Action, **C**riticism & **T**heory for Music Education

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Elizabeth Parker's reflection[1] on her experience as a musician educator working with children in an urban non-profit context, published in this issue of *Action, Theory, and Criticism in Music Education,* is an uncomfortable read for me. In a courageous act, Parker makes public her private misgivings about her past experience and allows scrutiny of them in the form of two public commentaries as well as the private musings of *ACT* readers. The editors of *ACT* engage in a democratic act by choosing to include a piece so raw, for certainly Parker is not alone. The voices of individuals similarly engaged in the day-to-day *act* of making music with children or adults, whether in school or community contexts, and facing struggles similar to the ones Parker portrays are, curiously, rather absent from the pages of *ACT*.

I emphasize *act* in the previous sentence because, at the core, that is what troubles me most as I re-read and re-consider Parker's piece. The title of this journal is *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education.* Whether we care to admit it or not, we (the readers and editorial members of this journal) are good at the "theory" and the "criticism" part of the title of this journal, and not so good (in my view) at "action"—or if we are, we don't make that very evident. While I recognize that critiquing and theorizing are indeed acts (Giroux 2000), I sometimes wonder about whether or how theorizing and critiquing become (or don't become) action on the ground, in music making contexts whatever and wherever they are, and in conversations with citizens, school committees, colleagues, and public and private sector boards such as the one Parker encountered.

As stated earlier, I offer this commentary with respect for both Parker's courage and the editors' commitment to publish. I also offer this commentary from my position as a white, female, middle-aged academic who is not "native" in critical theory territory. Using Parker's piece as "point of entry text" (Kincheloe & Berry 2004), Benedict provides an adept and thorough reading of Parker's reflection through the multiple lenses and lessons of critical theory. Benedict threads through problematic matters of agency, ownership, legitimation,

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race, class, hierarchies of control, and constructions of children and childhood, thereby providing rich ground for further thought. My "read" and "threading" is from my position as music teacher educator and "vigilant reader" (Barone 1995/2000), for as I consider Parker's piece I realize that I am complicit in Parker's troubles (and those of others like her), not because I failed to critique or theorize, but because I failed to act. Parker's piece, and my actions, are incomplete—partial, deficient, unfinished.

Raising Questions and Attending to the Place in Between

Parker chooses "not only to tell my own story and share impressions of the events that transpired, but also to dig further into understanding and resolving my experience. This is my process of meaning-making…. I hope to encourage greater dialogue regarding unspoken roles and responsibilities of music programs, particularly where under-represented urban youth is at center." Her motivation is consistent with Bakhtin's notion of writing that is "determined by experience, knowledge and practice" and that invites readers into dialogue (novel) rather than holding up a tale of the past as sacred or epic (in Holquist 1981, 15). From this literary perspective, "The aim of storytellers . . . is not to prompt a single, closed, convergent reading but to persuade readers to contribute answers to the dilemmas they pose" (Barone 1995/2000, 250). The dilemmas in Parker's reflection trouble me and persuade me to engage. Yet I am conscious of how little I know about Parker, the agency, the children, and the community. So I begin "the interpretive act (of) making sense of complexity" (Kinchloe & Berry 2004, 82) by peeling through layers of Parker's reflection and asking questions that arise from incomplete information in "the place in between" us.[2]

I know, for example, that Parker is a woman, but I know neither her race[3] nor the nature of her relationship to the community in which the non-profit is located.[4] Was she newcomer or native? How did she see herself in relationship to the children, their families, the community? I know Parker was near the beginning of her career at the time of her reflection—a vulnerable time for any educator. Was this her first work experience following her undergraduate education? Did her work with the non-profit comprise her entire career or supplement other work? What was her motivation for taking this position? Parker eventually left the non-profit, but when? How long did she stay, and what prompted her departure? Certainly, her sense at the time, and perhaps even now, was that to speak up was to end her employment. Was the decision to depart hers?

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At the time of her engagement with the non-profit, Parker says, "all I wanted to be was the choir director." She frames the story as an "attempt to examine the conflicting expectations and mission confusion of *one children's choir director*" (italics mine). As her story unfolds and mission confusion causes distress, she turns to "colleagues and choir director friends" and "children's choir models for help." How does Parker see herself now? As "choir director" only? Would she turn to the same places for help? Parker intends, through her reflection, to "dig further into understanding and resolving" her experience and "to encourage greater dialogue regarding unspoken roles and responsibilities of music programs." Why now? What ideas and experiences has Parker encountered since her time at the non-profit that prompt her to return and reflect, to examine the experience and her role(s) in it, and to ask critical questions?

