

# Manipulating Racist Folk Songs: Problematizing the Practices of Erasing and Re-placing

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## Abstract

The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is to problematize the assumptions underlying elementary music teachers' choice to both erase folk songs from their curricula and to replace lyrics with racist associations. Erasing is defined as a process in which music educators remove certain folk songs with racist origins entirely from their repertoires, whereas replacing is defined as a process in which music educators adapt texts of certain folk songs with racist origins and thereby change the musical stories of those songs. I argue that both choices are insufficient for teaching students about the historical legacy of contemporary racism. Next, I propose erasing-as-dismantling and radically replacing as two sequential processes in lieu of the simplistic choices to erase and replace. Subsequently, I conceive of *thoughtfully erasing to radically replace* as a practice during which white teachers de-center whiteness and center the lived experiences of the Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Asian/Pacific Islander (BBIA) community.

## Keywords

Erasing, replacing, racist folk songs, antiracism

In elementary music classrooms in the United States, teachers commonly use American folk song repertoire to teach musical concepts such as rhythm and melody. However, the use of such songs has recently resulted in controversy among elementary music educators as they seek knowledge related to their historical origins. Notably, teachers have debated whether to continue using songs with racist associations, with some teachers wishing to preserve them and others arguing for their removal from curricula. Consider, for example, teachers who are subscribed to Facebook pages such as the “American Orff Schulwerk Association Discussion Group,” “I’m A General Music Teacher,” or the “Kodály Educator.” In a January 2020 post, a teacher inquired about song selections for Black History Month. One teacher replied with: “Carry me back to ol’ Virginny.” The subsequent responses in which individuals replied to the teacher who provided this answer drew more attention to the post than the initial inquiry.

In 2018, Kelly-McHale also described a Facebook post in which one teacher sought advice regarding the song “Jump Jim Joe.” The father of a kindergartener, a college professor who was simultaneously teaching a course titled “Race and the History of Jim Crow,” disavowed the use of this song in the classroom, indicating its relation to Jim Crow laws. Kelly-McHale (2018) discussed: “Some teachers felt that the historical aspects of the song justified removing it from the curriculum, while others felt that the musical benefits ... were the important aspects of the song and that the history was irrelevant, especially to kindergarteners” (60). This example illuminates how the history of a given song versus the utility of musical content creates tension among music teachers.

Authors of curricula have likewise responded to issues related to repertoire with racist histories. The authors of *GAMEPLAN*, an elementary music curriculum, issued the following statement regarding content within their curricula: “Understanding the hurtful nature of these songs, we are in the process of identifying alternative activities.... Until then, please use your judgement when considering which activities you choose to share with your students” (DeLelles and Kriske 2019, para. 1). Such judgments have resulted in general music teachers choosing to erase or to make replacements within folk songs, with the aim of eradicating notions of racism in the classroom. Erasing involves removing repertoire from one’s collection; replacing involves changing the musical story by means of adapting text. While not exclusive options, I propose each as two choices that interrupt the possibility for teachers to engage in antiracist discourse with their students.

The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is to problematize erasing and replacing, arguing that neither fully suffice for educating students about the ways that history has shaped music in our society. First, I discuss Ladson-Billings' (2021) conception of what it means to fund race, propose how erasing and replacing are illustrative of this concept, and underscore the colonizing nature of these practices. I then outline problems related to the impetuous choice to erase, followed by discussing similar issues with the choice to replace. Following this, the possibilities of erasing-as-dismantling and radically replacing are proposed, which I jointly conceptualize as *thoughtfully erasing to radically replace*. In doing so, I compare the removal of Confederate monuments to the removal of racist folk songs and assert that the act of thoughtfully erasing to radically replace is antiracist in nature. Subsequently, an emphasis is placed on the importance of white teachers decentering whiteness through two ways of listening: listening-through-observation and listening-to-learn. I conclude by arguing that thoughtfully erasing to radically replace can only occur when teachers center the lived experiences of the Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Asian/Pacific Islander (BBIA) community.<sup>1</sup> I also acknowledge that my reimagining comes with inherent tension, as some considerations are not possible in geographical locations where discussions about racism are prohibited, as well as in areas where teachers are not permitted to teach anything beyond music standards.

