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Back to Class: Capitalist Realism, Antiracism, and Music Education

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Abstract

In this essay, music education is conceptualized as a game or performance within The Game, the "pervasive atmosphere" (Fisher 2009) of neoliberal capitalism, which inevitably shapes scholarship, practice, and policy. Even people who strive to see music education for what it really might be (e.g., those researching and promoting social justice), especially when they hue to identitarianism or reductionism, can remain susceptible to neoliberal rationalities. Imminent critique, applied specifically to antiracist scholarship in music education, reveals a tendency to ignore, disparage, and erase the musical interests and values of poor and working-class whites, which serves to rationalize and reproduce inequality by maintaining the cultural superiority of middle class and affluent whites, and to diffuse opposition to neoliberal capitalism by dividing poor and working classes along racial lines. An argument is made for moving from neoliberal identity politics "back to class," or at least in directions more critical of neoliberal capitalism, more fully recognizing economic dimensions of inequality and oppression in music education.

Keywords

Music education, capitalism, antiracism, identity, classism, whiteness, white supremacy

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In a classic study of karaoke singing, Rob Drew (2005) noted that in western[1] societies, when members of the "urban middle-class" participated in this popular artform, they tended to do so with a sense of irony, not fully embodying or committing to their performances. People from "working- and lower-middle" social classes, on the other hand, were more likely to engage in karaoke with "fidelity."[2] Borrowing terms and concepts applied by Pierre Bourdieu (1988), one could surmise that when a person's background (habitus) aligns with karaoke singing, they "have only to follow their natural dispositions" to participate appropriately (100); they would be apt, in other words, to approach karaoke with *authenticity*—understood as a socially constructed sense of naturalness, genuineness, inateness, or realness (see Grazian 2018). One upper-middle class participant in Drew's (2005) ethnography spoke derisively of "true" karaoke fans as really "believing in it" (380), reflecting a propensity by outsiders to look upon others' cherished cultural practices as simply performative, game-like, or otherwise not real. The corresponding inclination for insiders, on the other hand, would be to take their own traditions for granted as deeply meaningful and authentic.

In the book at hand, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*, Mark Fisher (2009) brings up the possibility that most everyone, at least in the Global North (Santos 2018), is now an insider when it comes to capitalism, a way of thinking and being that is taken completely for granted, especially because there no longer appear to be imaginable alternatives. Capitalist realism, Fisher (2009) writes, is "a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (16, emphasis in the original). Some may notice that their actions have been shaped by capitalist rationalities while others may simply take everything in stride as the natural order of things.

Popular culture has offered movies like *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis 1999) and *Inception* (Nolan 2010) to explore associated ideas about performativity and perceptions of reality. Using specialized drugs and/or technologies, the characters in these films enter shared virtual spaces and experiences—sometimes willingly and sometimes without knowing—while their physical bodies remain asleep. This sets in motion an array of behavioral possibilities. Those who are fully aware that the perceived reality isn't real might play along (perhaps with a sense of irony) or they may work to disrupt the game, in which case their behavior could appear to others as erratic, nonsensical, or uninformed. Those who forget or are otherwise

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not aware that it is all a simulation may take things for granted, less likely to question the game and more inclined to try their best, showing full commitment, especially if they have advantages. The second of these two films, *Inception*, extends the ploy by adding various levels of realities *within* realities to the extent that many people, including those in the viewing audience, are thoroughly confused about what really is real.

In this essay, a work of critical social theory, common practices in music education are conceptualized as games or performances embedded within The Game, the "pervasive atmosphere" and social reality of neoliberal capitalism. Scholarship, practice, and policy in music education have been and continue to be shaped by capitalist rationalities. Even critical social theorists who strive to discern underlying patterns within music education discourses can remain susceptible to the internal logic of capitalism. With this possibility in mind, one eventual goal of this project is to apply imminent critique specifically to antiracism in music education, arguably the field's most popular social justice discourse (Bates 2019), identifying possible points of neoliberal division and co-optation. This critical analysis is preceded by an overview of contextualizing literature addressing how common practices in music education (games) reflect or are embedded within neoliberal capitalism (The Game), along with arguments pertaining to *sociodicy* (rationalizations for economic inequality), the neoliberal rise of *identitarianism*, and the subsequent subordination of political economy. The critical analysis section includes discussions of various ways antiracist scholars account for and propose to address unequal racial representation in music education, concluding that some facets of antiracism in music education are inclined to maintain the elite status quo by dividing poor and working classes along racial lines through the selective application of classist sociodicies (rationalizations) to poor and working-class whites, thereby upholding white supremacy. This analysis is followed by an argument for recentering socioeconomic class relative to antiracist and other more identitarian social justice work. In a sense, the critical discussion put forward here supports moving from neoliberal identity politics "back to class," or at least in a direction more critical of neoliberal capitalism, more fully recognizing capitalist roots to inequality and oppression in school music education.

Music Education: A Game within The Game

Judith Butler (1988) based her academic work in theories of embodiment and action intended to "explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs" (519). She framed identity as "a compelling illusion" or, in other words, "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to *perform in the mode of belief*" (520, emphasis added). This corresponds to a basic insight in critical social theory that identities and practices are socially constructed and thereby pliable; they do not have to be taken for granted. Yet, as with the karaoke example, people vested in a social practice come to perform it "with fidelity" (Drew 2005) or, using Butler's terminology, "in the mode of belief." Along similar lines, although looking more closely at socioeconomic inequality than identity, Bourdieu (2005) conceptualized social fields as games, each characterized by unique sets of rules and traditions. People whose social backgrounds align with the dominant social structure develop a natural sense of how the game should be played, accepting it as simply the way things are, less prone to question its overall fairness and more liable to defend its legitimacy. Those with less familiarly with, experience in, or commitment to a specific field or practice are potentially at a disadvantage but, returning to the karaoke example, are also less likely to take it for granted or to play it with fidelity.[3]

In addition to the previously mentioned examples of performativity and/or game qualities found in karaoke and two relatively recent movies, the phenomenon of children's singing games can lend another layer of nuance to conceptualizations of embedded social performances.[4] These traditional musical engagements, found throughout much of the world, in the Global South as well as the Global North, have historically been integral to social exploration, imagination, expression, and sense making (Campbell and Wiggins 2013; Marsh 2008). For example, Christopher Roberts (2013) reviewed field recordings and publications of ethnomusicologists who documented a wide range of songs and games engaged in by ethnically and racially diverse groups of children in Manhattan, New York,[5] during the mid 1900s. Reflecting the larger society in which the young people were situated, these songs and games traversed a variety of themes: romance, love, marriage, authority, inequality, hierarchy, competition, power, exclusion, commercialization, everyday activities, excellence, violence, abuse, gangs, retribution, housing, landlords, poverty, resilience, and so forth. Through singing games, children were able to explore

and internalize the social conventions and traditions of their metropolitan environments.

In this essay, people involved in music teaching and learning are imagined as analogous to participants in the sociocultural phenomenon of singing games, playing with and within a variety of social patterns and roles associated with school music education, internalizing and reproducing understandings of associated social constructions through the serious play and work of music teaching and learning (and researching, and setting policy, etc.), including perhaps the use of singing games or karaoke but also taking in all other common practices associated with school music. Those who are most vested or otherwise dominant in the various games (sociocultural practices) of music education will tend to play with a sense of fidelity, seriousness, and authenticity, while those situated closer to the periphery or in a disadvantaged position may be more likely to take an ironic or critical stance.

According to Fisher's (2009) theory of capitalist realism, *all* social practices within capitalist economies are in similar ways subsumed within, shaped by, and expressions of capitalist realism, understood in this essay as The Game.[6] In other words, all social practices, including school music education, are games within The Game. That the prevailing economic structure profoundly constrains thoughts and actions is a relatively common insight in critical theory. Wendy Brown (2015) refers to contemporary capitalist hegemony as a *totality*: "a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (loc. 57–61). Thought and action are similarly constrained in a perspective put forward by Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Peter McLaren (2018): "neoliberalism has ushered in the corporate domination of all aspects of society, subjecting the world's population to the judgment, whims, and morality of capital" (550).