Parker is not the only "actor" in this story. I have similar questions about the not-for-profit agency. I know that the non-profit is/was located in an urban context, but do not know its history in the community. It had/has a board, and later an arts committee. What is/was the nature of the relationship of the board members to the community? Is/was the community of families and children "served" by the agency represented on the board and in the decisions made? Parker interacted with the board and/or the arts committee. Was she (and were others hired by the agency) a member of either the board or the arts committee? How and when were their voices heard?

The programming also raises questions. At some point, someone made a decision to include arts experiences in the after-school programs. How was that decision made and by whom? Why choirs? Were choirs the only kind of musical experience offered? If the arts programming was a "notable difference" between this agency and others in the community, in what ways and to what ends was that "notable difference" valued by the agency? Clearly, the choir became a fund-raising tool for the agency. But why the choir? Were other programs associated with the agency, arts or otherwise, put forward for public view, and how?

At first read, the voices of the children and their families are silent/silenced in Parker's reflection, save the lone child who speaks up about the way in which she believes she is being "read" in the public performances imposed on the choir in which she participates. Yet as I read between the lines of Parker's reflection, I hear them through the silencings as well as in moments of speaking-through-(non)action. For example, the urban context in which the children lived is/was diverse, and the children in Parker's choir also appear to have

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diverse life experiences and backgrounds. Past the surface veneer of appearance, however, what voice did the children and their families have, if any, on the board or in the decision making processes of the agency? The arts programming? The choir(s)? What was/were *their* mission(s)—children, families, community members? Was it really the case that "the mission of enjoyment, accomplishment and belonging was unattainable for many students"? Or is it that the "mission" as they perceived it delivered *to* them as well as the choices made *for* them were inconsistent with their own sense of purpose and identity? Did anyone ask? Perhaps the children who "appeared unaffected and even disinterested" or who "discontinued participation within weeks or months" did so because they are/were erased from decision making—musical, programmatic, organizational—in every possible way. One way to claim agency is to leave.

Minding the Gap

It would be relatively easy to read this questioning as a critique of the actors in Parker's story. But I choose another path and turn to a critique of my own actions, to the concerns Parker raises for my own practice, and to what her reflection and my questioning calls me to do.

I am a privileged reader. I am, as Barone says, "a middle-aged urban academic who, secure in a tenured university position, will never leave school" (1989/2000, 181). But I *have* left "school" in some respects. The lived experience of a university faculty member is not the lived experience of a preK-12 music educator. To what extent have I minded the gap between my (relatively) privileged position and the positions of the undergraduate and graduate students (most of them preK-12 music educators, or soon to be) and their (our) colleagues? We may read about, talk about, and grapple with the crucial ideas of critical theory and pedagogy together, thereby engaging the questioning and thinking processes that inform a philosophical and critical stance and lead to transformation. But in the end, *they* live out those ideas in preK-12 contexts; they *enact* in places that are tremendously different (from each other's places and mine), often challenging, and sometimes devastating. To what extent have I minded the gap between the life-long experience of *becoming* and the daily-lived experience of *being* critical pedagogues? Not enough, and not well enough.

Parker's reflection points to the gap. Witness her actions. When she experienced "mission confusion" (her own and the agency's) as well as policies and practices that exploited children, she did not turn to a community of critical theorists and pedagogues for

help, perhaps because she was not yet aware of critical theory perspectives. She turned to the community of children's choir directors and children's choir "models," where she appears to have encountered pedagogical and structural narratives imbedded in the history and culture of art music performance. These did not help her address, rethink, or consider alternatives to the problems she was experiencing.

Yet I wonder, if Parker had turned to the community of critical theorists and pedagogues, what response—what help—would she have received? I ask because I wonder whether Parker—a teacher in the early stages of her career and in the midst of immediate and deeply troubling concerns—would have heard something that sounded like "arguments buttressed by an air of privileged insularity that appear beyond interrogation, coupled with forms of rhetorical cleverness"—a phrase Giroux (2000, 14) uses to describe the discourse of some academics. I ask because I have seen often, in my own practice, "gap frustration" among pre-service and early-career music educators who are working hard toward developing their ability to critique and theorize while simultaneously doing the hard work of teaching. I ask because believe *I* am guilty of not minding the gap.

