

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed journal of the



Volume 10, No. 1
August 2011

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Electronic Article

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ISSN 1545-4517

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Radical Negativity: Music Education for Social Justice

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Edgar Bauer, hurt by some chance remark, turned the tables and ridiculed the English snobs. Marx launched an enthusiastic eulogy on German science and music—no other country, he said, would have been capable of producing such masters of music as Beethoven, Mozart, Handel and Haydn, and the Englishmen who had no music were in reality far below the Germans who had been prevented hitherto only by their miserable political and economic conditions from accomplishing any great practical work, but who would yet outclass all other nations. So fluently I have never heard him speak English.¹

Patrick Schmidt has put together a provocative set of essays for this special issue of ACT. They come at a very precipitous time not only for music educators but educators in all fields of endeavor. Even for those of us who for decades have engaged in risk-taking in our pedagogical and activist work, it is hard not to flinch at recent nationwide political developments at a time fiercely fragrant with despair. For the popular majorities—world-weary, forlorn and deeply imbricated in the struggle for survival and seeking to valorize those rare transitional moments when they can free themselves from their nightmare of record home foreclosures, mounting unemployment, constant budget cuts, endless wars and increased environmental destruction—life today is not lived but merely endured. More and more Americans are living triangulated lives, moving from point to point in a mapped out universe that leaves them little room to maneuver between rage and resignation.

Corporate control of the state (especially in the context of the result of *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*), hyper-nationalism, the rejection of liberal discourses of democracy in favor of a messianic militarism, and the creation of scapegoats for the troubles within the state (in this case, undocumented immigrants primarily from Mexico) are four pillars of fascist society. The lunatic fringe of the Republican Party, the prehensile tale of libertarianism known as the Tea Party, is the direct result of what Chris Hedges (2010) calls the “collapse of liberalism” which includes institutions such as “the press, the church, universities, labor unions, the arts and the Democratic Party.” Hedges (2010) claims that the “rage being expressed by disenfranchised workers” is legitimate since “the college-educated

liberal elite, who abetted or did nothing to halt the corporate assault on the poor and the working class of the last 30 years...continues to speak in the prim and obsolete language of policies and issues” and constitutes a “flagrant betrayal of the citizenry”. Hedges (2010) is worth quoting at length:

The liberal class, which once made piecemeal and incremental reform possible, functioned traditionally as a safety valve. During the Great Depression, with the collapse of capitalism, it made possible the New Deal. During the turmoil of the 1960s, it provided legitimate channels within the system to express the discontent of African-Americans and the anti-war movement. But the liberal class, in our age of neo-feudalism, is now powerless. It offers nothing but empty rhetoric. It refuses to concede that power has been wrested so efficiently from the hands of citizens by corporations that the Constitution and its guarantees of personal liberty are irrelevant. It does not act to mitigate the suffering of tens of millions of Americans who now make up a growing and desperate permanent underclass. And the disparity between the rhetoric of liberal values and the rapacious system of inverted totalitarianism the liberal class serves makes liberal elites, including Barack Obama, a legitimate source of public ridicule. The liberal class, whether in universities, the press or the Democratic Party, insists on clinging to its privileges and comforts even if this forces it to serve as an apologist for the expanding cruelty and exploitation carried out by the corporate state.

Traditional liberal institutions and the blindingly arrogant cabals that run them have disgraced themselves, and have been rejected by a frustrated (mainly white) working class. As a result, liberal democracy is in peril. Those that will reap the benefit of the demise of the liberal state are those “very forces that co-opted the liberal class and are responsible for the impoverishment of the state.” This is what Hedges (2010) aptly describes as “a new class of speculators, war profiteers, gangsters, and killers, historically led by charismatic demagogues.” Ironically, those well-intentioned members of the Tea Party who believe they are fighting elite power as part of a grassroots movement, fail to recognize that they have been duped by billionaires—in particular, the Koch brothers—to serve as ideological handmaidens of their ideological dirty work. According to Monbiot (2010), groups such as:

the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute, the George Marshall Institute, the Reason Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute...have been instrumental in turning politicians away from environmental laws, social spending, taxing the rich, and distributing wealth. They have shaped the widespread demand for small government.