Neoliberal Capitalism and Music Education

The pervasiveness of capitalist rationality (The Game) has wide-ranging implications for music teaching and learning. Without sufficient levels of critical thought, music educators can simply become pawns in The Game, so to speak (or cogs in the machine, or tools in the toolbox to mix metaphors), playing their respective roles in reinforcing rather than disrupting habits of thinking and action that

uphold and perpetuate inequality and exploitation.[7] There might still be room for the argument that global free markets, paired with various levels or forms of social democracy, have been or can be beneficial in increasing standards of living, health, and wellbeing for many, but the apparent fundamentals of capitalism in exploiting people and planet are also readily apparent, and any global advancements in quality of life have been grossly unequal (Boushey, DeLong, and Steinbaum 2017); the privileges of some seem inevitably to come at the expense of others, including more-than-human others (see Shevock 2018).

A growing number of academics in music education have taken up the issue of neoliberal capitalism and music education, identifying ways in which music educational practices embody, support, and reproduce capitalist structures and rationalities or, in other words, how the performative game of school music education functions within and in support of The Game:[8]

First, music teaching and learning promote consumerism, reliance upon and desires for a wide range of products such as musical equipment, travel, and uniforms,[9] including the use of "non-musical" consumer products as rewards and teaching tools.[10] Consumerism goes hand in hand with corporate control as business interests develop and promote curriculum materials and other music-related products for music teaching and learning.[11] As an extension of this consumerist ethos, popular philosophies of school music have been shaped according to advocacy,[12] which reflects an apparent need to "sell" or market school music programs[13] and, on an individual level, to promote oneself professionally and personally—a form of entrepreneurship.[14]

Second, music teaching and learning, especially in dominant global economies such as the US, emphasize two hallmarks of capitalism: competition and meritocracy.[15] Capitalist competition supports one-dimensional thinking[16] or bottom-line mentality[17] as products or outcomes become more important than social processes: "profit for profit, regardless of its social usefulness and the satisfaction generated by the work process."[18] The bottom line of production/profit is also the basis for technical rationality,[19] which focuses on efficiency[20] and progress,[21] with priority given to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math),[22] technological innovation,[23] and research-proven methods,[24] as well as an emphasis on measurement and assessment.[25] Skills and knowledge, accordingly, are instrumentalized[26] and standardized.[27]

Third, these elements combine to support hierarchical systems of authority and control,[28] including elitist cultural hierarchies,[29] with a focus on accountability to hierarchical standards.[30] Ensemble directors often embody and reinforce this aspect of neoliberal rationality through strict leadership[31] and other forms of exploitation.[32] School music is also primarily associated with developing self-discipline and other marketable skills to equip students to eventually become part of a compliant workforce.[33]

Fourth and finally, with all these connections combined and embodied within schools, music education becomes a force for the social reproduction of neoliberal capitalism.[34] Middle class and affluent parents have a keen interest in maintaining privilege via any means including through music education, and they are influential in developing and shaping processes and structures of music teaching and learning that are favorable to them.[35] The reproduction of inequality is further steeped in deficit perspectives, posing the less affluent as "culturally deprived."[36] Young people with the ability and disposition to capitalize on dominant cultural habits and preferences (processes of cultural capital) remain relatively privileged in music education and beyond.[37]

Common Cause

A sense of hopelessness can ensue when pondering the totality of capitalist realism coupled with an awareness of how adept neoliberalism appears to be at co-opting even the most well-intended movements for change. It may even be tempting to embrace the performance or game as it is (ignorance is bliss) and explain away any indication that the current social order is anything but just, good, or real. In the final portion of his book, Fisher (2009) considers a possible way forward through these quandaries, framed within state and political contexts.

> It's well past time for the left to cease limiting its ambitions to the establishing of a big state. But being 'at a distance from the state' does not mean either abandoning the state or retreating into the private space of affects and diversity which Žižek rightly argues is the perfect complement to neoliberalism's domination of the state. It means recognizing that the goal of a genuinely new left should not be to take over the state but to subordinate the state to the general will. This involves, naturally, resuscitating the very concept of a general will, reviving—and modernizing—the idea of a public space that is not reducible to an aggregation of individuals and their interests. (77)

If large enough groups can come together in common cause, they can bring about change on multiple structural levels and in diverse social domains. However,

the neoliberal turn to identity, as Fisher intimates above, especially when it becomes too reductionist, tends to divide the necessary reactionary force into insular and sometimes adversarial special interest groups, producing doctrines (or dogmas) that may converge with other groups at times but not to a long-lasting or significant enough extent to bring about anything but incremental or cosmetic change. Furthermore, Fisher's description at the outset, of capitalist realism as "a pervasive atmosphere," highlights its capacity for seeping into even the most well-intended movements, co-opting possible social/political commonalities to support neoliberal aims. In efforts to avoid these pitfalls, it is essential to keep capitalism (The Game) in mind when striving for equality. To her own summation of capitalist realism, Nancy Fraser (2017) adds the following warning: "What all the talk about capitalism indicates, symptomatically, is a growing intuition that the heterogeneous ills that surround us—financial, economic, ecological, political, and social—can be traced to a *common root*, and that reforms that fail to engage with the deep structural underpinnings of these ills are doomed to fail" (141, emphasis added).

Sociodicy

Fisher (2009) invokes David Harvey's argument that neoliberalism is a "*political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (29, emphasis in the original). In many respects, neoliberalism is the same old game of capitalism amplified and reframed more thoroughly within and facilitated by national and international governmental institutions (see Slobodian 2018). Given the relentless material disparities that can lead people to question The Game's legitimacy, it is essential for its beneficiaries to gain and maintain widespread support. One way this can be accomplished is through a form of rationalization (apologetics) referred to by Bourdieu and other social theorists as *sociodicy* (Shammas 2023), evidenced in arbitrary valuations that position the cultural preferences and practices of dominant groups as *causal* justification for their dominance. For example, an assumption that prevailed for many years (in the US at least) was that people were wealthy *because* (among other personal qualities) they knew how to fully appreciate western classical music and, by logical extension, that the poor could be rehabilitated, at least in part, by learning to appreciate western classical music.[38] The Game is essentially classist, in other words, allowing strategic advantage to the already economically privileged and

reproducing social structures, attitudes, and biases that serve to perpetuate the subordination of poor and working classes.

To further increase their advantage, winners in The Game leverage classist sociodicies and associated socioeconomic structures in ways that divide poor and working classes along racial lines—thereby diffusing natural opposition.[39] In his book-length analysis of the roots and impacts of this perennial division, Asad Haider (2022) quotes W.E.B. Du Bois: "The theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest" (66). When poor and working-class people unite across racial lines, given their insight and sheer numbers, they can pose a significant challenge to not only the winners in The Game but to the sociodicies upholding The Game, exposing The Game's socioeconomically unjust and exploitive roots as well as the complicity of socioeconomically dominant groups in maintaining inequality (whether consciously or not).

As recounted by social theorist and historian, Touré Reed (2020), early leaders in the US civil rights movement focused much of their energy accordingly on reforming economic policies, often in ways aimed at uniting broad coalitions of poor and working-class people across racial lines. However, even though some reforms were effective in reducing poverty for racialized groups, they still tended to favor white people. As Reed (2020) points out, "discriminatory employers, unions and public policy … denied African Americans the full benefits of the New Deal and postwar welfare states that had facilitated the rise of the union movement and, by extension, the rapid growth of the white American middle class since about 1940" (74). But rather than amplifying efforts to equalize and extend economic interventions, by the 1970s emphases within social justice movements had begun to shift away from political economy (class) and in the direction of identity (especially gender, sexuality, and race). Eventually, in Reed's (2020) account, unitarian perspectives were largely replaced by identitarian ones, which have had the effect of neutralizing and dividing class-based coalitions: "Racial reductionist explanations for mass incarceration, poverty, the wealth gap or even the 2016 presidential election shift attention from the political-economic underpinnings of inequality to frameworks centered on innate attitudes, disembodied identities and notions of privilege

that are determined by skin color rather than *wealth—the actual basis of power in a capitalist system*" (164, emphasis added). This identitarian trend culminated in what Yascha Mounk (2023) calls "the identity synthesis," functioning as "a form of progressive separatism," (4) essentializing and dividing people according to socially and legally recognized identities, encouraging people to define themselves mainly by select demographic categories over potential commonalities, and making it more difficult "for people to broaden their allegiances beyond a particular identity in a way that can sustain stability, solidarity, and social justice" (14).