## Erasing and Replacing

### *Funding Race and A Colonizing Music Education*

Critical race theorist and renowned educational scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) posited the idea of what it means to socially fund race, which builds on Fisher's (2004) notion of funding literacy in education: "As a society, we embed literacy and literacy activity in every aspect of our culture such that children come to school (and preschool) with a fully formed notion of the book as a sacred artifact" (Ladson-Billings 2021, 139). To this end, Ladson-Billings proposed that schools are sites for the social funding of race, stating, "The degree to which teachers are willing to reinforce or interrupt the racial discourse represents a constant source of social funding of race as a concept" (144). That is, the way society references and talks about race is intricately related to the manner in which individuals fund this concept, giving rise to the "public recognition of its value" (Ladson-

Billings 2021, 139). To illustrate, she discussed a story regarding her interaction with a preschool student who observed two Black girls playing and asked her, “Which one is yours?”—in other words, a question regarding which Black girl was Ladson-Billings’ own daughter (139). In response, the student’s teachers, who feared that Ladson-Billings would feel insulted, reprimanded the student for asking the question. This exchange exemplifies how the funding of race begins early in life, despite the innocuous nature of how it might occur.

As such, I refer to erasing and replacing as two ways that elementary music educators might fund race in the music classroom, regardless of the intentions underlying these choices. In support of this view, Lorde (1984) asserted the following about the tension inherent in such dichotomous decision-making: “Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives” (108). Given that the motivations supporting erasing and replacing necessitate both the acknowledgement of race and racism and the choice to ignore these topics, as opposed to interrogate them, I suggest that these choices are two ways of funding race. In other words, neglecting to engage in discussions about race and racism concretizes the manner in which “we may unwittingly participate in a process that we believe benefits us without being aware of the way it regularly and systematically disadvantages others” (Ladson-Billings 2021, 141). To combat this, music educators can defund race—refraining from reinscribing it rather than tacitly giving it prominence or value by way of social funding. As Ladson-Billings asserted, “We need to find ways to render [race] useless” (Ladson-Billings 2021, 149).

In addition to socially funding race, erasing and replacing practices uphold a Western, colonizing music education that emphasizes concept-based musical instruction over various ways of musicking that should exist in a pluralistic society. Describing the nature of a colonizing music education, Hess (2015) asserted, “Western classical music is constructed as ‘natural,’ and the curriculum tokenizes alternative practices by making them tangential to the main curriculum. In many respects, Western music in music education acts as a colonizer” (336). In light of this, I contend that erasing and replacing are mechanisms for music education practices that prioritize the instruction of musical concepts (i.e., concept-based

instruction) while failing to consider students' interests, including outside-of-school musicking experiences. As such, they do not allow for the possibility of music education moving beyond a static orientation in the twenty-first century, which I argue is necessary for best serving diverse populations of students and creating spaces to talk about issues such as antiracism.

### *Erasing*

In attempting to avoid folk song repertoire that is outwardly racist, music educators have chosen to erase songs from their collections, turning instead towards benign music still intended solely to teach musical concepts. Yet, disregarding the history that influenced folk songs with racist origins may allow teachers to present parts of history without acknowledging the racism that occurred in those historical events. As such, the use of folk songs without racist origins may seem more appealing for general music teachers who discover the historical lineages of racist folk songs. Simply choosing literature that does not relate to racism and discarding music that does seemingly enables music educators to safeguard both themselves and students from encountering racially problematic repertoire. Central to this choice is Hess's (2017) assertion about educators' decisions to eliminate discussions regarding race: "We miss opportunities to consider what such erasure does both in our own language and in the language practices of the students we teach" (18).

When teachers discover the historical elements and emotional harm that can be done by teaching folk songs with racist origins, they might believe that erasing such songs will extinguish their racist histories. Participants in Cicco's (2023) survey study on folk songs with racist origins exhibited this perspective, as exemplified by comments like "My community isn't aware of the negative history, so it was easy for me to just replace them with others" (10). As such, erasing repertoire in this way often involves ignoring racism, including by treating it as a reality disjunct from current society.

