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Balancing the Counterpoint: Exploring Musical Contexts and Relations

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Music is inherently connected to sociopolitical contexts and relations. Music and politics are intertwined both historically and presently, and there is much literature exploring the relationships between music and various political movements. In considering the importance of an approach to understand these connections and relationships, I suggest a methodology that allows us to contextually explore musics that occur both in tandem with human actions and in response to human actions. In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said (1993) put forward a contrapuntal methodology as a means to make sense of the literature and “culture” he examined in his text. Said was an accomplished pianist and often wrote of music (see, for example, Said 2006, 2008). As such, this contrapuntal methodology has the inherent musical qualities of counterpoint that include both intricate design and a delicate balance. Inherent to its structure is the examination of hegemonic culture in juxtaposition with its counterhegemonic counterpart. In this paper, I explore the notion of Said’s (1993) contrapuntal methodology and its potential relationship to music, musicking, and music education.

Keywords: music education, contrapuntal methodology, Edward Said, counternarratives, contextualized education, worldliness

With the understanding that any contexts of musicking are integrally connected to the nature of human activity, MayDay Group Action Ideal II calls on music educators to find a “secure theoretical foundation that unites the actions of music with the various contexts and meanings of those actions.”¹ All music is situated in a context; it is embedded in the historical, political, cultural, and social relations of the time, place, and people from which it emerged. Music is inherently connected to sociopolitical contexts and relations. Music and politics are intertwined both historically and presently, and there is much literature exploring the relationships between music and various political movements.² In considering the importance of an approach to understand these connections and relationships, I

suggest a methodology that would allow us to explore contextually musics that occur both in tandem with human actions and in response to human actions.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1993) put forward a contrapuntal methodology as a means to make sense of the literature and “culture” he examined in his text. Said was an accomplished pianist and often wrote of music (see, for example, Said 2006, 2008). As such, this contrapuntal methodology has the inherent musical qualities of counterpoint that include both intricate design and a delicate balance. In a work that largely examines literature, Said (1993) argued that examining contradictory texts is important in understanding what might be (intentionally or unintentionally) absent from dominant culture. He cited, for example, the importance of reading Jane Austen alongside Frantz Fanon in order to affiliate modern culture with its imperial engagements and attachments (60). This methodology, then, examines hegemonic culture, music, and music education in juxtaposition with its counterhegemonic counterpart. In this paper, I explore the notion of a contrapuntal methodology and its potential relationship to music, musicking, and music education.

Context: Said’s “worldliness”

In order to understand the context for Said’s contrapuntal methodology, we must look to some of his earlier work. For Said, understanding a text requires understanding its place in the world. This context includes considering the discourses that influence it and the manner in which it is situated in the global context. A text, in this case, can include music, although Said’s site of analysis is usually written text. In his article, “The text, the world, the critic,” which predates his book of a similar name, Said argues that “any text, if it is not immediately destroyed, is a network of often colliding forces” (Said 1975, 3). This text “in its being a text is a being in the world” (3). As such, it addresses the reader directly. For the purposes of this paper, I consider texts broadly. Following the field of cultural studies and several musicologists (see for example Kramer 2002, Leppert 2002, McClary 1991, 2001), I include music among the texts we might “read” critically. Readers of these texts are thus also conceptualized as readers of a diversity of texts that might include music, literature, film, social media, visual art, theater, dance, news media, television, and more.

For Said (1975, 1983), “worldliness” was a necessary quality of both the text and the critic. Any text is deeply embedded in the world in which it is produced. Critics bring their own context to each text they encounter, but critics can also read the text in such a way that works to understand the worldliness of the text. Reading for the worldliness of a text underpins Said’s contrapuntal methodology (Said 1993). Before moving to a discussion of contrapuntal methodology specifically, there are two other aspects of Said’s “worldliness” construct to consider.

In reading texts, Said contended that the English canon of literature was often read filiatively — that is, in relation to texts that had gone before. Filiative relations are those that speak to heritage. Said instead argued for an affiliative reading — a reading grounded in culture and the world. According to Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001), Said “promotes affiliation as a general critical principle because it frees the critic from a narrow view of texts connected in a filiative relationship to other texts, with very little attention paid to the ‘world’ in which they come into being” (24). This kind of affiliative reading allowed critics to situate and understand the text as a “phenomenon in the world” (25).

Finally, and importantly, Said believed profoundly in amateurism. He was wary of the silos created by narrow specialization and preferred the literal meaning of an amateur — someone who engages in a pursuit for the love of it without being professional (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, 34). Said deeply valued amateurism in a critic. According to Said, cultural critics should approach criticism grounded firmly in the world. A critic with a broad scope of knowledge is likely more equipped to situate a text in a world than a critic with a narrow specialization. Hildegard Froehlich (2011) addressed the narrow specializations and splinter groups in the music education context in her keynote paper at the International Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education Conference in 2011 entitled “Music Education: A Case of Too Many Communities of Practice?” Perhaps we might be better served as music educators by engaging in education from a worldly perspective. A number of music education scholars have considered musics contextually in music education and advocated for its importance in curricula and programming (Abril 2003, 2006, Bradley 2003, 2006, Dunbar-Hall 2009, Schippers 2010, Vaugeois 2009, Hess 2014, 2015a). To position their work in Said’s arguments on “worldliness,” these scholars argue not only for “filiative readings” — that is, the examination of music in relation

to earlier “works”³ — but also for the “affiliative readings” — the situating of music in its wider sociopolitical, sociohistorical context.

A contrapuntal methodology: What is it?