Under the apparent benignity of the Tea Bag party’s conception of democracy lurks a hideous, reckless revisionism.

According to Hedges, the real enemies of the liberal class are radical thinkers such as Noam Chomsky and Ralph Nader, iconoclastic intellectuals who possess the moral autonomy

to defy the power elite. While I agree with Hedges I would take his argument even further. I would argue that the real enemy of both conservatives and liberals alike are those who not only challenge the basic fabric of capitalism, but call for the creation of a social universe outside of capital's value form—thinkers and activists known as socialists. The major challenge, in my view, is not simply to challenge neoliberal market ideologies but in earmarking capitalism for the dust-heap, that is, to offer an alternative to capitalism.

Critical Education and Pedagogy

Within the field of critical education, sepulchered as it is in the discourse of liberal progressivism and marked by cultural privilege and atemporality, not everyone would agree with the need to struggle for a post-capitalist future. Regardless of whether or not one's larger political project is situated in the subterranean and subversive tradition of socialism, the fact of the matter is that those who critique capitalism and call for at least a better ideological alternative to educational policies and practices grounded in neoliberalism (i.e., the No Child Left Behind Act) play an important part in the continuing struggle for educational reform. Many of these educators work within the field known as critical pedagogy. And while we need to acknowledge the various groups, perspectives, and tendencies within critical pedagogy, what draws critical educators together despite their many differences is an abiding commitment to creating engaging and vibrant spaces where students—adults and young people alike—are encouraged to question dominant epistemological, axiological and political assumptions that are often taken for granted and often prop up the dominant social class. In this respect at least, critical pedagogy is essentially a *plaidoyer* for the claim that education is not a neutral activity and that all knowledge is a form of ideological production. Critical pedagogy, as I attempt to formulate it, possesses many vocabularies of self and social formation, but is essentially a Freirean approach to reading the world and the word dialectically.

Whether or not our repressed subjectivity is the *manqué d'être* at the core of our being or whether desire is a productive force in itself, there is no question that subjectivity (and here I am most concerned with political/pedagogical subjectivity) is not autotelic but conditioned by capitalist social relations and this affects temporally, spatially and ideologically the art of sound (here ideology is not viewed simply as false consciousness but as a value system from which there exists no escape into an objective God's-eye view). We

are latently educated by capitalist social relations and not recognizing this in our pedagogical mission as critical educators will return our efforts back to us as a symptom on another level and in another form. Here we emphasize the co-constitutive nature of theory and practice, its immutable entanglement and imbrication that we call praxis. Here our pedagogical engagement with the teaching of music becomes a vehicle for thinking about, for “sounding out”, and changing the world from the perspective of those who have been excised from society and cut off from their humanity. In our work we reject the myth of the objective observer by citing the Thomas theorem:

The Thomas theorem effectively challenges this myth by stating: ‘If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’ In other words, the interpretation of a situation causes the action. This interpretation is not objective. Actions are affected by subjective perceptions of situations. Whether there even is an objectively correct interpretation is not important for the purposes of helping guide individuals’ behavior. We can find a similar view in Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History, where he writes: ‘To him who looks upon the world rationally, the world in its turn presents a rational aspect. The relation is mutual.’ (Jaksa 2011, 77)

As a formative process of subjectivization (creating the subject of history in the process of becoming human), critical pedagogy operates under the assumption that the established distinction between the rulers and the ruled prohibits the type revolutionary subjectivity or revolutionary praxis that can summon forth the active equality and distributive justice necessary for a truly inclusive democratic society. That is, proponents of critical pedagogy believe that liberal democracy, while officially proclaiming the natural equality of all individuals, nevertheless excludes many groups who remain exploited by the dominant system of power and privilege under neoliberal capitalism. In order for social justice to prevail, we need to move beyond liberal representative democracy (because, as Hegel put it, the person who is represented somewhere is not there). What is needed is a protagonistic or direct democracy, which entails the abolition of the distinction between the ruler and the ruled, and which does not represent the person but enables the person to be there. But for this to occur, I believe that we need to create a society where the value form of labor (capitalism) is abolished altogether.