Additionally, the action of erasing does not necessarily involve music educators deeply understanding why they should or should not erase; rather, it could serve as a precautionary choice one makes to claim they are antiracist or to avoid discussions about racism in general. Such a choice resembles Martín's (2020) description of white ignorance, which "is the result of moves that white individuals make to avoid inconvenient truths about race and racial inequality" (869). Accordingly, erasing by way of white ignorance may assuage one's concerns about

engaging in dialogue about racist folk songs; however, ignoring the racism embedded within the songs does not mean their racist overtones no longer resonate, particularly in music classrooms centering white, Eurocentric approaches focused on concept-based instruction (e.g., the Kodály approach).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, erasing is a mechanism that allows music educators to teach a positive interpretation of history, nullifying problematic aspects of America's racist history and disregarding how such aspects inform the present and potential futures. Erasing a song such as "Pick a Bale of Cotton," which depicts the labor of slavery, means that teachers not only ignore the history of the song, but they also inadvertently halt the potential for dialogue through which students might have the opportunity to learn about systemic racism. Consequently, creating a classroom climate in which racist folk songs are erased might result in teachers only sharing musical stories representative of white individuals who have not experienced racism. For example, a simple search of "The Farmer and the Dell" on Google primarily presents images of white farmers. When teaching "The Farmer and the Dell," in which the farmer is presented as a white working man who has a wife, children, and a nurse (or nanny), one is telling a story of privilege to which all students joyfully sing "Hi-ho, the Derry o!" To this end, Ladson-Billings (2021) highlighted a tension when it comes to understanding how curricula contribute to the social funding of race. Discussing the nature of examining literature in English courses representative of white individuals, she proposed, "This is work that requires us to look at what images, ideas, perspectives, values, and ideologies are made available and instantiated by reading certain texts. According to those who advocate for deciphering knowledge, the problem with *Huckleberry Finn* is not simply Huck's use of the 'N-word.' Rather the reader needs to struggle with why an adult black male is made serviceable and childlike vis-à-vis an adolescent, indigent white boy" (144). Regarding folk songs with racist origins, then, teachers who choose to erase thereby eliminate narratives that convey issues related to racial inequalities, as students instead learn music that depicts an overall affable tale that centers white individuals in a positive light.

While the form of erasing I problematize is a more recent practice, the erasure of songs that represent various races and ethnicities has been a historical and current practice in public schools, though perhaps less explicit. As an example, songs that are not white- and Anglo-centric are only worthy of inclusion when they can enhance one's learning during Black History Month or be celebrated as

multicultural music. Additionally, one can observe individuals on Facebook asking for song selections to celebrate Asian/Pacific American History Month in May, Black History Month in February, and Indigenous peoples' music around Thanksgiving. Yet, requesting these songs for specific dates on the calendar illuminates the absence or erasure of such songs throughout the entire remainder of the school year. Bradley (2007) supported this claim, arguing: "Our music education curricula continue to validate and recognize particular (white) bodies, to give passing nods to a token few 'others,' and to invalidate many more through omission" (134). In other words, songs colored by whiteness are tried and true and seemingly permeate throughout the music classroom, often at the expense of songs reflecting BBIA communities. Thus, the act of erasing reinforces a predominantly white curriculum focused on the instruction of musical concepts while excluding songs potentially useful for enacting racial discourse—which is necessary in a pluralistic society; the acquisition of musical concepts alone is not what the end goals of music education should be.

### *Replacing*

Another act deemed suitable for purifying historically racist folk songs involves replacing problematic texts with more innocuous lyrics. Rather than erasing repertoire completely, replacing lyrics might involve removing a racist term or set of words with racist associations. "Chicken on a Fencepost" or "Johnny on the Woodpile" serve as primary examples. Written as sixteenth note passages in each song, the words "Chicken" and "Johnny" replace an anti-Black racial slur towards African American and/or Black individuals. With this example, replacing for the purposes of teaching specific musical patterns highlights that educators make this choice in order to support concept-based instruction; creating musicking experiences beyond learning about melody and rhythm is thereby overlooked when the focus remains on students becoming competent with solfege and rhythmic recitation.