The worldliness of both the text and the critic is fundamental to understanding what Said meant by contrapuntal methodology. To begin to unpack this approach to reading, I begin with Said’s (1993) words directly. In his important work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said engaged with literature from the English literary canon alongside works that are decidedly anticolonial. Given his emphasis on worldliness as defined above, Said read the texts of the canon in a very particular way.

Specifically, he read the canon to understand colonial and imperial engagements and entanglements threaded throughout the texts. In his words, “this procedure [that is, contrapuntal methodology] entails reading the canon as a polyphonic accompaniment to the expansion of Europe” (60). Further, “theoretical work must begin to formulate the relationship between empire and culture” (60). He argued:

The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded — in *L’Etranger*, for example, the whole previous history of France’s colonialism and its destruction of the Algerian state, and the later emergence of an independent Algeria (which Camus opposed). (66–7)

For Said, what is excluded from the text was just as important, if not more important, to a critical reading than what was present. These ideas become more complex than the previous example as we examine Said’s (1993, 80–97) discussion of Jane Austen’s ([1814] 2000) *Mansfield Park*. Said argues that the Bertrams’ lives at Mansfield park were sustained materially by a plantation they owned in Antigua (85). While the plantation was a mere shadow in the book’s plot, the two environments were actually co-constitutive. They were wound in intricate relations with each other. It was a symbiotic relationship. A contrapuntal methodology allows us to study what is presented in texts alongside any colonial and imperial entanglements and explore them both as intrinsically related, and, in many cases, co-constitutive. The ability to look at both contexts simultaneously is invaluable, as it is the relations between contexts that determine how we understand both spaces.

Said's work has been discussed and critiqued extensively across a broad range of fields (see, for example, Little 1979, Wang 1997, Sivan 1985, Tibawi 1979, Wahba 1989, Said 1994). Combining his words with those of other cultural critics who employ his work, I now attempt to elucidate the elements of a contrapuntal methodology, as put forward by Said. Notably, this methodology is rooted directly in the musical tradition to which its name alludes. As Said prepares to read the canon in *Culture and Imperialism*, he notes:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts. In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work. (Said 1993, 51, emphasis in original)

Edward Said's counterpoint draws on the Western Baroque contrapuntal tradition of Bach. He valorized the playing of Glenn Gould — particularly of the Goldberg Variations — and spoke of it often in his work. The counterpoint to which he refers is the “punctus contra punctum,” literally, the “note against note” or “point against point” with which we are readily familiar in music education. Voices are distinct and notes are balanced artfully. Some lines take precedence at times, but one line rarely dominates for any significant period of time within the context of the piece. Emerging out of Renaissance counterpoint, Baroque counterpoint grew out of a vocal tradition (Lachman 2010, 165). Situating counterpoint in the context of comparative literature and discourse analysis, the idea of voice seems important. In educational settings, acknowledging all voices who participate in (music) education is a fundamental tenet of critical pedagogy.

In his piece entitled “Perspectives of the polyphony in Edward Said's writings,” prominent Dutch composer and musicologist Rokus de Groot (2005) emphasizes the role of responsibility in polyphony. De Groot takes polyphony as the “simultaneous unfolding of two or more different voices, each with its own identity, and at the same time each with a ‘responsibility’ to the other and for the *ensemble* of voices” (de Groot 2005, 221, emphasis in original). He draws on the work of composer Pierre Boulez to explicate this “responsibility.” For Boulez, the participant voices “shape each other (e.g. in melodic and rhythmic complementarity), and contribute to the

articulation of the overall texture and of overall processes (in particular, in the dimension of harmonic structure)” (Boulez [1963] 1971, 118, as cited in de Groot 2005, 222). Because of both the responsibility and the corollary, the ability to respond, de Groot (2005) argues that the voices may be perceived as “transforming each other continuously” (223) — an idea with interesting implications when considered in imperial, colonial, and anticolonial contexts. He further notes the presence of dissidence in the counterpoint — moments when one voice dissents from the others or from the underpinning harmonic structure (233) — as well as transgression — moments or longer sojourns that challenge the so-called “identities” of the voices (234).

If these elements are typical of counterpoint, considering Said’s contrapuntal methodology in light of its musical influences points directly to the possibilities Said introduces in employing this type of reading. Music as text is always already political, given Said’s privileging of the necessity of worldliness. People create music both for and within contexts imbued with intricate tapestries of power relations. Symphonic music, for example, connects to white, middle class sensibilities in ways that celebrate such identities (Small 1998). Afro-Cuban folkloric music reflects Cuban culture’s “heterogeneous conglomeration of different races, cultures, many fleshed and cultivations that are stirred, intermingled and disintegrated in the same social cauldron” (Boggs 1991, 76). Colonization, imperialism, and enslavement intersect within the music. Examining music contrapuntally illuminates an interesting set of relations and counternarratives.

Exploring the manner in which cultural critics have taken up Said’s (1993) work in literature illuminates the ways in which such a musical methodology might be useful as a means to understand the world. Importantly, for Mildred Mortimer (2005), this type of reading was in fact a sort of “reading back” from the perspective of the colonized (61). She argues that this “reading back” “brings to light the hidden colonial history that permeates nineteenth-century European literary texts” (55). Thinking contrapuntally allows for the exploration of such complexities. As Colin Symes (2007) notes,

[t]he contrapuntal approach enabled Said to see cultures not as monolithic, pure entities, but as overlapping, as interdependent, in which the patterns of power and domination are never expressed completely, but are accompanied by

resistance and subversion, by point and counterpoint, and where contemporaneous events can produce antiphonal responses. (317)

Truly then, a contrapuntal reading allows for a sense of the larger picture — an examination of multiple narratives that enable the narrative that appears as dominant, while recognizing that narratives are continually in flux — responding continuously to the ever-shifting context. Geeta Chowdhry (2007) deems the “goal of a contrapuntal reading is thus to not privilege any particular narrative but reveal the ‘wholeness’ of the text, the intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories of metropolitan and colonized societies and of the elite and subaltern” (105).