Yes, working hard toward developing the ability to critique and theorize and doing the hard work of teaching are inseparable, part of the same cloth. However, pre-service and early-career teachers *experience* gaps between theorizing and practicing, between knowing and doing, between regulatory cultures and new ideas, between becoming and being, between sympathetic others and those who view them (and their ideas) with skepticism and even scorn. Moreover, they experience these gaps differently, for they are individuals no less diverse than the children they are teaching or will teach. I have no desire to "ease" the tensions, for growth and change (may) evolve from them, and tensions are essential to the project of democracy. Absent tension, no change occurs. I also reject the notion that "answers" can be found. Still, a retreat to theorizing and critiquing when tensions occur without exploring *potential actions* seems hollow and, well, incomplete. What to do?

Thinking about Parker's reflection and other experiences leads me to three possibilities. First, I believe I have a responsibility to acknowledge the discomfort of being in the gap, whenever it occurs. To do less is disrespectful. Second, I have a responsibility to acknowledge, even to make conscious and prepare for the likelihood that tensions and frustrations will continue to occur as individual educators take on the project of critical pedagogy, and that they will occur not only in music classes and ensembles, but also in

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interactions with colleagues, parents, administrators, boards, media representatives, taxpayers, and citizens who may challenge, resist, and confront in any number of ways and with varying degrees of intensity. Third, I have a responsibility to position myself as an ally, for to stand apart rather than live alongside seems disingenuous as well as contrary to the notion of "pedagogy as a crucial cultural, political and moral practice for connecting politics, power, and social agency to the broader performative practice of democratic public life" (Giroux 2000, 11). To be an ally means, to me, to engage in mutually supportive actions that include questioning more thoughtfully, listening longer, opening and engaging in discussions aimed at problem-solving and strategizing, and standing (and acting) alongside.[5]

The project of critical pedagogy is always incomplete, never comfortable, a practice of witnessing to both injustice and potential, which are both in abundant supply. To the extent that I mind the gaps that early-career teachers (and even more mature educators) experience as they link theory to practice and knowledge to engagement, perhaps I (we) can enhance the potential for transformation that is the always unfinished business of critical pedagogy and the possibilities of the constantly evolving project of becoming critical pedagogues.

Note To Parker

Dear Elizabeth,

Thanks for writing your piece, sending it to ACT, committing to the revision process that is part of publication, and allowing public commentary. I've learned something about myself from your writing—surely a sign that the piece is worth the effort of both writer and reader—and because of that learning, I will act differently (hopefully more wisely) than I have. I hope our paths will cross in person and that we may continue to think and act together.

Sandy

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Notes

[1] Parker uses the word "narrative" to describe her piece. Parker is indeed telling her own story, and that story is instructive. However, those working in narrative as a particular form of scholarship (a contested "field" itself) would not necessarily label Parker's piece as narrative *inquiry*, on methodological or epistemological grounds (Barrett & Stauffer 2009, Bowman 2006, Clandinin & Connelly 2000, Clandinin & Rosiek 2007, Connelly & Clandinin 2006, Squire, Andrews, & Tomboukou 2008). For that reason, I have purposefully chosen the word "reflection" to indicate the possible difference in perspective, and have chosen to focus on other matters in the essay rather than explicating those differences.

[2] The "place in between" is an idea from place philosophy that recognizes each individual as place and suggests that understanding arises in the place in between. See Stauffer 2009.

[3] I met Elizabeth Parker just prior to completing this piece, so I am now aware of her race.

[4] I specifically use "I" here because "we" implies an omniscient reader. This is my reading only, others may read Parker's reflection differently.

[5] Many of the ideas in the paragraph I attribute, with gratitude, to Evan Tobias, from whom I have learned to question more thoughtfully, wait longer, and listen better.

About the Author

Sandra Stauffer is Professor of Music Education at Arizona State University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in general music, creativity, and qualitative research. Sandra is co-author/co-editor with Margaret Barrett of *Narrative Inquiry in Music Education: Troubling Certainty* and *Narrative Soundings: An Anthology of Narrative Inquiry in Music Education*, as well as co-author with others of general music pedagogical texts. Sandra has collaborated with composer Morton Subotnick in the development of his creative music software for children, and her studies of children and young people as composers appear in research and pedagogy journals.