The many adherents of critical pedagogy—liberal, left liberal, revolutionary, and macerated versions of the above—can be found teaching in public and private institutions of various sorts, and working within fields that include science, music, mathematics, philosophy, social studies, history, English, bilingual education, ethnic studies, and

multicultural education. My own approach to critical pedagogy is what I have termed “revolutionary critical pedagogy” (after Paula Allman 1999), and constitutes a qualifying description used to designate my engagement with socialist pedagogy from more domesticated (liberal or left liberal) variants. Many of the more domesticated versions of critical pedagogy stop short in calling for socialism and argue that their purpose is mainly to “empower” students and “transform” education. By this they usually mean that teaching and learning should give students a greater sense of personal voice and agency in assisting them to carve a niche for themselves within the existing social order. However, not to interrogate further such seemingly keystone terms is to lure critical educators into the very zone of neutrality against which they inveigh. The notion that critical pedagogy is an “empowering” and “transforming” pedagogy is an often-repeated expression that retains little meaning without first answering the following questions: Empowering for whom and for what purpose? To what end is such transformation directed, whose interests will be served, and who will benefit by such transformation? To say that critical pedagogy is “empowering” without qualifying exactly what is meant by the term is to ensnare critical pedagogy in the very ductile category it seeks to interrogate. These terms remain nakedly silent before such questions. Many critical educators have signally failed to engage such questions.

Revolutionary critical educators (who work from a Marxist humanist perspective, which embraces a tragic humanism [of acknowledging our own incompleteness] as opposed to a liberal humanism) argue for a dialectical reasoning that involves becoming conscious of and transcending the limits in which we can make ourselves; it calls for externalizing, historicizing, and objectifying our vision of liberation, in treating theory as a form of practice and practice as a form of theory as we contest the psychopathology of everyday life incarnate in capitalism’s social division of labor. We do this with the intention of never separating the production of knowledge from praxis, of always reading the word and the world dialectically. In so doing we maintain that practice serves as the ultimate ground for advancing and verifying theories as well as for providing warrants for knowledge claims (Stetsenko 2002). These warrants are not connected to some fixed principles that exist outside of the knowledge claims themselves, but are derived by identifying and laying bare the ideological and ethical potentialities of a given theory as a form of practice.

Critical educators seek to uncover what at first blush may appear as the ordinary, transparent relations and practices that make up our quotidian existence—what we might

even call mundane social realities. We take these relationships and practices and try to examine their contractions when seen in relation to the totality of social relations in which those particular relations and practices unfold. Such an examination works against a transdisciplinary backdrop that reads the word and the world historically. In other words, it examines the political and material dimensions of everyday life historically. By ‘historically’ I don’t mean the history of discourses taken in isolation, but rather the history of the relationship among discourses, capitalist social formations and production relations. This stipulates paying close attention to the temporal and spatial dimensions of knowledge production but with an eye to the production of silences, of lacunae, of interstices where, like an octopus that can fold itself into small cracks and crevices and camouflage itself, great power can hide and then emerge unsuspectingly to wreak havoc on the most vulnerable groups. At the same time, we need to be careful not to fall prey to philosophico-anthropological generalizations that educators use to deflect our attention from class struggle and to identify the concrete sociopolitical analysis that needs to be done to move the left forward towards socialism.

Critical educators need to identify what may be forbidden to say since it is not always clear what is considered extreme or ridiculous from a dominant perspective and what is actually forbidden to think or to say. Conversely, it is important to identify which educators are likely to be heard in the dominant culture, how their ideas affirm the ruling ideas (which are, as Marx noted, most often the ideas generated by the ruling class) by serving as an ideological alibi for the production of commonsense knowledge, and why such educators allow their messages to be conscripted by the dominant media apparatuses. Second, it is important to identify educators whose ideas are discontinuous and disruptive to the pro-capitalist imperatives of the ruling regime, to affirm the aberrant, the incongruous and offensive, and to advance their work.