There is a further complexity, however. Said (1993) calls on readers to read Jane Austen alongside Frantz Fanon in order to understand its imperial engagements and attachments (60) — to notice the “absent presences,” to draw on the words of Katherine McKittrick (2006).⁴ This move places the responsibility squarely back onto the reader, effectively acting as a charge to live Said’s theories of worldliness as a cultural critic. My reading of this methodology is thus twofold: first, readers/critics must engage with the text directly for its imperial and colonial attachments, and second, readers/critics are responsible for “reading back” to these texts by engaging with anticolonial texts.

“Reading back” is not without its challenges. Dominant power structures can make it difficult for dominant bodies to be aware of anti-oppressive texts by virtue of the manner in which these power structures operate. These structures facilitate a neoliberal discourse of meritocracy, individualism, and colorblindness — an image of a world in which one can do anything or be anyone if one just tries hard enough. If anti-oppressive texts become a part of the main discourse, they threaten the security of such power structures. Interrupting and subverting these systems is a primary focus of “reading back,” but dominant groups and the power structures that sustain their privilege have a vested interest in obscuring these texts or counternarratives.

Before considering applications of this methodology, I note one particular hesitation I have with this work. When I first read *Culture and Imperialism* a number of years ago, I was struck by the reliance on a Western classical tradition, itself deeply entangled in imperialism and colonialism,⁵ to do anticolonial work. Lise Vaugeois (2013) opposes Bennett Reimer’s notion that “Western classical music represents universal values, is innocent of political relations, and offers aesthetic

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experiences that embody the beautiful, and thus, the moral” (Reimer 1989, 224, as cited in Vaugeois 2013, 31). She proceeds to strip Western classical music of its political innocence by situating it within explicitly political colonial projects (Vaugeois 2013, 31). As Lachman (2010) notes, this Baroque counterpoint tradition is indeed distinctly European and also strongly tied to Christianity (165). As such, employing counterpoint in the service of anticolonialism points to the possibility of a sort of neocolonialism attached to using such a tool. A number of scholars express their concerns with Said’s overemphasis on Western works (Little 1979, Sivan 1985, Tibawi 1979, Wahba 1989, Wang 1997). Most of these critiques pre-date *Culture and Imperialism*, yet the critique speaks to the majority of Said’s work. Critics point to his Westernization and emphasis on Western tools and cultural works including literature and music. This critique is highly visible in reading Said’s (1993) work and relates directly to his use of counterpoint as a methodology. Western works analyzed critically make up the bulk of that book. Edward Said is a key figure in anticolonial discourse analysis (Bhabha 1994); however, the West features more prominently than key anticolonial texts in *Culture and Imperialism*.

To complicate this critique, in reading further, I encountered the words of R. Radhakrishnan from a symposium on Said’s work held in Toronto (Robbins et al. 1994). Radhakrishnan (Robbins et al. 1994) pointed out that Said is “partial to those theorists who use the master’s tools to deconstruct the master’s house,” although he notes that Said does not claim total value for such strategies (17). His words allude to Audre Lorde’s ([1984] 2007) now famous quote: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110). Reading of Said’s partiality to employing the master’s tools in exactly that manner is reminiscent of Lisa Delpit’s ([1995] 2006) work. Speaking specifically about language, Delpit argues that providing the master’s tools to marginalized students who lack that facility is an important step in addressing structural oppression. She makes a compelling case that at times, the master’s tools can play a fundamental role in undoing systemic injustices.⁶ Reconsidering Said’s (1993) contrapuntal methodology, Delpit’s ([1995] 2006) case provides a strong counternarrative to the critiques of a methodology derived from Western classical music. At the very least, in deconstructing the master’s house, we can perhaps enlist both the master’s tools and other anti-colonial strategies in our efforts.

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Inserting counterpoint back into a musical context

What might it mean to read music as text? Drawing on Said's (1975) commentary on worldliness, music is always already situated in the world and firmly entrenched in sociopolitical, historical, and social contexts. Reading or writing music contrapuntally might involve a number of strategies. From a lyrical perspective, artists who work with lyrics can potentially make the "voyage in" (Said 1993, 239–61) and literally write back to dominant discourses and oppressive structures.

We can perhaps read and perceive most easily those musics as texts that have literal associated texts; however, Susan McClary (1991) offers insight into analysis of musical content devoid of lyrics in her exploration of musical signification. She delves into the fourth symphony of Tchaikovsky in order to consider what his music signifies. She argues compellingly that classical music, like popular music, communicates explicit messages about gender, gender construction, and desire, drawing on use of thematic material, key areas, and musical forms with gendered attachments. She demonstrates, for example, the triumph of masculinity in the typical sonata-allegro form of symphonic first movements through the ultimate reconfiguration of the "feminine theme" in the home key of the "masculine theme" (69). A musical "writing back" to this gender script might involve a subversion of the typical forms of classical music and a refusal to represent identity musically in ways that are oppressive.