The identity synthesis in general and race reductionism in particular, by deemphasizing and precluding class-based solidarity, can be amenable to the rules of The Game. Even though antiracism, for example, is intended to be intersectional (see Kendi 2016), prevailing reductionist or identitarian approaches tend to delimit concerns about socioeconomic inequality to the experiences of racialized groups. Overt racism has basically been ruled "out of bounds" in The Game; as linguist and social theorist Michael McWhorter (2021) aptly observes, "to the modern American, being called a racist is all but equivalent to being called a pedophile" (13). Consequently, traditional sociodicies that frame the poor as deficient are less likely to be applied to racially marginalized/minoritized people whose relative poverty is generally understood to be an outcome of racism. Nevertheless, the rules of The Game still allow and, in many respects, rely upon the application of classist stereotypes (sociodicies) to poor and working-class whites (PWCWs); to attribute their relative poverty to laziness, deviance, cultural deprivation, or a lack of intelligence (clear examples of classism) does not typically incur the same societal sanction as what could be construed as overt racism (see Sullivan 2014). This opens all fields, including music education, for the possibility of advocating an antiracist stance while simultaneously perpetuating classist sociodicies in support of neoliberal capitalism.

An example of this potentiality within the field of music education is identified by Juliet Hess (2022) in her description of how "performative wokeness" can serve as cultural capital for music education academics and institutions, garnering professional accolades and status even though direct impacts in addressing racism might be minimal. Understood within the framework of The Game, cultural capital is somewhat synonymous with sociodicy; it is something dominant groups do to distinguish themselves from subordinate groups in order to justify their own dominance.[40] In this case, the antiracist/woke positionality has two related

orientations, one aligning its proponents *with* racially marginalized/minoritized groups (as antiracist allies) and the other *against* PWCWs; regarding this latter group, racism is an easy addition to a litany of perceived moral and intellectual failings.[41]

Still, this move toward allyship does not necessarily mean that the winners in The Game have opened the field equally to racialized groups.[42] An example for this in the music education literature can be found by once again turning to Hess (2022) who aptly critiques *interest convergence*—a strategy whereby the interests of subordinated groups are advanced through alliances with dominant groups (e.g., Black with white). As Hess argues, this approach is limited and deceptive; advancement inevitably extends only in a way or to the point where dominant groups can still maintain or optimize their privilege or, in terms of this essay, preserve the structure and viability of The Game. In the words of legal scholar, Derrick Bell (1980), who originally theorized interest convergence, "Racial remedies [to inequality] may … be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests *deemed important by middle and upper class whites*" (523, emphasis added).

Again, to challenge and delegitimize The Game itself, a more promising form of interest convergence is possible between poor and working-class people of all races, nationalities, and ethnic origins. They have arguably the greatest insight and interest, gained through first-hand experience, in challenging the veracity of The Game. Middle-class and affluent people, if they truly are vested in socioeconomic equality, will focus their efforts on uniting rather than dividing poor and working classes, just as civil rights leaders did more than a half-century ago by focusing on political economy (class) in addition to identity (race in this case). One of the leaders of Malcolm X's Black Panthers, Kathleen Cleaver, reflected: "In a world of racist polarization, we sought solidarity… We organized the Rainbow Coalition, pulled together our allies, including not only the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the youth gang called Black P. Stone Rangers, the Chicano Brown Berets, and the Asian I Wor Kuen (Red Guards), but also the predominantly white Peace and Freedom Party and the Appalachian Young Patriots Party. *We posed not only a theoretical but a practical challenge to the way our world was organized*" (quoted by Haider 2022, 29, emphasis added).

A Critical Analysis

Two antiracist articles in music education, one published in 2008 by Julia Koza in *Philosophy of Music Education Review* and the other published in 2023 by Erika Knapp and Whitney Mayo in *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, have been chosen to lead and shape this critical analysis for the basic reasons that 1) they represent both a relatively early and a recent essay on this important topic in music education (spanning 15 years) and 2) they identify similar problems and recommend comparable solutions to racist policies, practices, and structures associated with what is referred to in this essay as Elite Schools of Music (ESMs)—understood generally as the pinnacle of and model for institutional music education in North America, including what transpires in university schools or departments of music as well as in elementary and secondary schools.[43]

Koza (2008) identified two instances of whiteness in the vocal audition process at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a relatively elite research university where she worked alongside such luminaries in the education world as Gloria Ladson-Billings and Michael Apple. The first indicator of whiteness was that students who could afford private music lessons prior to auditioning appeared to have distinct advantages in an increasingly competitive selection process, and "because the affluence gap has a racial pattern, this access conundrum has racial implications, too" (148). The second indicator of whiteness was the priority given in the auditions to "music from the European/American high art *bel canto* tradition" (148). As a result of this highly selective process, the music students who were accepted were "an elite lot" with "broad-based cultural capital" (147).

Similar points are recapped by Knapp and Mayo (2023), presumably based on experiences as graduate students at Michigan State University. They open their article with a vignette about "James," an applicant to the ESM. Socioeconomic background was evident in that James "had to get a ride to the audition from a community member" (74). Nor did he seem socially at ease in the preliminary interview: "James sat in front of me, smiling nervously, clearly hoping he was making a good impression" (74). He talked about how he wanted to become a music teacher and return to the "inner city" to have a positive impact on others like him. The interviewer was "struck by his passion and confidence" as well as his "raw talent" (74). Ultimately, James passed the aural exam but did not pass the audition. He was *not*

admitted to the ESM. At the end of the vignette, the authors affirm, "James is Black" (74).

The Economic Argument

As Koza (2008) maintains, poverty is a racial injustice because African Americans are overrepresented among the poor. And, for Knapp and Mayo (2023), evidence of economic inequality is especially problematic because "James is Black." These authors are in line with other antiracists in music education who locate a significant degree of racism structurally within socioeconomic inequality (e.g., DeLorenzo 2015; De Santis 2024; Hamilton 2021; Hendricks and Dorothy 2018; Hess 2015; Rampal 2015; Thornton 2018).[44] In this instance, through differential access to private music lessons and associated cultural capital, overrepresentation among people in poverty filters up into racial underrepresentation in the ESM.

For individual Black students like James whose hearts are set on becoming music teachers, this is a major injustice and clearly worthy of antiracist attention. African Americans, however, make up just 13 percent of the US population with 17 percent living in poverty (Shrider 2023), meaning that African Americans in poverty make up around two percent of the US population. Within this two percent, only 20 percent are likely to apply to college (Fry and Cilluffo 2019). An African American student like James, in other words, would represent just one out of every 250 applicants to the ESM. There is slightly greater likelihood for Hispanic or Latinx applicants from low-income families, while to encounter a Native American or Pacific Islander applicant from a low-income family would be rare indeed (depending on geography), given their much lower representation among the US population. To extend this portion of the analysis by starting instead with the 40 percent of African Americans with relatively low incomes, who also might struggle to afford private lessons, James would still represent just one out of a hundred applicants. Overall, prospects for explaining or addressing IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, and People of Color)[45] underrepresentation among music educators by focusing on IBPOC overrepresentation among poor and working classes are somewhat limited. There are certainly other factors at play.

