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Willfully Challenging Boundaries

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The nature of boundaries within music teaching and learning remains a perennial concern for theorists. The MayDay Group has long questioned boundaries within the profession, including between musical content and the sociopolitical contexts in which musical practices arise.[1] Boundaries often exist in layers, with boundaries between musical practices furthering those between different individuals and groups, and vice versa. For instance, elective music ensembles create boundaries between welcomed and unwelcomed instruments and voice parts, which in turn creates boundaries between students and ultimately community members who feel comfortable versus uncomfortable in such music making spaces.

Music educators and students often accept inherited boundaries willingly, without protest. Sara Ahmed (2014) describes a willing subject as one who "leans toward what is being willed" (35). In other words, a willing individual accepts the existing practices and systems within the spaces they inhabit. While Ahmed acknowledges that willing individuals may freely welcome their circumstances, she argues that willingness often results from the fear of consequences. For instance, a high school ensemble director may at times question why they should work so many after school hours or attend so many competitions, but if they fear that their employment or standing within the local music community depends on such

actions, then they may willingly adopt them. Ahmed (2014) notes "Will and force can thus amount to the same thing.... When willing is a way of avoiding the consequence of force, willing is a consequence of force" (42). Teachers working within certain value-laden systems for much of their life may find it difficult to disentangle self-chosen willingness from coerced willingness.

Yet, what might at first appear as coerced willingness may have little consequence for music educators. For instance, while some educators face unemployment or social shunning should they attend fewer music competitions, many could slightly reduce the number of competitions with little consequence. Teachers sometimes continue willingly enacting practices because of imagined rather than actual coercion. Philosophies centering abstract systems, rather than individual agents, may contribute to such thinking and action.

As an editor, I find that many authors—myself included—resist naming the agents behind problematic practices. We might blame the ensemble tradition, classical music, or vague education policies. Writing in passive voice—using words such as "is" or "being"—hides the human agents, often music educators, who create and reinforce systemic inequities. While I do not deny that institutionalized systems influence action, naming the individuals most directly reinforcing those systems can help identify the source of coercion, or lack thereof.

Music educators who critically examine their boundaries—including self-imposed ones—may find themselves no longer willing to enact them. Gloria Anzaldúa (2022) describes: "There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is the part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space or others, it kicks with both feet. Bolts." (15). The questioning rebel refuses to willingly accept the multitude of taken-for-granted teaching practices that surround and confine all educators.

This rebellious refusal shares similarities with what Ahmed (2014) terms willfulness. She explains willfulness as an "embodied and shared vitality" (140) that involves not only "standing against" but also "audacity" and "creativity" (134). While Ahmed acknowledges that individuals often use the charge of willfulness as a critique, she calls for a reclaiming of the term for its productive, disruptive potential. In contrast with those willingly submitting to music education conventions, willful teachers and student insistently go against the flow.

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In my reading, the authors in this issue all illuminate rarely discussed boundaries within music education and posit willful actions that cross and reimagine them. In "A tale of two epistemes: *Music* in the public forum of Canada and in the community life of the *Nuu-chah-nulth* people," **J. Scott Goble** and **Anita Prest** use Peirce's semiotic to describe typically taken-for-granted practices, including perceiving music as an object based on linear time and dissociated from natural environments. The idea that money can purchase any and all musical products also pervades and bounds common thinking. Conversely, members of the *Nuu-chah-nulth* community understand musicking as relational, circular, and connected to the local environment; musicking is gifted and often only accessible to other community members. Rather than willingly treating groups who produce musical practices as invisible, Goble and Prest advocate that teachers willfully provide regular instruction about the epistemes of each people with whose musicking students engage.

Focusing instead on the boundaries that inhibited his own musical self from emerging, **Andrew Schmidt** considers the possibilities of willfully enacting multivocality. Drawing on queer theory and his own problematic experiences as a "bass" voice, Schmidt traces the power dynamics reinforcing limiting and exclusionary classification systems. While noting that multivocality "resists easy definition," he explains that it involves traversing "genre and style through embodied intersections of technique, practice, and meaning." Moreover, Schmidt argues that teachers and students can use multivocality "to articulate their self-narratives within spaces that might otherwise exclude them." Such description reminds me of Anzaldúa's (2022) image of a crossroads. She writes: "And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame … or to feel strong, and for the most part, in control" (17). Through willfully claiming the meaningful narrative capabilities of their unique voices, teachers and students may find empowerment during times of transition and uncertainty.

Looking across national boundaries, **Norbert Meyn** problematizes the longstanding practice of classifying composers by their national origin. Centering migration and transnational mobility, he defines the utopian concept of "global artistic citizenship." Detailing participatory action research in London, he describes students' reactions to performing repertoire by previously marginalized composers who emigrated to Britain as a result of Nazi rule during World War II. Importantly, the willful refusal to accept bounded national identities encouraged participants to

question their own cultural situatedness. Meyn summarizes that the project "revealed a high level of awareness of the intersectionality of cultural differences as individuals recognize multiple national affiliations within their own identities." While **Goble** and **Prest** importantly center the contrasting epistemologies for music making created within more isolated circumstances, **Meyn** shows how migration may facilitate music making that restricts strict place-based epistemic divides.

Alternatively, **Cara Bernard** and **Kelly Bylica** interrogate boundary-forming practices within P-12 schools. Using the concept of hidden curriculum and Foucault's theories of governmentality and discourse, they problematize pervasive behavior management systems, including Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports and Responsive Classroom. Bernard and Bylica interrogate how behavior management processes encourage teachers to focus on individual students—rather than societal conditions—and to surveille then minimize or prohibit certain forms of emotional expression, which they find particularly troubling given the emotional aspects of music making. According to the authors, creative willful resistance might involve the "counter-conduct" of "using 'rules' language in a way that honors individuality and the marriage of that individuality with the goals of collective."

In my reading, the authors in this issue concur that music educators can never completely escape boundaries. They instead imply the need for constantly questioning the ethical nature of boundary-production practices, including those that create musical epistemologies, voice categorizations, national identification, and "well-behaved" students. Rather than willingly submit to the status quo, music educators might willfully object by forging new, creative, more permeable boundaries. These include acknowledging contrasting epistemes, multivocality, global artistic citizenship, and diverse, context-specific conceptions of "good" behavior.

In reflecting on how the authors in this issue willfully challenged boundaries within music education, I wondered about potential next steps. In the conclusion of her book, Anzaldúa (2022) writes: "To survive the Borderlands, you must live *sin fronteras,*[2] be a crossroads" (123). While I am doubtful about the possibility—or even benefit—of enacting completely borderless crossroads in music education, imagining the pursuit of this unreachable end may inspire further willfulness. I wonder: What might it mean to focus on ontology and ethics in addition to epistemology, as in Karen Barad's (2007) "ethico-onto-epistem-ology" (90)? What might be missing from multivocality and, given the limits of including everything (e.g., Parker 2020), what should be excluded? How might transnational identities intersect with other aspects of identity, including unequal Global North and Global

South power relations (Mantie and Tironi-Rodó 2024)? What might it mean to enact rules as a process for forming democratic dispositions, particularly in moments of conflict? Sitting at the crossroads of limiting boundaries and the impossibility of completely borderless practices, may teachers and students look out in all directions and willfully take action.

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Notes

[1] See https://maydaygroupofficial.wixsite.com/mayday-group/about

[2] Without borders.