Some musics connect to manufactured or fictional contexts through plot devices. Operas, musicals, and music videos, for example, create meaning through music in conjunction with setting and characters. McClary (1991) also explores gendered and sexual meanings created by the intersection of music, setting, and characters in Bizet's *Carmen*.⁷ Koza (2003) similarly critiques the gendered and racialized meanings created in *Once on this Island* (Ahrens/Flaherty). In both critiques, meanings emerged through the intricate relationship between music, lyrics, and fictional context. A musical, opera, or music video that "writes back" might choose a counterhegemonic subject or represent characters in ways that interrupt dominant discourses.

We also might consider the context in which music occurs. Small's (1998) renowned sociological critique of the symphony reveals an affirmation, exploration, and celebration of white, middle class values facilitated by the experience of going to the symphony. Certain contexts serve to reinscribe dominant structures and understandings of identity. Contrapuntal contexts to such celebrations of values might create ways to understand identity differently — perhaps in ways that disrupt conventional understandings of identity. Music occurring in the context of a fundraiser to support Syrian refugees, for example, is positioned to both celebrate values inherent in the music and communicate the value and support of those families in profound crisis. In considering music as text, the potential for musicians to “write back” to dominant hegemonic discourses is rich and exciting.

I came to this methodology in the proposal stage of a new research project. As a white, cisgendered musician and scholar who prioritizes activism and anti-oppression work, I centered both activism and equity work in this project. I interviewed 20 musicians who identified as activists to consider three research questions: (1) How do activist-musicians view the role of (their) music? (2) How do activist-musicians perceive the connection/relationship of music to the status quo and/or various systemic injustices? and (3) Based on their experience of music, what do activist-musicians believe are the implications of their work for music education? In thinking through the project initially, a methodology that richly exposed counternarratives seemed indicated, given the nature of activism and the work of these 20 individuals. The participants were diverse both musically and demographically. Activist-musicians ranged in age from their late 20s to 70s and held a range of class positions. The majority of participants either identified as white or as Asian American or Canadian with the exception of two black or mixed race participants. There was an even representation on the gender spectrum and participants also held a range of class positions. The musics in which they engaged ranged from hip-hop to punk to classical to musical theatre to metal and beyond. When I considered the music of these activists/musicians, it seemed to me that music exists in multiple spaces. Some music is inherently tied to the status quo. Such music reinscribes hegemonic relations and hierarchies of civilizations through both content and context.⁸ Concurrently, there is music that exists *in response to* these hegemonic contexts and relations.

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The counternarratives I encountered in this project were present both in the activist-musicians' discourses and philosophies, as well as in the music itself. I recently presented a paper at the *Research in Music Education* conference in Exeter, UK (Hess 2015b). This paper focused on the preliminary findings of this project both in terms of the activist-musicians' perceptions of the role of music in the world and their ideas for an activist music education grounded in their own life experiences. To demonstrate a contrapuntal methodology, I set up the paper in terms of dominant narratives that exist in music and music education and the counterpoints provided by the activist-musicians. For example, the first section of the paper examined the prevalent narrative in aesthetic music education of music for music's sake and its corollary, art for art's sake. The counterpoint to this particular narrative was the overwhelming tendency of these activist-musicians to position music as a potential learning site. I continued to unfold the paper in this manner, examining many of the narratives in aesthetic music education in juxtaposition with counternarratives from the participants. Because the paper was based on preliminary findings, I knew I was setting up the counterpoint as more of an example than a real illustration of Said's (1993) methodology; however, I was unhappy with the way the methodology felt. On the train back to London after the conference, I took out my notebook and wrote the following title: "Why my presentation WASN'T counterpoint." I began to diagram out the faults in my paper and consider whether or not it might be appropriate to change methodologies.

The crux of my issue with my iteration of Said's methodology in that paper was rooted in the lack of a co-constitutive relationship between the dominant narrative and the related counternarrative. I kept returning to Said's (1993) contrapuntal reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, discussed previously. In Said's analysis of Jane Austen, the plantation in Antigua *sustained* the life that the family had in England. The colonialism was absent from the dominant narrative, and yet it made that colonial existence possible. From that reading, I gleaned that a contrapuntal methodology looks for what is absent from the narrative and explores how that which is absent in the narrative is co-constitutive of what is present.

In the paper that I presented, beyond contrasting a discourse of music for music's sake with the concept of music as learning site, I examined a number of other narratives. I drew in particular on the construct of "absolute music" and Kantian

notions of aesthetic disinterestedness (Kant [1952] 2007). I also considered Reimer's (2003, 89) "education of feeling" as lacking any possibility of emotional expression through music. Finally, I pointed to the tendency to separate music from its political context. After setting these discourse up as examples of the dominant paradigm, I put forward the activist-musicians' perceptions of the role of music — a music that served as communication, emotional expression, and a sociopolitical means to heighten global awareness. In examining these contentions on the train, I was unable to see a co-constitutive relationship between the dominant and counternarratives. In this case, the counterhegemonic does not sustain the hegemonic. Counternarratives often have an implicit relationship to dominant paradigms; however, while I clearly saw a counterpoint or dance between each paradigm, the dominant paradigm did not seem to respond to the counternarratives in any sort of contrapuntal manner. Indeed, the dominant narrative did not engage.⁹

In considering this paper two months later, the contrapuntal reading Said used to analyze Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* does not work for this project; however, I suggest that another type of contrapuntal methodology may challenge us as readers and cultural critics to make meaning in a way that is profoundly counterhegemonic. Said (1993) calls on us to read Fanon alongside Austen to actively consider the anticolonial alongside the colonial (60). In doing so, he places the responsibility for anticolonial engagement squarely back on the reader/listener. He spends considerable time elaborating the importance of the worldliness of the critic (Said 1975). His 1993 text teems with examples of anticolonial texts making what he terms the "voyage in" (239) to speak back to imperialism.