The following Table shows the numbers and percentages of people in the US who earned degrees in a variety of fields. American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (groups with the highest poverty) are significantly underrepresented in all degrees listed here. Asian Americans (with a poverty rate

equal to white Americans) find parity overall and in each degree except for among education majors.[46] Black or African American students are underrepresented overall by about two percent (10.8 percent of degrees for 13.6 percent of the population). They are overrepresented in social work (18.6 percent), a field that is slightly more lucrative than education, and they reach close to equal representation in nursing (11.9 percent) and in business (11.5 percent), both of which offer higher average salaries than education.

Degrees in the US 2021	White Non-Hispanic	Hispanic or Latino	Black or African American	Unknown	Two or more races	Asian	Non-resident Alien	American Indian or Alaska Native	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders
Total % of US Population	59.4%	19.1%	13.6%		3%	6.3%		1.3%	0.3%
Music Education $60,101	3,535 74.2%	431 9.05%	255 5.36%	146 3.07%	146 3.07%	143 3%	82 1.72%	14 0.294%	9 0.189%
Music Performance $65,031	3,936 53.7%	826 11.3%	368 5.02%	206 2.81%	327 4.46%	437 5.96%	1,204 16.4%	19 0.295%	12 0.164%
Jazz & Jazz Studies $70,742	279 53.8%	64 12.3%	46 8.86%	17 3.28%	25 4.82%	20 3.85%	65 12.5%	2 0.385%	1 0.193%
Elementary Education $60,101	30,714 71.4%	4,773 11.1%	2,886 6.71%	1,683 3.91%	1,092 2.54%	947 2.2%	338 0.786%	370 0.86%	200 0.456%
Social Studies Ed $60,101	1,538 78.2%	175 8.89%	94 4.78%	48 2.44%	54 2.74%	41 2.08%	12 0.61%	4 0.203%	2 0.102%
Math Education $60,101	2,383 70.2%	334 9.84%	141 4.15%	217 6.39%	75 2.21%	169 4.98%	56 1.65%	18 0.53%	2 0.0589%
Art Education $60,101	1,333 72.6%	199 10.8%	72 3.92%	69 3.76%	51 2.78%	55 2.99%	49 2.67%	7 0.381%	2 0.109%
Physical Education $60,101	5,040 62.1%	1,001 12.3%	1,259 15.4%	182 2.24%	273 3.36%	151 1.86%	165 2.03%	51 0.628%	9 0.111%
Social Work $63,578	29,035 50.6%	10,954 19.1%	10,685 18.6%	1,875 3.27%	1,900 3.31%	1,710 2.98%	706 1.23%	431 0.751%	105 0.183%
Law $79,717	22,629 62.5%	4,518 12.5%	2,659 7.34%	1,538 4.25%	1,201 3.32%	2,261 6.24%	1,193 3.29%	176 0.486%	41 0.113
Nursing $81,847	156K 58.6%	37,514 14.1%	31,850 11.9%	12,220 4.58%	7,348 2.76%	16,876 6.33	2,251 0.844%	1,483 0.556%	777 0.291%
Business $98,335	415K 50%	120K 14.6%	95K 11.5%	39K 4.7%	24K 2.9%	57K 6.9%	66K 8%	4,282 0.52%	1,999 0.24%
All Degrees	2.75M 50.7%	968K 17.9%	594K 10.8%		182K 3.3%	355K 6.6%	307K 5.7%	13.2K 0.24%	13.7K 0.25%

Table: Degrees awarded in the US by select majors (data compiled from DataUSA 2021)

It could be that the 20 percent of young people from low-SES families who pursue college degrees (Fry and Cilluffo 2019) are seeking professional positions that will pay more than a teacher's salary. Research by Yingyi Ma (2009) bears this out: "Lower SES families tend to choose technical, life/health science, and business majors—those higher paying fields upon graduation—over humanities and social science/education majors. This indicates that once in college, lower SES children and their families rationally utilize the opportunity of college major choice to enlarge the economic returns from their college education" (227). An exception to the trend in Ma's study is that white first-generation college students are still more likely (two times more so than Black students, yet still less likely than non-first-gen students) to choose a social science or education major. Overall, first generation and low-SES college students of all racial identities "tend to avoid risky majors" and are likely to choose majors that offer the most promise for social mobility (Ma 2009, 223). Considering the highly selective gatekeeping in ESMs premised upon a slim chance at winning a relatively mediocre socioeconomic status job performing western classical music,[47] many degrees would seem to be less risky.

Decisions by prospective IBPOC students to do something more lucrative and reliable than teach music are complemented by at least three more possible explanations for the overwhelming whiteness of the music education profession in the US. First, there is evidence that desegregation remains a contributing factor in the relatively low number of Black teachers (Thompson 2019).[48] Second, white overrepresentation, stemming originally from racist policies, is perpetuated in part because the children of teachers, among whom whites are already overrepresented, are more likely to become teachers themselves (Jacinto and Gershenson 2019). Finally, a considerable number of IBPOC teachers still don't feel supported or welcome in the profession (Marx et al. 2023). Adding these three explanations to the previous one (prospects of social mobility), yields four viable alternatives to attributing underrepresentation among music educators to overrepresentation among people in poverty.

Why, then, has so much emphasis in music education scholarship been placed on race-based socioeconomic inequality in addressing underrepresentation? Reasoning along these lines, after all, runs the risk of adhering to what could be called a *deficient applicant thesis* given that possible solutions have a propensity to center on rehabilitating and making special accommodations for economically underprivileged and racialized young people through free lessons, transparency in

audition processes, and additional repertoire alternatives. To put it another way, the deficient applicant thesis tends to place responsibility for change and adaptation primarily upon the applicant rather than the ESM. In this vein, Darren Thornton's (2018) recommendations for remediation are likely the most thorough, a comprehensive regimen including a "college readiness program" to develop musical/academic skills and "provide exposure to a broad range of musical opportunities both through school and outside of school" (61); a "music education scholars program" to mentor "promising underrepresented undergraduate students" (61); a "future faculty in music education program" (62) for graduate students; and a "faculty mentoring program" for new faculty.

As Thornton (2018) expressly recognizes, though, there are deeper problems with the ESM than what can be addressed by his proposed "pipeline access program." He writes, "I openly admit, it is designed to address access, retention, and success through the current racist system at play in the academy. Ideally, the academy will begin to employ more equitable and inclusive practices as demographics become more diverse at all levels, including leadership" (60). This is an important caveat because, by focusing primarily on bringing young people from low-income families up to speed, so to speak, the game of music education supports The Game of neoliberal capitalism, preserving sociodicies that attribute relative success to personal and cultural qualities thought to be remediable or at least in need of remediation. And this reification or reproduction of inequality can end up being the major outcome of interventions that are based on the deficient applicant thesis considering that, even with these accommodations, the 83 percent of IBPOC applicants who do *not* live in poverty or at least the 60 percent who are middle class or above (using US statistics as reflected in the Table) will *still* have advantages. The Game, as well as games within the game, are competitive; less successful players, according to this common form of interest convergence, can receive a degree of assistance without ever surpassing the advantages of their more affluent peers.

Addressing the more promising explanations for underrepresentation, which together could come under the umbrella of a *smart chooser thesis* (people want to enter a professional field where they are valued and where they can make a good living), would perhaps involve a more radical restructuring of the ESM to *entice* IBPOC applicants to *choose* a career in music education. Referring to the Table, it is noteworthy that IBPOC students are *overrepresented* among physical education majors, perhaps paralleling majority representation of Black players in America's

two most popular professional sports: basketball and American football. The next section of this paper will address cultural arguments, but these points also support the explanatory potential of choice over socioeconomic limitations overall, that young people of color generally are, for a variety of reasons, not choosing to become music teachers despite the plenitude of IBPOC role models in the popular musical world outside of schooling. The smart chooser thesis places responsibility on the ESM and associated faculty to change themselves (rather than attempt to change the applicant), not to simply allow or accommodate differences, but to completely reflect the values and interests of currently underrepresented groups, including those who also are overrepresented among the poor and working classes.