Radical Negation

The revolutionary critical pedagogy that I support is directed at understanding the world dialectically, as an effect of multiple antagonisms whose conditions of possibility are intensified by the contradiction between labor and capital. Revolutionary critical pedagogy questions the official, hegemonic view of ahistorical educational change, isolated from the capitalist social and production relationships. As critical revolutionary educators, I believe

that we need to understand how the dynamics of the capitalist system—its movement from global capitalism to transnational capital, for instance—has guided the meaning and purpose of educational reform and have impacted institutions and approaches with respect to what counts as educational change.

There has been little transformation wrought in the attitude of critical educators to Marxism. Like an artifact packed in a tea-chest and left sitting in the rust-splotched storage room of an abandoned freighter, Marxism has been all but forgotten in the field of critical pedagogy. This has been, in part, because Marxism has been criticized for its hermetic vocabulary that apparently reduces class to a categorical stasis, and participates in a dehistoricizing economic reductionism commonly associated with the orthodoxies of what has been termed mechanistic Marxism. This lack of understanding of Marx and the Marxist tradition has ensured a fixed place in the future for a very specific and circumscribed concept of Marxism, along with the company of other “isms” such as totalitarianism, and authoritarianism. The Marxist humanist approach with which I strongly identify has a very different take on Marx’s writings, viewing Marx’s work as indispensable for the development of a philosophy of praxis, and human development in general. I don’t have the space to discuss this work, but I would argue that Marxist educationalists have, in the main, been able to develop an important dialectical conception of knowledge production, which is formed internally through analyzing the continuous contractions of external influences on the lives of human beings. One founding assumption of this approach is that by means of negativity, human beings are able to surmount those contradictions that block the development of their humanity and they are able to come to recognize the positive content of their original acts of negation or what philosophers have called “the negation of the negation”. I call this process, *radical negation*.

Let me try to give an example of radical negation borrowing from the work of Anne Fairchild Pomeroy (2004). All movement is the negation of what is. As Pomeroy notes, what is, might not be, and what is not yet, might be. But acts of negation that move beyond *mere* acts of negation are those that negate the negation itself, and this occurs when we recognize the positivity of acts of negation as negativity. We are all beings of negativity. We are dialectical beings and our self-determination is our absolute right. Pomeroy’s (2004) premise is that,

if the human being is in her very being the source of negation and that negation is the continual transformation of the real, then the lived being of humanity is the appropriation of this very being. It is, therefore, a revolution in permanence.

The first negation occurs when we negate our status as objects of history, when we refuse to be commodities in the service of neoliberal capital, when we shout a resounding “no” to serving as wage labor for capital. This is when we take the position: I am NOT wage labor. Here, the emphasis is on the NOT. We do not want to fit into this destructive society of commodified, monetized relations of capitalism. We refuse to live within relations of subordination wrought by capital with its ever-increasing rate of exploitation. We will not let capital define and redefine us according to its need to maintain its rate of profit. We are misfits and we choose to be so rather than allow ourselves to be re-patterned according to the requirements of value production. We refuse to be buried by abstract labor. We shake our fists at the sky in defiance. We assert our determination against all pre-existing capitalist social relations.

The second negation occurs when “the human being as self-determination hears herself speak that she truly understands what freedom is” (Pomeroy 2004). Freedom here has become self-conscious, it knows itself. When we, as human beings, recognize ourselves as the source of negativity that produces the contradiction that is the source of movement and life, then we are in the self-possession of our creativity, of our freedom, of our potentiality, of the “not yet”. Here, self-recognition is the second negation, when freedom becomes conscious of itself, when it knows itself. In this instance we escape from the prison house of being determined to the precincts of self-determination. The second negation is this self-determination hearing itself speak in the subject’s own voice, that is, when our knowing becomes merged with our doing, and our reaching out becomes part of a collective doing.

