain “pure.” Jocelyne Guilbault’s essay offers an excellent example of the ongoing tension in Trinidad between lived practices of calypso and soca and their discursively imagined boundaries.

The concluding chapters of *Music and the Racial Imagination*, however, take a darker turn. Longinovic’s essay about the genocide in *Bosnia* in the 1990’s (2000) is a chilling reminder of the way our musical engagements, and our discourses about others’ musical engagements, play a role in perpetuating hatred and unfathomable crimes against our fellow humans. Philip Bohlman’s concluding essay on placelessness as remembered musically speaks poignantly to the plight of millions of displaced persons, whose collective identity as a people lives on only through musical practice (Celtic music as one example).

The choice to position these two essays as the final words of *Music and the Racial Imagination* stands as a warning to those of us who practice music as teachers, performers, and composers: what we do is not a trivial pursuit. We influence our students, our friends, our neighbours, even our enemies, and that influence may be simultaneously positive and negative. The musical choices we make have the potential to contribute to drastic, earth-shattering, irreversible outcomes. Or they may, like my high school choir director “Charlie Smithson’s” choices, motivate us to attempt singing a better world into being.

Biographical Information

Deborah Bradley is a PhD Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation, entitled *Global Song, Global Citizens? Multicultural Choral Music Education and the Community Youth Choir: Constituting the Multicultural Human Subject*, examines the ways engaging in global choral music curriculum taught within an anti-racism praxis is performative to adolescent choir members' identity and self-understanding. Ms. Bradley founded the Mississauga Festival Youth Choir, and has served as Artistic Director for this 85 voice community choir since 1997. Ms. Bradley taught music education courses at the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, from Sept. 1997- May 2005. In January 2006, she begins a position as Asst. Professor, Music Education, in the Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.