The Cultural Argument

There appears to be more explanatory potential in attributing white overrepresentation in music education to the ESM's enduring focus on western classical music, as discussed both by Koza (2008) and by Knapp and Mayo (2023). However, even though music education can be thought of as a game within The Game, how it reflects neoliberal capitalism is not always obvious. Those who are winning The Game may also have economic advantages in music education (musical instruments, private lessons, transportation, social networks, cultural capital, etc.),[49] but acquiring advantages in music education doesn't necessarily or directly give one economic advantage in The Game. Learning to appreciate and perform western classical music, for instance, will only go so far toward helping someone accumulate wealth and, especially in the case of performance degrees, could even delay young people in finding more viable or reliable careers. Because the promise of upward social mobility from majoring in music is limited for all but the lowest socioeconomic classes, the ESM is more likely to deal in cultural capital than economic capital. But even then, western classical music doesn't exercise the same type or degree of cultural capital that it once may have done. It would be a rare scenario, for example, where the ability to converse intelligently about Tchaikovsky gave someone an advantage in a job interview. Nowadays, being a musical or cultural omnivore (albeit while also denigrating the music of poor and working classes) appears to have more currency (Veenstra 2015).

To see the value of a seemingly archaic form of cultural capital such as western classical music, it may be helpful to consider it within the context and history of western colonialism. The period of European colonialism began in the 1400s and

extended through the mid-1900s, corresponding roughly to the span of western classical music's historical periods: Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and Romantic. In the words of Corey Whitt (2024), "A quick and cursory study of history reveals the long shadow music and music education has cast over cultural sovereignty, dignity, and self-realization" (2). As an example of this process in the US, Whitt examines the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a residential school in Pennsylvania where Native Americans were taught to perform western classical music, part of an effort to erase and supplant their cultural heritage. As Whitt describes it, music education played the same oppressive and repressive role throughout the world as elite European culture, in which western classical music was front and center, served as both justification and means for colonization.

The ESM's stubborn, myopic focus on western classical music (despite a history of antiracist and anticolonialist criticism) provides an enduring and deep-seated sociodicy (rationale) for the history and trajectory of western society, still founded upon and active in the domination of the Global South and of subordinated groups within the Global North. In other words, even though the game of music education may be only tangentially connected to economic profit, it can still support The Game in a major way as a rationalization for its colonialist legacy. When western classical music is inflicted upon economically or racially subordinated groups, it emanates from this historically colonialist and racist, capitalist and classist impulse, appealing to "high culture" to justify the human and environmental atrocities perpetuated by dominant groups over centuries; western classical music, according to this age-old conceit, represents the apex of human musical achievement, reflecting the highest levels of civilization by the supposedly most evolutionarily advanced people, the perennial winners in The Game.

Even though an increasing number of people appear to see through this rationality (supposed reality), antiracist or decolonial progress in music education has been disturbingly slow. Loren Kajikawa (2019) writes: "Faculty members and administrators have implemented strategies designed to increase ethnic and racial minority representation, but they have largely left untouched the institutional structures that privilege the music of white European and American males. This privilege is disguised by race-neutral celebrations of musical excellence that make colorblindness (or colordeafness) the default mode of daily interaction. In most schools, improving representation through token gestures that celebrate diversity is the only imaginable response to the United States' long history of racial

inequality" (156). And, given a readily apparent resistance to change within western classical music, there have been an increasing number of calls to cancel it outright. For example, "It's Time to Let Classical Music Die" is the title of a short article by Nebal Maysaud (2019) who explains, "There comes a point in some abusive relationships where the victim wakes up out of their Stockholm syndrome and learns that they need to plan an escape. As you communicate with others and get a taste of freedom, you learn that the force you thought was protecting you is in truth keeping you in danger" (para. 1).

On this point, antiracist academics associated with ESMs appear at times to be "threading the needle," striving to strike an amicable balance between conflicting points of view, seeking to be fully antiracist without, for instance, offending colleagues in the ESM. Knapp and Mayo (2023) provide the following qualification for their critique of western classical music's hegemony in ESMs and throughout the profession: "We want to be clear that we are not discussing individual actors within these systems but the system itself" (75). Koza (2008) provides a similar disclaimer: "This paper is not a critique of my valued colleagues in the voice area. Rather, it is an analysis of the larger systems of reasoning that help knit school music into a homogeneous whole characterized by striking *similarities between this institution and nearly every other school of music in the United States*" (146, emphasis added). As astute as is the broad contextualization of the ESM's influence, the qualifier that precedes it makes it seem as if the ESM's faculty have no agency whatsoever. But who establishes and enforces the audition requirements? Who recommends the repertoire to choose? If the buck is to be passed to an accrediting board or other outside organization, aren't there actual people making the decisions there as well? Especially in a culture where it has literally been possible to "cancel" academics by pointing out or alleging overt racism or sexism, threading the needle in this way functions to preserve a prominent place for western classical music in the ESM while allowing just the right types and requisite amounts of diversity, equity, access, inclusion, belonging, justice, etc.

Another possibility for threading the needle is considered by Hess (2017), a consistent advocate for decentering western classical music and associated epistemologies: "What happens if, as critical pedagogues, we go into the classroom and our critical work with the full knowledge that educating critically could potentially place students of color at a disadvantage through the negation of specific content in school music programs? How do we educate differently? If throwing out the

canon limits students, as well as eliminating a wonderful repertoire of music from the classroom, perhaps we need to think about different ways to engage it, drawing perhaps on Allsup's 'both/and' approach rooted in Estelle Jorgensen's 'this with that.'" (183) Drawing from Lisa Delpit (2006), Hess suggests that if western classical music is removed, already disadvantaged students might be further disadvantaged for lack of familiarity with the "dominant discourse" (174). But, one could counter, the western classical canon is only a dominant discourse in the specialized, marginalized, and otherwise limited field of school music. It no longer appears to be a dominant discourse in the greater US society other than as a token of western superiority. Nor will it even come close to yielding as much of an advantage in The Game as, for example, learning to fluently read, write, and speak "standard" English (which also is obviously colonialist). Using a "both/and" or "this with that" approach could serve as another way to play both sides of the issue, preserving what mainstream music educators appear to love the most while allowing (or appropriating) just enough of "the other" to avoid any effectual degree of political/professional sanction.

Dylan Robinson (2019), an Indigenous musicologist, has perhaps been more unequivocable and comprehensive than most in his call for change, recapping points made by others and adding some new elements: "As the continuation of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous violence of the past months, years, and lifetimes has made evident, the time has ended for further working groups and 'Equity, Diversity and Inclusion' (EDI) recommendation committees on how we as educators across all scholarly disciplines must work toward systemic forms of change that are decolonial and anti-racist. *We no longer have the luxury of proceeding with small steps, and snail's-pace increments*" (137, emphasis added). He extends a passionate plea for ESMs to "abolish the current configuration of entrance requirements," "prioritize drawing IBPOC students into your programs [and] ensure students from marginalized economic backgrounds have the financial support and mentorship to succeed," "end the dominance of Western art music performance, historical knowledge, 'rudiments' of music (and centralized Western forms of popular music to a lesser extent) across your curriculum," "affirm that there are many epistemologies of music, and that they are not mutually exclusive," "make a long-term strategic hiring plan that results in at least 50 per cent of your faculty representation by IBPOC scholars, composers, and musicians who work within community-

centered, politicized, and activist areas of research and artistic practice," and more (138–40).[50]

Technically, though, western classical music could be decentered and still represent nearly half of what goes on in the ESM—just as long as it's not in the majority position. The musical interests ostensibly of white people could still be thoroughly served within the most radical antiracist framework. But on this point, one should not take for granted that western classical music, beyond its colonialist heritage (which is significant), reflects the musical interests of white people as opposed to the musical interests of people of color. There is evidence that most people, in fact, remain uninterested in western classical music. A national (US) study (Treptow et al. 2023) commissioned by a classical music radio station in Seattle, Washington, for example, "found that Asian [35%], Black [22%], Indigenous [25%], Latinx/Hispanic [31%] and white [24%] people listen to classical music [any format] at relatively similar rates. Classical music [according to this radio station] isn't just for white people, contrary to what many believe" (para. 4). Percentages of those who indicated that Western classical music "isn't part of my culture" were also relatively small: Black (15%), white (6%), Indigenous (12%), Latinx/Hispanic (11%), and Asian (12%). Even though people of color were at least twice as likely as white people to regard western classical music as not part of their culture, according to this survey, the vast majority don't appear to think along those lines; regardless of racial identity, most people simply don't engage with western classical music.