Furthermore, replacing lyrics that deviate from those that resurrect exclusionary ideals might seem more appropriate than continuing to sing lyrics associated with racism. However, one might unintentionally reproduce notions of racism when choosing to replace; if a music educator simply hummed the melody of a racist song, students may still have familiarity with the rhythmic pattern, memorable melodic sequence, and underlying harmonic functions. Thus, the original

racist lyrics can still affront or traumatize BBIA individuals after being replaced, which recent scholarship supports (Bradley 2020; Bradley and Hess 2021). To illustrate this point, Bradley (2020) asserted that any traumatic event “may remain unavailable to consciousness but later asserts itself into daily life as a repetitive haunting, often triggered by otherwise innocuous sights, sounds (including music), and smells, all the while maintaining its incomprehensibility” (7).

Consider the folk song “Jump Jim Joe,” which was also the original title of a song collection by *The New England Dancing Masters* (Amidon and Amidon 1991). Upon discovering that the lyrics were directly related to “Jump Jim Crow,” which invokes Jim Crow laws, the authors stated: “While ‘Jump Jim Joe’ on its own merits is a beautifully simple and engaging singing game, it is certainly understandable to choose not to use it because of its complicated ancestry” (Amidon 2018, para. 3). Yet, even if one replaces “Jump Jim Joe” with new lyrics, the descending “mi-re-do” pattern still resonates while children jump up and down to the rhythms and unconsciously mimic a racist past, all the while reflecting a music education that is colonizing in nature. For this reason, it is less likely that a text adaptation or substitution would be sufficient remedies for undoing the racist damage that “Jump Jim Joe” has caused; the musical reproduction of this song tacitly perpetuates racist ideals despite its enjoyable melody and playful game, and the focus on “mi-re-do” renders replacing insufficient for teaching students about musicking experiences beyond concept-based instruction.

While erasing precludes students from critically participating in any conversation pertaining to racism, replacing engages students in musical stories birthed out of racism yet camouflaged by anodyne texts. As a non-musical example, consider Quaker Oats and their decision to replace the “Aunt Jemima” brand with “Pearl Milling Company” (Kesslen 2020). Kesslen described, “The 130-year-old brand features a Black woman named Aunt Jemima, who was originally dressed as a minstrel character” (para. 2). Considering that the minstrel references have been removed, it would seem that this replacement might allow for one to enjoy the brand’s products. Yet, the label’s colors and shapes have not changed, and the circle that was once occupied by Aunt Jemima’s mammy caricature appears as the same frame with a different picture. In the same way that changed images that retain recognizable branding can still evoke racism, folk songs with changed lyrics can still convey racist overtones to those who hear them.



Additionally, it might appear that choosing to camouflage curricular texts might fully conceal the texts' racist undertones and render them appropriate for students to learn. Yet, Kelly-McHale (2018) asserted, "We also cannot continue to assume that children do not need to know the history or that it is perfectly acceptable to teach a song devoid of its meaning and intent" (61). Camouflaging execrable histories and replacing them with new texts overlooks the existence of systemic racism in American history and how such racism is reflected in folk songs. When teachers choose to replace, they may intentionally aim to preserve the integrity of a given song, albeit within a colonizing music education practice; however, the humanity of those who were and are racially targeted by the song can diminish regardless of the teacher's intent.

When teachers choose to either erase or replace songs that contain racist and/or minstrel references, such as "Jump Jim Joe," they prioritize musical concepts over other considerations about the use of musicking within pluralistic societies. This points to a larger issue raised by Bradley (2020): "Educations may avoid contentious topics altogether, a behavior that already occurs too often in music education among teachers who never venture beyond teaching notes and rhythms, or who view the inclusion of musical context as extra-musical and thus unnecessary" (11). With this in mind, I contend that educators usually perform the acts of erasing and replacing in order to continue teaching repertoire that is colonizing and representative of concept-driven music education. Such pedagogy inhibits students from being able to engage in conversations about the music they learn and restricts their participation in practices that look beyond the mere acquisition of musical concepts (e.g., opportunities to critique music or to create music that represents their own musical interests).