When we become self-conscious of our act of negating our role as wage labor for capital, that is, when we become more critical and self-reflective about it, then we are participating in a second negation, and this is greatly facilitated by the kind of self-reflexivity engaged in by critical educators who work in the field of critical pedagogy. When teachers can create spaces of learning where students are able to HEAR their denial of their status as capitalist labor, they can help them see the positive content of their original act of negation, and thus assist them in recognizing their own act of self-determination: I AM not capital. Here the emphasis is on the AM. Individuals in this second negation become more self-conscious about their power to become subjects of history. In Pomeroy’s terms, individuals

recognize themselves as the one with the power to say no, as the very source of the negation, and thus through this recognition they become the subject of the movement of history itself. Here, we are able to plant the seeds of the new, and begin our escape from the deadening fixity of capitalist social relations, creating a counter-public sphere, a counter-world with a different logic of being, “a time-space in which we try to live as subjects rather than objects” (Holloway 2010, 54).

A critical education in my view should provide the space for students to recognize themselves as the very source of the valorization of capital that oppresses them, but also as the primary source of capital’s undoing. Teachers can make a strong case that individuals have the capacity to alter what it is about their world that they no longer want to be—slaves to capital and to capital’s co-constitutive antagonisms of racism, sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism. They can begin take charge of their own creative capacities and realize that it is possible to build a future outside of capital’s value form, outside of the social universe of capital and value production itself. When individuals realize the power of their acts of negation and simultaneously understand this negativity as positivity, then they can come to the conclusion that it is through their great refusal of capitalism that ideas are produced anew. Students also begin to realize that “mere” acts of negation are inadequate to changing the world, without the second negation. The negation of the negation is the return of human beings to themselves, as we recognize that capitalism is that which enslaves the negative, that requires the subservience of this critical self-consciousness, of the I AM not wage labor. Here we find the freedom to create organizational forms that will enable us to live outside of capital’s value form, to discover the freedom in our particular acts of struggle that we also recognize as absolute freedom, because negation is the source of all movement. Here we find, in Marx’s words, “the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity” (1964, 135). We recognize that there is no freedom that does not simultaneously will the freedom of the other, and that, as Pomeroy notes, our form of being becomes the Absolute Idea (in Hegel’s terms), that is, our simultaneous individual and universal realization that I am the movement of the real, that my own self-consciousness takes on the burden of freedom, of responsibility of sociality. Here, critical pedagogy as radical negation becomes a brimming reservoir from which to draw numerous practices of criticism and possibility. For instance, to recognize that “I am NOT capital, followed by I

AM not capital,” is also both to acknowledge and confront the series of antagonisms unleashed by capital—racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social relations of power and privilege that capitalist social relations of exploitation support.

Radicalizing Education in and through Music

One of the greatest Latin American Marxist theorists was José Carlos Mariategui. Rejecting dogmatic objectivism, Mariategui believed that revolutionary consciousness could be achieved in the very process of revolutionary struggle. Mariategui was an iconoclastic Marxist in that he did not believe the proletariat was a passive spectator bobbing and eddying in the wake of the laws of motion of capitalist development. Rather, from within Mariategui’s open, non-deterministic, subjective Marxism, he sought to salvage Marxism from the economic determinists. Mariategui’s statement—that “for poor people the revolution will be the conquest not only of bread, but also beauty, of art, of thought, and of all the pleasures of the spirit” (Becker 1993, 137)—influenced many on the left. Following Mariategui’s lead, it is easy to see how music can serve as a vehicle for challenging oppression through a form of radical aesthetics.

In their path-breaking book, *Radicalizing Learning*, Stephen Brookfield and John Holst describe what they call “the educational functions of radical aesthetics,” summarizing T.V. Reed’s ten functions of art in social movements that can be equally applied to music: to “encourage, empower, harmonize, inform internally, enact movement goals, historicize, transform affect or tactics, critique movement ideology, and make room for pleasure” (2011, 152). They go on to identify six functions of art in radical adult education: sounding warnings, building solidarity, claiming empowerment, presenting alternative epistemologies and ontologies, affirming pride, and teaching history. Here, they maintain that songs play a vital role:

Art that sounds warnings is art that works on two social levels. First, it solidifies and encapsulates an emerging movement in a way that feels accurate and real to members of the movement. Song is particularly suited to this owing to its short gestation time. A song can theoretically be written and learned in a couple of hours recorded and mixed in a few more, and then be available for download on the web almost immediately and on the streets a little later. It is more compact than a blog posting and works in visceral and emotional ways that an op-ed piece or blog cannot. From the Trouveres to the broadside ballads, from “Joe Hill” to “Strange Fruit,” song has a directness and immediacy that appeals to memories and instincts deeper than mere prose can. (Brookfield and Holst 2011, 153)