I draw a few examples from this research project to demonstrate a possibility. As I apply a contrapuntal methodology to my work, it is important to note that rather than considering exclusively colonial contexts, that I look to oppressive contexts of any type and draw on an antioppressive counterpoint. By oppressive contexts in music, I refer to musics and musical contexts (fictional or lived) that reinscribe sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, and other marginalizations through both musical and extramusical meanings (see McClary 1991, 2001).

At the beginning of this section, I outlined several possibilities for musicians to "write back" to dominant discourses. Conceptually, the lyrical possibilities are perhaps most intuitive. Consequently, I begin with the consideration of lyrics. In

popular music culture, heteronormativity is ubiquitous in many ways. From the content of the top 40 to the representation of love in music videos, there is no particular diversity of representations of masculinity, femininity, or relationships in mainstream culture. Two of the activist-musicians who participated in this project cited the act of writing about queer love as both political and deeply satisfying personally and professionally. Thematically, queer love is absent from the dominant narrative as presented musically, with the exception of Macklemore's *Same Love*.¹⁰ Casey Mecija, a Filipino Canadian who formerly headed up the Indie band *Ohbijou* speaks to her catalogue of music:

Casey: When I think about the Ohbijou catalogue of music, and that is what my catalogue of music is up to this point, the first two albums are very self-reflexive, talking about relationships and things like that, but I think something that is powerful now to me, it's something that I'm proud of about that work is that it's talking about queer love or communicating queer love in a way that is not insidious, but subtle, and this queer love is something that people listened to and sang without probably knowing that it was about queer love, and things like that. That's something that I am proud of.

T-Vu (or Theresa Vu), a Vietnamese American hip-hop artist from the group *Magnetic North* details a similar theme:

T-Vu: I refused to write a love song for a long time and it was the first love song that I put on this album. But, Taiyo actually said that that was probably the most political song I'd ever written, because it actually was me coming out on an album.

With their music, these women articulate absences in the dominant narrative — an action that is explicitly political. Gayatri Spivak's (1988) powerful critique of postcolonial studies challenges the practice of white, male, "first world" academics with significant privilege speaking for racialized others within the context of postcolonialism. She wonders if postcolonialism does not draw on the same tropes as imperialism. She raises concerns with the assumption of the homogeneity of heterogeneous groups of people¹¹ implicit in the practice of "speaking for" and challenges the practice of Western intellectuals "speaking for" racialized Others. Casey Mecija and T-Vu powerfully speak their own truths and lived experiences to dominant discourses. They do so through engaging lyrically in "writing back."

In considering so-called "absolute music," McClary (1991) challenges us to consider the meanings created by musical figures. She demonstrates, as noted above, that music continually produces gendered, sexualized, and racialized meanings that

reinscribe dominant discourses — a point affirmed by Small (1998) in his argument that the symphony allows white, middle class individuals to explore, affirm, and celebrate their values. While some classical music communicates inherent hegemonic meanings, it is possible to create differently. Laura Kaminsky, a white, concert music composer from New York City, describes a piece she wrote following a visit to Croatia after the war:

Laura: “I wrote a Piano Trio that was inspired by a trip I took into Croatia after the war, into the bombed-out city of Vukovar under Human Rights Watch protection; there we gave a concert in the Serb Cultural Center . . . This was about 3 years after the official end of the war and we went through street after street where apartment buildings had no rooftops and people were still living in unheated apartments with no windows and they were building fires in the street to cook their food and the tower of the Minaret of the Mosque was blown up. We performed in the Serb Cultural Center in January and there was no heat in the building and it was so clear that the devastation of war and this ethnic divide and religious divide was still right in everybody's faces. After having been there, I was inspired to write a piece which I titled the Vukovar Trio, an abstract piece for violin, cello, and piano in multiple sections; I dedicated it to the victims of ethnic cleansing . . . And it was in an Eastern European- inflected musical language. Because I was living in Eastern Europe that year, the local sounds of both the folk and concert music were what was in my ear and my head. The piece is in one movement but has multiple sections: “A Sky Torn Asunder,” “The Shattering of Glass,” “Ghost Chorale,” “A River of Blood and Ice,” and more, but it functions both programmatically and as an abstract piece. . . . A number of years after writing it, I was giving a class on how to listen to music to The Seattle Chamber Music Society, and I said, “I'm going to just play you this piece of music. I'm not going to tell you its title. I'm not going to tell you who the composer is or when it was written. I'm not going to say anything. I want you to tell me what you hear and I want you to record your responses, whether you make pictures or you write words or draw energy fields . . . I want you to map the piece as you hear it and then tell me what the piece is about.” And they all got it. All the listeners discerned that there was something cataclysmic that happened and that the music expressed it. They noted that: There's a lot of fear. There's pain. There's running away from it. There's a sense of hopefulness, but there's always a question mark. They got what was core to my piece. So then we talked about [whether] abstract collections of sounds tell a story and did they need to know that the middle movement was called “River of Blood and Ice” in order to discern the music's meaning. They realized that they didn't, but when I told them the specifics, it grounded them and they brought deeper, more keenly etched images to what they had heard.”

Kaminsky's piece “speaks” through musical meanings alone. She sends a message about ethnic cleansing and devastation of war and communicates profound emotions and considerations of ethics. In doing so, she opens up the possibility for the

inherent meanings of music itself (the intrinsically musical meanings) to write back to injustices.