If the ESM changed dramatically to reflect the real musical interests of its constituents, western classical music would occupy a marginal position. The most preferred genres, according to the survey at hand, organized by race, do not even include western classical music:

- Asian: Pop (46%), Rap/Hip-Hop (30%), R&B (28%), Rock (23%), Country (23%)
- Black: Pop (32%), Rap/Hip-Hop (55%), R&B (65%), Reggae (18%), Blues (17%)
- Indigenous: Pop (36%), Rap/Hip-Hop (38%), R&B (38%), Rock (44%), Country (28%)
- Latinx/Hispanic: Pop (48%), Rap/Hip-Hop (49%), R&B (43%), Rock (37%), Latin (45%)
- White: Pop (42%), Rap/Hip-Hop (27%), R&B (24%), Rock (45%), Country (40%)

To increase racial diversity in the ESM, the most effective course of action would likely be to center genres that might attract more people of color. According

to this survey, that would be Rap/Hip-Hop, R&B, and Pop.[51] In other words, Rap/Hip-Hop, R&B, and Pop—*including associated epistemologies and aesthetics*—would become a key focus of the school of music, and this aspect of the ESM would (as it does now) emanate throughout all school music from elementary through high school and beyond. It may still be appropriate or practical to share aspects of western classical music in the ESM while also passing along some associated practices (recognizing its colonialist roots along the way), but a fully antiracist, decolonial, anticapitalist, and egalitarian (no longer elite) school of music would *at most* include western classical music as just one minor element among many.

Whiteness

One major stumbling block for antiracists in music education is evident in the general agreement that the dominance of western classical music (and associated epistemologies or aesthetics) reflects the values of and is an overall benefit to *all* white people. Some antiracist authors in music education tend to see whiteness as monolithic, with little or no acknowledgement of diversity *within* whiteness. Hess (2017) maintains that music education is rooted in "whiteness and Eurocentricity" (17), asserting that people "institutionalize whiteness as a dominant ideology" (18) and "reinscribe whiteness through superficial engagement with diversity and through failing to engage discourses of race and power" (23). Andrea VanDuesen (2021) refers to "monocultural, White Eurocentric beliefs and values" (121), "an ideology that works to normalize and promote white supremacy … by centralizing white culture, history, language, beauty standards, and traditions as normal" (125). Knapp and Mayo (2023) see whiteness in the cultural and social capital required for entrance in the ESM, repertoire associated with auditions to the ESM, and the "prioritizing [of] written notation over aural learning" (86). Although Michelle Rampal (2015) recognizes diversity among IBPOC students, admonishing that "music teachers should not presume that their students embody the prevailing stereotypes, opinions, or views of their cultures" (41), she also suggests that music educators ought to learn to "critically reflect on Whiteness as *a* culture" (39, emphasis added). And finally, even though Koza (2008) hints at diversity within whiteness, joking that "not just any Whiteness will do; art song with a country twang will not cut it" (150), she does not address this nuance further; the focus of her article is still on "listening for whiteness" in general.

Others more fully and seriously acknowledge diversity among white people but still provide rationales for whiteness as a general category of racial dominance deployed by and benefitting all whites. For Deborah Bradley (2015), whiteness "represents the combining of various White ethnic cultures *into a single entity* for purposes of racial domination" (196, emphasis added), and she has referred accordingly to this overarching category by a variety of names: "cultural whiteness" (2006, 5), "institutionalized whiteness" (2007, 136), and "normative whiteness" (2007, 157). Mary Stoumbos (2023) brings political economy and identity (class and race) together in defining an overarching category of whiteness despite her own insistence that White people are diverse: "I do not mean to speak of White people as a single, uniform entity who support any single, uniform ideology; rather, I use the term White to describe the *racially and economically hierarchizing* mechanisms that have evolved throughout the history of capitalism and to describe the people who benefit from those mechanisms due to their racial categorization as White" (3). And finally, Chris Jenkins (2021) troubles the binary between a white aesthetic, associated with western classical music, and a Black aesthetic, associated with a variety of African American-influenced practices and genres. He allows that some African Americans (and, by extension, members of other IBPOC groups) may in fact love western classical music and embrace its aesthetic, but that overall—as a general trend and given the inevitable connections people have to their places of origin—the "cultural inheritors of [white] aesthetics" (165) are the ones who benefit most from modern school music education.

A few authors recognize socioeconomic diversity within whiteness and/or appear less prone to view whiteness monolithically. Joseph Abramo (2007) refers to "White, Middle-class ideals" (6) in an article in which he also mentions "embodied whiteness" (201) and "cultural whiteness" repeatedly. Hence, it is presumably *elite* white "cultural messages inherent in music education pedagogies [that, for example,] may cause students to infer abilities from comportment, gesture, and speech" (201). Lise Vougeois (2018) similarly identifies and critiques *Bourgeois* (middle and upper class) whiteness in Canadian music education. And finally, Nasim Niknafs (2021, 2022) stands out for a propensity to promote antiracism without framing it against a general category of whiteness at all.

Nevertheless, it would be safe to say that there is strong tendency in the antiracist music education literature, even when recognizing diversity within whiteness, to draw all white people together as beneficiaries of whiteness in and through

music teaching and learning. This perspective has a logical corollary that reinforces classist sociodicies: if all whites benefit equally from whiteness, there is something especially wrong with whites who somehow fail to excel in the Game or otherwise miss opportunities to take full advantage of their racial privilege, especially over multiple generations. The concept of monolithic whiteness thereby simultaneously dismisses, denigrates, and erases PWCWs. Given that most antiracist authors in music education are white and have little to no evident experience with poverty, this could reflect the strong aversion MCAWs have for PWCWs,[52] a logical necessity for MCAWs in rationalizing their comparatively comfortable lives and their relative dominance in The Game. And for cultural distinctions to have their upmost potency as sociodicies, PWCW cultural practices must stand in the starkest possible relief to *elite* Eurocentric cultural values and practices (the most supreme whiteness). Antiracists in music education generally recognize the need to *decenter* elite Eurocentric cultural values and practices, but preservation of the classist sociodicy also requires *maintaining* elite Eurocentric cultural values and practices—decentering perhaps but not eradicating—as antithesis to PWCW cultural values and practices. In this paradoxical twist predicated upon the need to rationalize the immeasurable harm The Game has imposed on majorities throughout the world, antiracism (along with other identitarian and reductionist moralities) becomes a key, albeit tacit, foundation for elite and supreme whiteness or, in other words, white supremacy. And because classist sociodicies are applied selectively to poor and working-class *whites* (a decidedly racial distinction), they can amount to what Australian sociologist Jacqueline Zara Wilson (2002) calls "invisible racism":

> A monolithically normative and therefore invisible Whiteness—effectively assumed even by those critiquing it—overlooks the highly diverse range of degrees of agency, autonomy, status and social power within White society, and hence assumes, for those residing at its lowest stratum, a degree of implicit benefits from being a member of the dominant race that many underclass individuals have in all likelihood never enjoyed, nor are ever likely to enjoy; concomitantly, it imposes upon them moral responsibility for the evils consequent on that same dominance—and it does so by virtue of no other quality or attribute than the colour of their skin. Which is, one would have to argue, a form of invisible racism. (399–400)