Woody Guthrie wrote a song based on the novel *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck that exposed the suffering of migrant farm workers in California during the Great Depression. Steinbeck once confessed: “he [Guthrie] got the entire story of a thing that took me two years to write” (McLoughlin 2009, 73). What song and “musicing” can do—along with theater and other unorthodox approaches to teaching and learning—is to provide alternative and oppositional ontologies and epistemologies that can then serve as mediating languages for reading the world and the world dialectically. This is certainly true in the music of Rage Against the Machine, a group that actually makes reference to Frantz Fanon (“grip tha canon like Fanon and pass that shells to my classmate”) in a track entitled “Year of tha Boomerang” on their 1996 album, *Evil Empire*. Other references to Frantz Fanon can be found in a track that Zack de la Rocha (the lead singer of Rage Against the Machine) did with artists Last Emperor and KRS-One called “C.I.A. (Criminals in Action), and in other songs by The Coup, Dignable Planets, and Earthling.

Inspired by the life and work of Tupac Shakur, Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell developed “THUG LIFE” pedagogy that draws upon the “hatred/rage/hostility /indignation that result from any group of people systematically being denied their right to food, clothing, shelter, education, and justice” and channels these feelings “into the courage to act and fundamentally change the direction of a society, even in the face of the broader society’s cowardice” (2008, 143). Music in this instance helps to bridge the gap between our inner and outer worlds, as difficult and agonistic as those worlds might be. In her book, *A Pedagogy of the Blues*, Shirley Wade McLoughlin (2009) attempts to challenge dehumanizing techno-rational approaches to education that devalue what she sees as the spiritual and physical aspects essential to humanity. She does so by establishing a pedagogy that utilizes the blues metaphor and that conceives of pedagogy as an art form that can break the established hegemonic order of society. She believes that “[b]y looking at teaching as an art, the process of educating is seen more clearly in terms of its potential for creating change” (2009, 88). McLoughlin’s pedagogy of the blues centers upon what she calls “critical testimony.” She writes:

A pedagogy of the blues looks and feels different than the type of education so prevalent today. One of the distinguishing characteristics is in the incorporation of testimony in the daily work in the classroom. Teachers and students relate their personal experiences to the educational setting, interpreting them and relating them to the content with which they are working with intent for deeper learning and understanding to occur as these stories are shared. In essence, they are sharing their

selves and elements of their private interpretation of experience and knowledge of the way of the world.... The use of critical testimonies is an essential component of working within educational environments that are essentially controlled by members of the dominant society. To teach and learn within such spaces, especially as marginalized members of society, requires deep reflection and consideration of appropriate manners in which to best approach issues, especially those of social justice. (2009, 88–9)

The idea behind these critical testimonies is to acknowledge the oppressive circumstances surrounding the lives of marginalized peoples, to “embody” theory production by revealing the author’s voice through personal narratives that accompany theory production, and to create a community that can support the struggle for social justice. In this respect these critical testimonies are similar to the counter storytelling so vital to the practice of teaching informed by critical race theory.

Tracing the blues metaphor in country music, folk, jazz and hip hop, McLoughlin identifies six themes that have come out of the thematic universe of her classroom experiences and are engaged through the testimonies of her students: truthfulness, pain, criticality, hopefulness, joyful/playfulness, and autobiography.