At the beginning of this section, I also pointed to the possibility of constructed or fictionalized contexts of some musics. I included in my discussion opera, musical theatre, and music videos and pointed both to Koza's (2003) critique of *Once on this Island* (Ahrens/Flaherty) and McClary's (1991) critique of *Carmen* (Bizet/Halévy/Meilhac) as examples of contextual reinscriptions of oppressive racialized, gendered, and sexualized tropes. It is also possible, however, to tell a different story. Lee Phenner, a white woman of Western European descent and the lyricist and book writer of the musical *A Pint of Understanding*,¹² attempts to write back to dominant understandings of race and racism in the United States. She writes:

Inspired by the much publicized July 2009 arrest of Harvard University professor Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr. at his Cambridge, Massachusetts home by a white police officer, an event that led to the much-hyped White House Beer Summit, *A Pint of Understanding* is a fictionalized work of musical theatre that dives beneath the surface to get at the thorny issues at the heart of that incident. Employing drama, sardonic humor, multimedia, and a multi-genre musical score rooted in jazz, *A Pint of Understanding* goes beyond that episode to explore broader issues of race, class, irony, ego, individual perspectives and collective blindspots . . . with a sense of forward-looking hope. Given today's headlines about strained citizen-police relations, *A Pint of Understanding* is as timely as it is relevant. It is a revolt against complacency and a creative, positive contribution to the progress our country can make — if we all insist on it.¹³

With this work, Phenner offers a counterpoint to understandings that lack race and classed analysis of the role of police officers. At the same time, she creates a human story and offers the audience a glimpse into the humanity of those involved in both the original incident and the fictionalized account.

Like lyrics, music videos often reinscribe dominant discourses about sexuality, gender roles, race, disability, and heteronormativity. The contexts of music videos routinely feature women wearing very little and, on occasion, acts that are fairly explicit. Pete Shungu, a multiracial hip hop/jazz/soul/funk musician, discusses a song written by his band the *Afro D All Starz*:

Pete: [In] some pieces, I try to directly address some of the -isms out there and I think for me it's particularly important to strive to be an ally in causes that may not directly affect me. On our band's last album, we have a piece called "Memories Live On"¹⁴ that's basically an anthem to honor LGBTQ folks who have committed suicide or who are being bullied and feeling like they're in a tough place due to societal pressures and everything. So we actually made a video for

that particular song. Even though I don't identify as LGBTQ, I feel like in some cases, [it's] even more important to stand up for those things which might not directly affect you.

The lyrics for this song powerfully describe the stories of fictionalized youth persecuted for identifying as LGBTQ. The context in the video is powerful and subverts dominant understandings of what needs to be in a music video. The cemetery features prominently in the video and Pete performs alone in the various places described in the song. Rather than the violence appearing explicitly, the video alludes to it through subtle images — a plate smashing to the floor, a notebook on a table and then in a bag, a classroom. The lack of explicit images is remarkable in a music video, but this video also centers an issue important to the LGBTQ community — that children and adolescents are dying because they are bullied and persecuted because of their identities. The *Afro D All Starz* write back powerfully to the kind of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia that kills.

Operatically, Laura Kaminsky chooses to center a transgender individual as she transitions from male to female in her opera *As One*. While operas like *Carmen* reinscribe racialized, gendered, and sexualized stereotypes (McClary 1991), operas can also tell stories that center different realities. Significantly, Kaminsky worked to make this opera intelligible by a public both familiar and unfamiliar with issues faced by the transgender community:

Laura: With *As One*, our opera, we were conscious that if we marginalized it, and presented it as a solely transgender story, about a person who is supremely different and has a significant struggle to find a comfortable place in the world, it would only be a transgender story. By making it a universal story which, at its core, is saying that every single person has a fluidity of self and every person has to struggle with finding a way to be him or herself in the world and in some cases, has to give up a lot in order to be fulfilled as a human being, we knew that we could reach a broader audience and speak more universally. We wanted to pose the question that is true for all: what do you gain and lose as you embark on a journey of self-actualization, what are the challenges along the way, and how can you be fulfilled? That's a universal story that may make the transgender issue much more understandable to people who've never thought about it or who may think it's weird. So we wanted to find a universal in a specific.

Through this opera, Kaminsky and librettists Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed (who is herself transgender) aimed to make this story universally legible. Rather than reinscribe dominant understandings of gender and sexuality, Kaminsky, Campbell and Reed wrote a different story. Works such as operas and musicals and

shorter segments like music videos signify in a manner that is larger than the music or the lyrics alone. It is the contextual whole that potentially creates counterhegemonic meanings. These meanings create a counterpoint to those works that perpetuate dominant understandings of the world, and one to which newer productions of older works and covers of older songs might respond through reimagining context to signify differently. This reimagining might occur, for example, through “gender-bending” of the original characterization or a change of setting to communicate a different story.

Finally, we also might consider the context in which music occurs. As activist-musicians, we have the opportunity to choose to perform for causes and events that we support. Liz Sunde, a co-founder of the organization *Music2Life*,¹⁵ makes it her life’s work to provide a “soundtrack for social change:”

Liz: We started to figure out our value about 2 or 3 years ago because Dartmouth College called us in and they said, “We want to find a new way of commemorating Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy. We usually do lectures and workshops, but can you musically infuse this commemorative day? And how would you do that?” And it was this great exercise. They gave us 10 hours . . . And so we did a public forum on how music can make change and we invited all of the musicians from our song-writing contests, as many as could come to do kind of a pub-sing. Commemorating social justice. And we invited a hip hop artist who we worked with to come and do youth empowerment. We had the whole day. We had done some documentary films on how artists make change with their music and so we also debuted those with the artists themselves coming in. It was unbelievable. And the response was so powerful.