Further, teachers rarely involve students in the decision-making process regarding which songs exist in the curriculum and which songs are erased or replaced, often because they intend to shield them from encountering songs with racist associations (Cicco 2023). Given that the history of racism is implicitly maintained and undisturbed when obscured through erasure or neutralized texts, the impulsive choices to erase and replace eliminate the potential for students and teachers to engage in conversations about how they might combat racism. As such, these choices align closely with the social funding of race, since "What intellectual information and experiences students have access to, what they are denied access to, and what distortions of information they encounter can serve as powerful

fundamentals of our racial ideology” (Ladson-Billings 2021, 143). This necessitates a reimagining of erasing and replacing as a process in which students decide what to erase and replace as well as participate in dialogue about racism and antiracism at large.

## Thoughtfully Erasing to Radically Replace

I have thus far posited that erasing and replacing are reflective of the social funding of race, intricately tied to concept-based instruction, and insufficient educational choices for interacting with racist folk songs in the general music classroom. Ladson-Billings (2021) emphasized the importance of defunding race in order to counteract the deleterious effects of racism’s ubiquitous circulation: “Fighting for justice is never just about winning. It is the hope of winning, but more important, it is about fighting for the right cause regardless of the odds.... This vision can never be realized as long as its foremost enemy—the construct of race—serves the current shape of democracy so well” (149). Drawing on Ladson-Billings’ work, and in lieu of the simplistic choices to erase or to replace, I propose the possibilities of two sequential processes for defunding race: erasing-as-dismantling and radical replacing.

In erasing-as-dismantling, teachers might first research the histories of specific folk songs with racist origins, after which they would involve students in the process of investigating them more closely. Unveiling the historical truths about songs that teachers previously taught, such as “Jump Jim Joe,” is an integral step towards understanding the need for the song’s erasure. In other words, erasing-as-dismantling begins with teachers’ transparency about the songs’ histories as a way to disrupt the innocuous narratives that disguise the songs’ racist roots. Simultaneously, this allows for music education to begin moving beyond concept-based instruction.

Erasing-as-dismantling might be understood, analogously, to the removal of Confederate monuments. Historically, “The majority of Confederate monuments were erected in one of two periods: the portion of the Jim Crow era between the early 1900s and 1920s and the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, Jim Crow voting laws were passed to disenfranchise African-American voters” (Timmerman 2020, 2). In reference to their removal, Perhamus and Joldersma (2020) argued that there must be no

political neutrality regarding the monuments and their mendacious histories; they asserted the need for individuals to recognize that these monuments are part of a “continuum of revolutionary social movements rather than a ‘new’ political awakening” and argued for providing “correctives to [their] ‘historical myths’” (6–7). Similarly, Lai (2020) posited that the presence and dissemination of fabricated histories are forms of “derogatory pedestalling” (604). For example, this may include individuals saluting Confederate monuments in the United States that represent victories of soldiers who defended slavery while failing to recognize that Black citizens, who view the same monuments, may feel marginalized by their presence. Likewise, individuals who musically reproduce folk songs such as “Jump Jim Joe” tacitly reinforce oppression by neglecting to consider the songs’ racist associations. For this reason, racist folk songs convey an indirect form of derogatory pedestalling and require a collective effort to confront their hateful messages. As such, teachers would stress the importance of being transparent about folk songs’ racist pasts and naming the racism that underpins them, rather than ignoring it.

Second, students and teachers might commit themselves to an ongoing line of inquiry, during which they reflect on whose humanity is diminished by specific songs. Referencing Confederate monuments, Perhamus and Joldersma (2020) asserted that reflective questioning about their presence might include, “Are the statues images of glory or hate? Who is given full humanity in the statues, and who is violently objectified? Whose history do the statues value and which histories are distorted through the marbling?” (8). Teachers and students might adopt such questions when interrogating the origins of racist folk songs.