My own previous work on the topic of gangsta rap and hip hop touched on some of these themes, as well as attacks on music that can be traced to the creative production of artists working within different historical junctures and musical genres. As I wrote in 1996:

Gangsta rappers follow a long line of musicians denounced by the moral custodians of US culture as prime instigators of juvenile delinquency—a list that includes, among others, Frank Sinatra, Elvis, the Beatles, the Sex Pistols, Metallica, and Prince. Members of my generation...reflecting on the earlier public debates surrounding the subliminal messages purportedly inserted into songs by Judas Priest and Ozzy Osborne, are perhaps reminded of earlier controversies that accompanied the Rolling Stones’ hit “Satisfaction,” or the two-and-a-half-year analysis by J. Edgar Hoover’s G-man of the Kingsmen’s 1963 hit, “Louie Louie.” The investigation by FBI sound technicians and cryptographers of this pop chant (which merely recounts a lovesick sailor’s return to his Jamaican sweetheart) seems ironic now, given the fact that the teen anthem has since appeared as the backdrop of numerous films, charity telethons, and wine cooler ads. The debate over gangsta rap has captured the public imagination at a time when the nation is vigorously reevaluating public policies surrounding affirmative action and urban reform. This has given gangsta rap an urgency and public visibility far greater than earlier debates over rock ‘n’ roll and morality. (1996, 10–11)

Gangsta rap and hip hop clearly have a visceral sensibility of embodying life in the streets. Again, as I wrote in the same article:

With its numbing psychorealism; with its fixing of “in-your-face” rhymes to social meltdown and bass rhythms to urban disaster; with its commodification of black rage

through high-volume and low-frequency sound; with its production of sexualizing fugues for an imploding Generation X; with its ability to provoke a white hellification of black youth with “attitude”; with its seventh sons in blue or red bandanas and ten-dollar gold tooth caps “droppin science” and warning their homeboys against “tell-lie-vision,” the “lie-bury,” and public school “head-decay-tion”; with its dance culture of the Hanglide, Flow, Headspin, King Tut, Windmill, Tick, Float, Wave, and freestyle; with its production of affective economies of white panic around a generalized fear of a black planet; with its sneering tongue-flicking contempt of public space; with its visceral intensity and corporal immediacy; with its snarling, subterranean resistance; with its eschatological showdown of “us” against “them”; with its “edutainers” down with the brothas in the street; with its misogynist braggadocio; with its pimp-inspired subjectivity; with its urban war zone counternarratives; with its home-brewed polymerized anarchism; with its virulent autobiographical hype; with its irreverent first-person narratives powered by malt-liquor; with its rhythmic macho boastfests by brothas in Carhartt jackets; and with its dissenting themes and high-pitched contempt for the white petit-bourgeoisie and the yuppie heirs of the overclass who can afford to sidestep the frenetic dizziness of reality.... (1996, 13–14)

And while hip hop clearly has become commodified and commercialized, it has pullulated, and continues to branch out, into new forms. Hip hop can provoke classroom debates as students examine not only the sexism and use of language in some of the lyrics but also the ways in which the four pillars of hip hop (MCing, DJing, b-boying, and graffiti writing) embody a way of life, has been embraced by youth globally, and has produced politically and socially conscious messages that speak within a larger framework of social justice.

Urban, Capital and Music Teaching

The focus on urban music is an important advance in music education, not just in terms of how such music is consumed but how it is produced, how it is taught, and the assumptions that underlie such approaches. Critical approaches to music teaching in urban areas have focused a great deal on so-called “at risk” students and the importance of teaching music that embodies the kind of “difference” that would be relevant to their lives. But, of course, this begs the question of what constitutes the operative multicultural imaginary in use and the kind of music that would embody the idealized normative conception of music against which such “difference” defines itself.

When Gaztambide-Fernandez asks in his excellent essay in this volume, “differing from what?” he notes that “the reference to the ‘ideal student’ that these urban students differ from” also makes clear “that the ‘reality of urban schools’ is constructed in opposition to the