Sunde’s organization “musicked” a counterpoint to the typical college calendar. Adding music to a day that traditionally included workshops and lectures created an impact and centered issues of social justice. While focusing on issues of justice one day a year or during *Black History Month* is problematic, it is also a beginning. What music added to this contrapuntal day was clearly both profound and relevant to the students.

Many of the participants in this project also chose to play fundraisers for various issues that ranged from supporting the Cambodian refugee community, to LGBTQ awareness, to creating a youth hip-hop program and more. In choosing to play music to support these issues, these artists added economic support to their counterpoints. T-Vu or Theresa Vu, a Vietnamese American hip-hop artist from California, performed at a benefit concert to raise funds for lawyers’ fees for

Cambodian refugees being deported unjustly for minor offences like marijuana possession. The music she created for the fundraiser was already a counterpoint. By virtue of it being a fundraiser, her performance created capital for this contrapuntal response to injustice enacted on the Cambodian community.

Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001) note that

[a] Saidian strategy of resistance is the ability to make the “voyage in,” to write back to imperialism. This is possible because of the potential for humans to negate their experiences, to imagine another world, a better world in which the colonisers and the colonised work towards liberation. (113)

These artists made the “voyage in.” They are writing back in profound ways to narratives that threaten to consume them. This counterpoint is different from Said’s analysis of Austen. As I noted earlier, it places the responsibility on readers and cultural critics to write back — to construct their own narrative by reading Fanon and listening to *Magnetic North* to engage the dominant narrative in a dance, a counterpoint. As cultural critics, we can choose to “read” those who “write back” to dominant discourses.

Moving forward: Counterpoint and a pedagogy of discomfort

As we consider the application of a contrapuntal methodology, I put forward one more concept to further the conversation. A number of years ago, I was in the process of writing a song cycle for baritone and a chamber ensemble of six instruments. In the third song in the group, I had a two-measure section in which the texture became quite spare — just flute and piano in the ensemble of seven. I was working through the cycle in a composition lesson. My teacher, Alexander Rapoport, paused at the two-measure texture change. He suggested that with such a significant texture change that I needed to give the listener more time to adjust. The two measures became four before moving on to new material. In my present work on contrapuntal methodology, that statement becomes important. Reconsidering the elements of counterpoint explored at the beginning of this paper — the dissidence, the transgression, the responsibility, the transformations — what might it mean to give the listener or reader time to adjust to the new texture?

In her 1999 work *Feeling power: Emotions and education*, Megan Boler (1999) suggests what she terms a pedagogy of discomfort as a tool of critical inquiry. She challenges educators and students to

engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see. (Boler 1999, 176–7)

Such an examination of what one sees and what one chooses not to see is reminiscent of Said’s contrapuntal methodology. It speaks to the absent presences in the narrative. If the responsibility for reading or writing back lies with the reader or cultural critic, I wonder what we might begin to notice if we choose to be uncomfortable for awhile — to live in the dissidence, transgression, and transformation of Said’s counterpoint. Importantly, Boler (1999) concludes with a call to action. In response to Elizabeth Alexander’s (1994) genealogy of witnessing, she draws on the comments of a student:

“We are obligated not simply to see what goes on in the world, but to witness — to cry out against that which is wrong.” The student continues, “I loved how [Alexander on the genealogy of witnessing in her 1994 essay “Can you be black and look at this?: Reading the Rodney King video(s)”] included Williams’s [sic] spreading of the guilt from the subjects of the *Life* photograph to the person holding the camera. Similarly, the responsibility for the L.A. riots rests with anyone who watched the videotape and was not outraged, and with all of us who were outraged and still haven’t done anything about it.” (198)

My predominant critique of my presentation in the UK was the fact that there was no transformation within the counterpoint. The dominant narratives remained unchanged and were unresponsive to the counternarratives presented. I wonder if a pedagogy of discomfort might provide a way to foster the responsibility in the counterpoint drawing on Boulez’ commentary cited previously. When participant voices are responsible to one another contrapuntally, they “shape each other . . . and contribute to the articulation of the overall texture and of overall processes” (Boulez [1963] 1971, 118, as cited in de Groot 2005, 222). They are transformative. When a counternarrative introduces a theme that makes performers of the dominant paradigm uncomfortable, if participants are willing to challenge cherished beliefs as Boler (1999) suggests, they just might engage the counternarrative in a manner that allows all voices to transform each other. This counternarrative engagement assumes that individuals will allow the possibility of discomfort — a rather significant assumption if these same individuals are, in fact, content with the status quo.

Rapoport's comment in that compositional instance was insightful. A listener or reader requires time to become comfortable with the new texture before moving forward. Perhaps what is warranted then is a degree of compassion — an acknowledgement of the discomfort and perhaps additional time. I did not alter the composition significantly to allow for the adjustment to the new texture; I simply added two measures. The dominant narrative continually threatens to consume counternarratives or interruptions to its discourse. In asking participant voices to live in the discomfort and allow their voices to be transformed by the counterpoint, perhaps allowing them an additional two measures of time to adjust might make all the difference between voices that are not communicating and voices that are “transforming each other continuously” (de Groot 2005, 223).

Wait a minute: Concessions for dominance and privilege?

As I consider how important it might be to allow more time for the reader/listener/cultural critic to adjust, issues of oppression arise that problematize such a suggestion. I just argued that allowing more time might make all the difference in adjusting to existing in a “discomfortable” state; however, time to adjust is a position of privilege and a luxury not afforded to many marginalized populations. I have thus made concessions for dominant structural ruling ideologies of whiteness, heterosexism, ableism, sexism, classism, and beyond.