Antiracism can further cement the marginalization and subordination of PWCWs in music education through IBPOC-MCAW interest convergence. When applied as cultural capital, antiracism hinges upon a necessary distinction positing

professional, formally educated MCAWs as "woke"—ostensibly aware of structural racism and their own implicit bias—as opposed to supposedly ignorant and backwards PWCWs, accordingly scapegoated for an array of social ills among which racism figures prominently (Sullivan 2014). And when a relative lack of formal education is used to explain a paucity of wokeness, this sociodicy works simultaneously to justify any degree to which PWCWs, for example, are compelled to work much harder to make often far less money than MCAWs. Calls for decentering whiteness (understood primarily as the centering of western classical music and associated epistemologies) and for infusing the ESM with a diversity of IBPOC musics and associated epistemologies, even if they are successful at bringing about a degree of change, will still allow antiracist academics who are vested in western classical music to reserve a prominent (albeit decentered) place for their chosen artform in the ESM (for western classical music to become even more exclusive might even strengthen the sociodicy). And when antiracist alliances between MCAW and IBPOC academics are united against PWCWs, whether openly or tacitly, there is a corresponding silence about the musical values, interests, and epistemologies of PWCWs—a culturally diverse group representing roughly 25 percent of the US population.

Back to Class

Fisher (2009) discussed three gaps in The Game that can allow glimpses of the Real (the possibility at least of perceiving actual nature aside from social constructions) beyond the various supporting games or performances, social constructions that people generally understand as reality. These gaps—the climate crisis, diminished mental health, and bureaucracy—are inconsistencies that Fisher argues have not yet been reconciled or assimilated within neoliberal capitalism (The Game). Classism and racism, on the other hand, according to Fisher, have effectively been integrated within The Game and through its embedded games. Regarding classism, for example, it appears to make common sense to or is taken for granted by most people, even those immersed in social justice discourses, that college-educated professionals ought to make considerably more money and live more comfortably than less-formally-educated laborers.

But maybe Fisher was too hasty in dismissing material want and exploitation as noticeable inconsistencies in capitalist realism. As with the karaoke analogy at the start of this essay, there certainly still could be *outsiders* who are less prone to

take The Game or an internal game such as school music education for granted. Poor and working classes already appear apt to view the ESM as a bloated extravagance, well outside the realm of necessity, practicality, or affordability. And this could well be the main reason they keep their distance. Poor and working-class people would also arguably be prone to sense the injustice embedded within the logic and practice of hierarchical systems of control. The Game, after all, is inherently unfair, and anyone not benefiting from it has every reason to "call foul." People oppressed by capitalism and any of its attendant games, in other words (including its racist manifestations), still have plenty of reason to recognize incongruities—to imagine and fight for a better system.[53]

This recognition is readily apparent in popular music, by the artists who produce it and the audiences who resonate with it. One could consider, for example, some of the lyrics in "The Poverty of Philosophy," a Hip-Hop song by Indigenous rapper Immortal Technique (Coronel 2001).

> My enemy is not the average white man,
> It's not the kid down the block or the kids I see on the street;
> My enemy is the white man I don't see: the people in the White House,
> The corporate monopoly owners, fake liberal politicians—
> Those are my enemies…
> In fact, I have more in common
> With most working and middle-class white people
> Than I do with most rich black and Latino people.
> As much as racism bleeds America,
> We need to understand that classism is the real issue.

Of course, popular music (just like music education) can also be coopted by neoliberal capitalism in a variety of ways (see Smith 2015). The infusion of popular anticapitalist music won't by itself disassociate music education from The Game, but it can still be impactful if it is approached with a significant degree of awareness about the overall arbitrariness of The Game. A musical example of such an opportunity to be "woke" to classism can be found in events surrounding the song "Rich Men North of Richmond" by Oliver Anthony (2023), shared via social media. In many ways this song/performance falls within the tradition of a working-class protest anthem/outcry. Given its immediate popularity, political leaders and media personalities on the political right in the US were quick to appropriate it in support of their views, while those on the political left condemned it as racist and ignorant, considering lyrical references to, for example, obese people on welfare (supposedly reflecting Ronald Reagan's racist "welfare queen" trope), Richmond, Virginia

(supposedly representing the Confederacy rather than simply a clever alliterative choice), and "minors on an island somewhere" (supposedly supporting mindless right-wing conspiracy theories) (Yousef and Tsioulcas 2023; Albeck-Ripka 2023). The working-class themes throughout the song that otherwise have clear potential to unite economically subordinated groups against neoliberalism were promptly diffused for not meeting refined antiracist standards, thereby co-opting an anti-capitalist critique and fomenting racial division. It is noteworthy that a whole series of reaction videos to Anthony's performance can be found on popular social media applauding the song's message and Anthony's musicianship, and that most of these videos are by people of color.

Getting past the aversion MCAWs are prone to feel toward PWCWs or, in other words, addressing classist sociodicies head-on, requires that people learn to appreciate and include PWCWs. In music teaching and learning, this would, of course, involve appreciating and including the musical values and epistemologies of PWCWs, while recognizing that their interests have never been advanced by western classical music, but rather that they have been put and kept in their places by arbitrary "highbrow" and "lowbrow" distinctions. Antiracist authors in music education could apply all the (truly) positive things they have promoted for antiracist approaches to music education, like culturally responsive or sustaining pedagogies, to also understand and appreciate the vast diversity within whiteness. This means taking a more conciliatory and open approach when musical opportunities arise. As antiracists in music education are quick to admonish regarding people of color, in other words, it means learning to listen.

A racially *representative* distribution of music emphases in the ESM, taking into account preferred genres (Treptow et al. 2023) and adjusting for each group's percent of the total US population (from the Table), would yield something like this: Pop (23%), Rock (22%), Rap/Hip-Hop (21%), R&B (20%), Country (10%), Latin (2%), Reggae (1%), and Blues (1%).[54] But rather than simply allotting time and credits accordingly, a genealogical approach to these genres would likely center American roots music, a blend of musics representative of Indigenous people and poor, rural, and working class "settlers," indentured servants, and enslaved people from diverse places (see Santelli, George-Warren, and Brown 2001). Rather than simply making room in the ESM for music representing the three (admittedly essentialized) groups discussed herein—IBPOC, MCAW, and PWCW—centering American roots music, with its attendant epistemologies and aesthetics, could

empower the ESM to drop the eliteness altogether and become just a regular, everyday school of music—fully inclusive rather than exclusive—a place where everyone is welcome with their respective musics and where no music or group of people is thought to be better than anyone else. Western classical music would at most become just one form of musical expression among many, competition would necessarily fall by the wayside, and The Game would no longer have full purchase on music education. Values such as popular interest, fulfillment of basic human needs, and environmental sustainability could then take the place of current meritocratic and hierarchical ideals.

Recommendations like these may sound nonsensical, impractical, and ridiculous to some folks. How will young people be motivated to excel if there is no competition? How will the school of music delimit the number of its applicants? Shouldn't the amazing accomplishments of human civilization evident in western classical music be preserved and protected? But such questions are predicated upon a capitalist, colonialist heritage perpetuated and amplified within neoliberalism. It's all part of The Game, in other words. And for people who are winning or otherwise vested in it, The Game can become everything—their entire world—as can any of the myriad supporting games within it.

Nonetheless, returning to Fraser's (2017) warning from earlier in this essay, there are indications of a "growing intuition" (or maybe an enduring intuition), reflected in various strains of popular and folk musics "that the heterogeneous ills that surround us—financial, economic, ecological, political, and social—can be traced to a *common root* (141, emphasis added). There is already a "growing intuition," in other words, that The Game is nothing more than a social construction—arbitrary, unnatural, inauthentic, contrived, illegitimate, and changeable. Schools of music could certainly leverage diverse strains of anticapitalist music to center this intuition. People within the field of music education could unite in pulling back the veil, in other words, revealing The Game for what it really is, and more directly and fully working in harmony for a more humane, equal, and sustainable world.