Examining the histories of racist folk songs alone does not fully suffice in revealing the harmful impact they can have on BBIA individuals. For example, teachers and students might examine the history of “Jump Jim Joe” and discover that it was regularly performed on the minstrel stage, but this does not take into account how blackface minstrelsy “lent racism a stage upon which existential fear could become jubilation, contempt could become fantasy” (Morris 2019, 3). In other words, the pain and harm Black individuals endured throughout slavery and during the time at which minstrelsy evolved was disingenuously characterized as joyous and lighthearted. While minstrelsy aimed to degrade Black individuals, “Paradoxically, its dehumanizing bent let white audiences feel more human” (Morris 2019, 3). In consideration of this, students might pose additional questions regarding how abhorrent forms of racism were possible, and they might consider what

options they have to halt the reproduction of songs that ridicule Black individuals' humanity. When discussing the dismantling of Confederate monuments, Perhamus and Joldersma (2020) further asserted: "Commitments to embrace new questions arise.... The shifting conditions signalled by such dismantling foster renewed grappling with questions about what it means to be human" (9). Through this questioning, students would seek to affirm the humanity of those who are targeted or mocked by racist folk songs, perhaps coming to the realization that any song's aesthetic lure is thwarted when racism materializes through the song's reproduction.

Third, erasing-to-dismantle would involve students and teachers deciding whether to eliminate or preserve folk songs in light of whether the songs possess educational value. For example, students and teachers might decide to completely erase "Jump Jim Joe," given that its original title was "Jump Jim Crow." They may conclude that the song's direct reference to minstrelsy and its anti-Black racism renders it harmful and necessitates its removal. On the other hand, "Jingle Bells" might be an additional song that students and teachers refrain from musically reproducing but preserve for learning purposes. The composer of the song, James Pierpont, did not write any references to minstrelsy in the song, though it was regularly performed on the minstrel stage (Hamill 2017). For this reason, the song might be preserved so individuals can learn that songs without racist references were eventually adopted by minstrel performers and thereby conveyed anti-Black racism. Because erasing-as-dismantling can involve either full erasure or preservation, teachers and students might conceive of this process as a dialectic, in which they consider possibilities rather than immediately default to fixed choices; the outcomes on which they decide will vary depending on the songs that they explore and the histories they unveil. Since the erasing-as-dismantling process involves transparency about songs' histories, a commitment to reflective questioning, and the erasure or preservation dialectic, it excludes the possibility of performing such folk songs, but it invites the opportunity for a more expansive music education that is not purely concept-based.

Because racist folk songs should not be performed, I suggest that students and teachers thoughtfully replace such songs with originally composed music that describes the racially just society they envision. I refer to this process as radical replacing. The term radical is derived from the Latin word *radix*, which is defined as the "source, origin; that in which anything originates" (*Oxford English Dictionary*

2023). In other words, radical can be understood as the root from which something grows or extends. As discussed earlier, teachers who simplistically replace either remove or adapt parts of texts with racist associations. Conversely, through radical replacing, students and teachers would reflect on their shared humanity, at the core of who they are, to compose or arrange music that replaces racist folk songs and conveys anti-racist messages. Radical replacing might also involve an array of possibilities for students to engage in activities, such as writing poems about racial justice, to which they could then create soundscapes with a variety of instruments. Further, I propose that radical replacing is an act informed by Haiven and Khasnabish's (2014) notion of the radical imagination. To radically imagine is to have the courage "to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be" (3). Haiven and Khasnabish explained that radically imagining involves reflecting on historical struggles and imagining how the present and the future may develop to overcome them. With this in mind, engaging in radical replacing involves considering how the past has shaped the present, as well as how the present might inform the future.

Imagine if students chose to create a new arrangement with the civil rights song "We Shall Overcome." As a way to deemphasize concept-based instruction, perhaps teachers encourage the students to create any sort of informal arrangement in which students fiercely advocate for racial justice, emphasize the societal ills caused by racism in current times (including messages conveyed by racist folk songs), and stress the need to center the BBIA individuals who are silenced, erased, and/or mocked by racist folk songs.<sup>3</sup> The fusion of music once used to oppose racial injustice with newly composed music that advocates for change, without the constraints of concept-based instruction, is illustrative of rigorous radical replacement.