Centering race as an example, given the pervasiveness of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2006) and the manner in which it enables white people to claim a state of false equality that actually masks disparate inequities and inequalities, accommodating for this structural position of power seems highly problematic. The nature of colorblindness enables white people not to trouble their cherished beliefs, as it sustains a narrative through which it is possible to believe that structural power dynamics and inequalities and inequities are not at play in the relations in question. I recognize that allowing more time to “live” in the discomfort is accommodating privilege in a manner that is profoundly unjust; however, I also acknowledge that in order to engage a group with significant power and privilege, reinforced by a narrative that expertly masks these relations, allowing an accommodation might be necessary to encourage engagement.

Power and privilege and narratives that negate yet reinscribe their existence allow dominant groups a choice of whether or not to engage in political questions of power and dominance. I adamantly counter the power and privilege associated with non-engagement; however, I also prioritize groups with structural power addressing and coming to terms with such power relations. If such engagement requires additional time, I prefer this type of accommodation to a lack of engagement.

Postlude: To the music educator

As I continued to write about my methodology on the train to London, I struggled to reconcile whether it was viable to continue the project in the manner in which I began. I realized that I was not looking for a counterpoint that sustained the dominant narrative in the manner that the Bertram's Antigua plantation made their way of life possible. Rather, I was looking for agency—a way in which participant voices could develop the counterpoint through asserting their own agency. Making cultural critics responsible for their own worldliness (Said 1975, 1983) encourages us to move beyond our silos of specialization to develop a broad, if amateur, range of knowledge from which we can approach a text. It also leaves room for individuals to write back or read back to the dominant paradigm or status quo.

As music educators who value worldliness (Said 1975, 1983), asserting agency might involve introducing students to these contrapuntal texts. When we take time to notice absences in the dominant narrative — for example, the absence of mainstream music that speaks to queer love stories — we can introduce these texts to students. By doing so, we demonstrate ways to read back and write back to oppressive narratives. Through experiencing these contrapuntal texts, students learn to look for what is absent in the discourses that shape their world. As educators, we can also model inhabiting spaces of discomfort and show by example ways in which we might challenge our cherished beliefs in order to move toward new possibilities. Engaging our own beliefs in the classroom changes the teacher-student power relations in a manner that is decidedly Freirean (Freire [1970] 2000).¹⁶ Finally, as educators, we can practice compassion — the active recognition that encountering spaces of discomfort and the upending of long held beliefs is not easy. Contrapuntal methodology is not a passive methodological tool of analysis. Rather, we can actively

look for the counternarratives — the dissidence and transgression that makes the composition interesting. Chowdhury (2007) argues that

Said's plea for a contrapuntal reading is not to valorise plurality, rather it is a plea for "worlding" the texts, institutions and practices, for historicizing them, for interrogating their sociality and materiality, for paying attention to the hierarchies and the power-knowledge nexus embedded in them, and for recuperating a "non-coercive and non-dominating knowledge." (Chowdhry 2007, 105)¹⁷

As music educators, it is within our realm of possibilities to model this contrapuntal methodology in the classroom, perhaps even to live it. Counterpoint is a formidable tool to understand the world. It is a tool that we can share with our students, so that they might listen for dissidence or dissenting voices and, as Boler's (1999) student indicated, both witness and "cry out against what is wrong" (198). Doing so is potentially a powerful tool of transformation.

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Notes

¹ See <http://www.maydaygroup.org/about-us/action-for-change-in-music-education/> for a complete list of the Action Ideals.

² See, for example, the journal *Music & Politics* housed at the University of Michigan (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mp/>).

³ I note here that the musical concept of a “work” of music is a Western construct.

⁴ In fact, in a musical context, de Groot (2005) similarly points to the ways in which the art of Umm Kalthoum played the role of a contrapuntal voice to classical music for Said (231).

⁵ Said (1993) distinguishes between imperialism and colonialism as follows: “‘Imperialism’ means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism,’ which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (9).

⁶ Delpit ([1995] 2006) does not herself draw directly on Lorde’s ([1984] 2007) words.

⁷ See chapter 3 in particular.

⁸ See, for example, the sheer quantity of music that thematically reinforces heteronormative relations.

⁹ In discussing this paper with Darrin Thornton at MayDay Colloquium 27, he suggested that given the fact that I was considering this work compositionally, that I simply did not like the “first improvisation” on this contrapuntal theme — the Exeter paper.

¹⁰ The nature of Macklemore’s song has been problematized significantly on social media. The fact that a heterosexual white man with all of the institutional power that entails was responsible for the song that became somewhat of an anthem for the movement to equalize gay marriage is highly problematic. This issue was compounded when he won the favorite rap/hip-hop artist and favorite rap-hip-hop album at the 2014 American Music Awards over multiple artists of color nominated in the same categories.

¹¹ Other academics raise similar concerns (see, for example, Mohanty 2003, Razack 1998).

¹² See <http://www.apintofunderstandingthemusical.com> for more details on the musical.

¹³ This text is included on the homepage of the musical listed in the previous footnote.

¹⁴ “Memories Live On” can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjaplNvL69s>.

¹⁵ See <http://music2life.org> for further information.

¹⁶ Freire's ([1970] 2000) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* worked to equalize the power relation between students and teacher through deeply valuing knowledge that students brought to the classroom.

¹⁷ Chowdhry (2007) draws on "An Interview with Edward Said," from *The Edward Said Reader*, 419–44 (Said 2000).

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