normalized ideal implied in most pre-service teacher education”—which he recognizes as embodied in a concept of a white and middle class student surrounded by nurturing (i.e., non-pathological) environmental conditions. When one deterritorializes this discourse of normativity in music education, it often reveals an invisible backdrop of Eurocentric values and the hierarchy of worth buried therein. When we call for diversity, we are usually referring to instances when a non-Western culture enters Western culture while maintaining its identity as one of *difference* (Gonzalez 2008, 31). This notion remains trapped in the discourse of cultural hybridity and counterhegemonic mixing and cross-cultural forms of semiotic blending that too often ignores the history of the often genocidal (and epistemicidal) encounters between non-Western cultures and Western cultures. Often this hidden backdrop of the Anglosphere, this curtain that European epistemologies have unnervingly drawn across the front of the world, affords the white music educator the opportunity to problematize students of color as pure negativity (often engaging in a prurient sensationalism under the cloak of ‘being down with people of color who live in the hood’) while assuming the role of the solitary protagonist of ‘reason’ and accountability. It also clears the ground for a well-intentioned pathologizing of the situated cultures of non-white students, as well as naturalizing the hierarchy that grants the western musical canon sacerdotal status over other, ‘different’ musical formations. What often goes unrecognized, however—even in the discourse of critical music educators—is that the preemptory quest for the equal worth of cultures, is underwritten by a homogenizing notion of cultural worth mediated by the capitalist marketplace. Here, multiculturalism—even within the critical tradition—becomes a means of imposing a new form of mystification based on exchange value where different cultures can be made “equivalent” when, in fact, within neoliberal capitalist societies these different cultures are all parasitic on the notion of the nation state that assumes the parity of colonized and dominated peoples. What is left out here is a reading of difference against the totality of capitalism’s division of labor and the history of colonization. In addition, addressing the postmodern cultural configuration of difference allows some white music educators to indulge in conversations about pluralism, heterogeneity, local knowledges, and non-essentialized identity politics without acknowledging how the social division of labor impacts communities of color differentially. This form of multiculturalism fetishizes the local and heterogeneous and refuses to see difference as part of a differentiated and dynamic totality (a concrete unity of contradictions) that is historically determined—such as neoliberal

capitalism and the history of colonialism. In the absence of socio-economic conditions for political equality, the notion of cultural pluralism is simply reduced to an empty plaudit of the ruling class, hiding what is in essence a form of cultural imperialism.

I agree that approaching music as a form of cultural production is a crucial step forward in the field of music education. But of equal and vital importance is to recognize that a cultural entity is not a totality in and of itself and must be read in the context of the larger social totality of capitalist social relations and the history of colonization and imperialism that has followed in its wake. To see cultural production as essentially a discursive affair, as in many poststructuralist accounts, can draw our attention away from the way power relations are historicized in concrete material conditions of production and reproduction. As E. San Juan (1998) notes, recognition of the equal worth of cultures cannot be possible in a social system founded on relations of commodity exchange and on the reification associated with bourgeois culture:

In this system of discrete and separate individuals, aggregated together in various collectivities, the hegemony (ideological plus political supremacy) of one group over the rest implies the ascendancy of a particular philosophical, ethical or cultural world view and form of life that subordinates others in a hierarchy that resembles the precapitalist formation—except now it is disguised in the language of democracy and equality. While lip service is paid to the value of diverse interest-groups, lifestyles, and so forth, in a society based on the logic of accumulation, the form differentiation and abstract universality of the whole operates to reproduce segregation, discrimination, and exclusion. (1998, 147)

Approaching music education from the perspective of revolutionary critical pedagogy will require music educators to take the ethical-political role of those most hated not only by the right wing establishment, but by the liberal establishment as well. This means we must engage in an existential intensification of the notion of the proletarian subject, and not a retreat from this notion, since what we stand to lose today is the entire human race (and non-human life as well) through the destruction of the planet through capitalist accumulation through dispossession, war and environmental catastrophe. And we do this through our protagonist identification with the oppressed, and by enacting a praxis of interculturality. This stipulates further that music educators not only enter into a radical negation of all that exists, but begin to envisage a world outside of commodity production, the violence of exchange value (both of symbolic and material values) and the abstract measure of equivalence inherent in capitalist social relations. This is a task that both liberal and conservatives are bent against, and they are counting on the fact that the educational

establishment, including the progressives in their ranks, will resist any move to put capitalism itself under siege. It is my hope that you will profoundly disappoint them.

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Notes

¹ Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs, by Wilhelm Liebknecht. First German edition, Nuremberg, 1896; first English translation (by E. Untermann), 1901. Reprinted by Journeyman Press, London, 1975. As retrieved from Eyewitness: A London Pub Crawl with Karl Marx, 1850s. <http://www.mytimemachine.co.uk/pubcrawl.htm>

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