Additionally, imagine if students explained how they thoughtfully erased to radically replace in a way that influences others to do the same. For example, consider a school function or community event related to social justice. What if the students retold the audience what they learned about "Jump Jim Joe" and "Jingle Bells" and how this led to the radical replacement of folk songs with a new arrangement of "We Shall Overcome"? Further, perhaps students can share what they would *not* have learned if the teacher simply erased or replaced and did not involve them in the process. They might assert the importance of becoming acquainted with the racist origins of folk songs in order to learn from their histories and to

develop inclusive, equitable curricula in response to this learning. Thus, as the students recount their own learning experiences, they would be capable of encouraging others to thoughtfully erase to radically replace through their commitment to “a public consciousness to radical love in the way that it facilitates connection and care beyond the self” (Perhamus and Joldersma 2020, 13–14). Thoughtfully erasing to radically replace may inspire possibilities that reach far beyond the acquisition of musical concepts, as students—in addition to those they encounter—commit themselves to anti-racist work.

## Who?

In the process of thoughtfully erasing to radically replace, white teachers need to decenter whiteness and center the BBIA community. As a white, cis-gendered, gay man who grew up in a low socioeconomic class, my own experiences and positionality informed the ideas I put forth in this piece. To be certain, however, I have not experienced the pernicious dangers caused by racism; I am unable to detach myself from the societal privileges from which I benefit as a white man. I realize that I am afforded privilege in the world that is not granted equally to BBIA communities, women, and members from BBIA communities with interlocking identities (e.g., a Black, trans woman). Thus, it would be disingenuous to propose ideas or recommendations and *not* include myself as someone who must continue to learn and reflect on the points I assert, for which reasons I continually work to decenter my whiteness as an ongoing process.<sup>4</sup>

In thoughtfully erasing to radically replace without considering whose voices must be heard, white teachers may be perceived as self-congratulatory; it is therefore important for them to decenter their whiteness and consider the role of BBIA communities. Garner (2007) described whiteness as “a system of privilege from which White individuals benefit that designate white people as ‘normal’ and racially ‘unmarked’” (4–5). Whiteness also manifests as a set of values and norms aligned with order and respectability, which “is seen as the human and universal position requiring no qualification” (Garner 2007, 39). Accordingly, it is possible that teachers might charge themselves with the task of thoughtfully erasing to radically replace yet inadvertently obfuscate their antiracist work if their privilege is left unchecked. For instance, some individuals may unintentionally center their whiteness when they are simply motivated to challenge racism based on the mere

knowledge that it exists. As Perhamus and Joldersma (2020) asserted, “White people, although perhaps well intentioned, often try to take the lead as they enter justice–work spaces ... a move which actually reiterates racialized power inequities and counters efforts to create conditions for liberation” (14). Thus, antiracist practices are fundamentally flawed when white individuals advocate for racial equality but dominate the spaces in which BBIA voices must be amplified.

To resist centering whiteness, white individuals must actively work to decenter it. Decentering whiteness is essential due to the assumptions underlying its superiority and how it might cause a lack of safety or discomfort for BBIA communities, since unquestioned white superiority functions as “a single entity for purposes of racial domination” (Bradley 2015, 195). Considering Marx’s (2006) claim that white individuals have the ability to reflect on their whiteness and critique it, it is essential that upon realizing the societal privileges that their whiteness affords them, they leverage this privilege through their active commitment to antiracist work. Leveraging privilege in this way resembles Kendi’s (2019) description of what it means to be antiracist: “We can knowingly strive to be an antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (23). Taking this into account, white individuals are encouraged to continually reflect on the importance of decentering whiteness as a way to center BBIA individuals in spaces wherein whiteness otherwise circulates and dominates.