About the Author

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Notes

[1] Drew (2005) notes that karaoke appears to be taken more seriously by upper and business classes in Asian countries. He suggests that this may be due to an Asian aesthetic in which imitation is valued, as opposed to western cultures that place more emphasis on individual creativity. Also, it should be noted that "western" is presented in lower case throughout this paper as a deliberate corrective to the historical dominance of western culture.
[2] These terms in quotes are Drew's, used repeatedly throughout his report.

[3] There is an important linkage here with feminist Standpoint Theory wherein marginalized groups are seen as having epistemic privilege (higher levels of insight) in relevant areas. In the karaoke example, of course, the socioeconomically oppressed (marginalized in society but centered in this particular field) perform with fidelity while the middle-class outsiders recognize karaoke as just another social construct. On Standpoint Theory and epistemic privilege, see Sweet (2020).

[4] These three examples, taken together, could be conceptualized as an *assemblage*. Rather than one clear concept with a limited definition (border), this assemblage brings forward levels of nuance and a plurality of points of departure. See, for example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

[5] There is some global significance in using an example from New York which, according to Oxford Economics (2024) (https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/resource/the-top-10-cities-in-the-world-as-ranked-by-oxford-economics-new-global-cities-index/), is the most influential among the world's cities: "Not only do they provide important economic contributions to the global economy, they are hubs for education and business innovation, and invest in the infrastructure necessary to maintain a high quality of life" (para 1).

[6] This concept of neoliberal capitalism as The Game was previously applied in music education by the author (Bates 2023).

[7] This reconstructionist frame of mind can be challenging personally and professionally for at least three overlapping reasons. First, it requires that music educators recognize that music teaching and learning are always about much more than "just music." Without critical thought, oppressive rationalities can be taught unintentionally as part of the *hidden curriculum*. Second, music teachers will need to accept that school music is not an absolute benefit. As Wayne Bowman (2009) argued, "Music and music education are not unconditional goods. They can harm as well as heal" (11). Like capitalism (and in many ways because of capitalism), music teaching and learning can advantage some people while at the same time harming others (including more-than-human others). Third, music educators must learn to look beyond professional preservation, letting go of the

hyper-positivity that grows from advocacy. Preoccupations with justification—ongoing efforts to "sell" school music—can veil the distinct possibility of music teachers, policymakers, and researchers inflicting harm, even when (or especially when) their intentions are thought to be virtuous (see Koza 2006).

[8] It should be noted that the attempt here to identify major references that systematically address neoliberalism in music education yielded mostly articles from authors residing in the Global North. This could reflect the fact that this review is limited to English language articles, although it could also simply be that publications regarding the nexus of music education and neoliberalism are more prevalent in the Global North. Nonetheless, a concerted effort was made to include scholars not from the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, or New Zealand. It should also be noted that, in some frameworks (e.g., Santos 2018), the Global South designation includes subordinated groups within the Global North, which adds more nuance to perceptions that discourses are Global North-centric.

[9] Koza 2006; Bates 2013, 2021a; Smith 2015

[10] Benedict 2013

[11] Koza 2006; Kanellopoulos 2022; Smith 2015

[12] Benedict 2013; Hess 2017

[13] Bates 2021b

[14] Aróstegui 2020; McPhail and McNeill 2021; Sadler 2021; Kanellopoulos 2022; Smith 2015; Woodford 2015

[15] Abramo 2017; Allsup and Benedict 2008; Aróstegui 2020; Bates 2021b; Benedict 2013; Goble 2021; Hess 2017; Powell 2021, 2023; Stoumbos 2023; Smith 2015; Woodford 2015

[16] Bates 2015; Powell 2021, 2023

[17] Bates 2021b

[18] Aróstegui 2020, page 44, see also Allsup and Benedict 2008; Abramo 2017; Powell 2021

[19] Bates 2013, 2015, 2018

[20] Koza 2006; Benedict 2013; Allsup and Benedict 2008

[21] Benedict 2013; Young 2021

[22] Aróstegui 2020; Bates 2021a

[23] Benedict and O'Leary 2019

[24] Young 2021

[25] McPhail and McNeill 2021; Powell 2021

[26] McPhail and McNeill 2021; Smith 2015

[27] Koza 2006; Benedict 2013; Abramo 2017; Aróstegui 2020; Mullen 2019

[28] Allsup and Benedict 2008; Benedict 2013; Aróstegui 2020; Powell 2021; Young 2021

[29] Green 2011; Angel-Alvarado, Gárate-González, and Quiroga-Fuentes 2021; Young 2021

[30] Benedict 2013; Young 2021

[31] Allsup and Benedict 2008; Bates 2021b

[32] Bates 2017

[33] Koza 2006; Horsley 2014; Aróstegui 2020; Bates 2021b; McPhail and McNeill 2021; Young 2021; Kanellopoulos 2022; Woodford 2015

[34] Wright 2015; Bates 2018, 2021a, Stoumbos 2023

[35] Young 2021

[36] Young 2021; Bates 2021c

[37] Bates 2021c, Stoumbos 2023

[38] Of course, it is possible that many people still believe this, although "music appreciation" courses don't seem as popular as they once were, and popular music courses are much more prevalent now than before.

[39] Regarding the historical roots of this division in the American colonies, instituted deliberately by wealthy enslavers and landowners, see Allen 2012 and Kendi 2016.

[40] See Bates 2021 on cultural capital as an action ("something people do") rather than a resource.

[41] Bonilla-Silva's (2018) research indicates that PWCWs may be less adept than middle-class and affluent whites (MCAWs) at hiding their racism.

[42] Blind racism, for example, can still have far-reaching impacts (see Bonilla-Silva 2018).

[43] Antiracist publications in music education emanate primarily from the United States and Canada. To illustrate this point, on the first five pages of results in a search on Google Scholar for "music education antiracism," twenty-two of the authors were working in the US, seven in Canada, and one in Costa Rica. Furthermore, the most prolific authors in these results were Juliet Hess with fifteen articles and Deborah Bradley with five.

[44] Also, one should probably note an emphasis on the experiences of African Americans.

[45] The use of this terminology and acronym is admittedly essentializing, but it is still common practice when discussing race and racism. Overall, there are good reasons to critique various binaries, but the standard practice has been chosen here to address the field of antiracism in music education on its own terms (imminent critique) and to make related arguments. In this instance, however, Indigenous people have been placed first, following what appears to be a Canadian practice adhered to by Dylan Robinson (2019) who is cited later in this paper and refers to "Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian and other scholars/artists of colour (IBPOC) who live and work in the locations where music programs are based" (137).

[46] It is also noteworthy that 16.4 percent of music performance degrees are earned by people who are not US residents (which may be one way that schools of music are able to tout their diversity, equity, and inclusion).

[47] Clearly, not all jobs in music involve performance of western classical music or jazz, but the gatekeeping in the ESM is still *premised* upon such competencies. The same performance standards typically apply to performance, composition, and education majors alike.

[48] In the words of Joyce McCall (2021), *Brown v. Board of Education* "was used as a ploy to advance a one-sided agenda resulting in the displacement of Black students, administrators, and staff, and the liquidation of Black K–12 schools" (32–33).

[49] In North America at least these economically advantaged young people are more likely to be white or Asian (Kochhar and Moslimani 2023).

[50] Still, most of these suggestions have been made by an array of antiracist authors in music education. In addition to Koza (2008), Knapp and Mayo (2023), one could include Fiorentino 2019; Hamilton 2022; Lewis 2022; Thomas-Durrell 2019; and others).

[51] This is only a possibility, though, considering that jazz (historically associated with African Americans) in ESMs is still dominated by European Americans (see the Table).

[52] For documentation of this bias, see Kunstman, Plant, and Deska 2016.

[53] That is, if they actually cared about school music in the first place. If the ESM was a mainstream institution, it might come under more scrutiny. As it stands, marginalization might be its saving grace.

[54] Based on the aforementioned survey administered and summarized by Treptow et al. (2023).