Decentering whiteness is a reflexive process during which white individuals bracket their lived experiences, center the experiences of BBIA individuals, and listen. According to Swan (2017), “To listen means for white people to take on their role and responsibility in these histories of racism and to understand them as ‘histories of this present’. And rather than moving into wanting to act, white people need to see that the racist world that is critiqued is where they live” (557). Accordingly, attempting to thoughtfully erase to radically replace must involve listening to what BBIA communities experience as an initial step towards decentering whiteness. When teachers take action without listening, their fights for racial justice might be perceived as salvationist—the “white” way to fix a problem rather than what those who experience the problem consider to be the “right” way. Additionally, listening must occur to learn about how racism afflicts BBIA communities, which may contrast with white individuals’ perceptions or assumptions regarding how difficult it seems to encounter racism on a day-to-day basis.

In my own going efforts to decenter my whiteness, I experienced two ways of listening with which other white teachers might also experiment: listening-through-observation and listening-to-learn. Listening-through-observation involves white teachers observing—or listening to—instances when BBIA students and families encounter racist experiences, both overt and covert. In contrast with brushing off such instances as circumstantial or ignoring them altogether, listening-through-observation demands that teachers have the courage to point out inequitable practices within their immediate communities.

Listening-to-learn involves white teachers closely attending to BBIA individuals who share their experiences with racism and what they envision for a racially just future. Teachers might first listen to personal experiences of racism shared by BBIA students, families, and colleagues. Additionally, individuals from BBIA communities at large have discussed their experiences with racism on multiple platforms, such as Tik Tok and Facebook, which makes it possible for white teachers to listen-to-learn without demanding labor. For example, Dara Starr Tucker, a Black Tik Tok creator and social commentator with over one million followers, regularly posts videos explaining the roots of minstrelsy in music among other truisms related to systemic racism (Tucker 2023). Through listening-through-observation and listening-to-learn, teachers can decenter their whiteness, which can inform their experiences guiding students during thoughtfully erasing to radically replace processes.

While listening-through-observation and listening-to-learn are necessary for decentering whiteness, there are also caveats associated with each process. First, white teachers must listen-through-observation without causing an intrusion or making members of BBIA communities uncomfortable in the process; teachers must negotiate how to listen-through-observation based on sensitive consideration of their own BBIA communities. This process will ultimately vary in different educational spaces, as the interactions will be dependent on many contextual factors, including but not limited to the race of the teachers and students. Additionally, listening-to-learn is not necessarily boundless, as the opportunity to engage in this process will present itself only when BBIA individuals freely share their experiences. In light of this, it is crucial to recognize that listening in general is not free, as it comes at the expense of BBIA individuals' lived and relived experiences. Accordingly, white teachers might regard listening-through-observation and listening-to-learn as educational opportunities that necessitate compensation. They



might use their privilege to serve as active allies in support of BBIA interests as well as consider ways to financially compensate BBIA communities individually (e.g., donating to Tik Tok creators' Cash-Apps) or collectively (e.g., donations to *Decolonizing the Music Room*).

In addition to listening to BBIA students in their classrooms, white teachers might consider students' responses to instruction. For example, thoughtfully erasing to radically replace may cause BBIA students to feel vulnerable and exposed. They might feel obligated to share details about how racism has affected them or to propose ideas for combatting or dismantling racist folk songs. Students might also perceive that white teachers engaging in this process are making decisions *for* BBIA communities; the failure to take the lived experiences of BBIA students into account serves as another instantiation of centering whiteness. Such action illustrates Martin's (2020) discussion of white ignorance and Bradley's (2015) notion of "Whiteness as ignorance," which involves "ignoring the realities of lived experience for children of color or those who are minoritized for other reasons" (195). Returning to intentions, I argue that teachers must remind themselves that what they intend to achieve when thoughtfully erasing to radically replace is of less importance than the impact it has on BBIA students involved in the process.

Though listening to BBIA communities' ideas regarding when or how to thoughtfully erase to radically replace is crucial, white teachers may never have the opportunity to enact these processes. In the United States, school board policies and state laws that restrict teachers from discussing racism create obstacles. As such, administrators might prohibit them from engaging in a line of questioning regarding how parts of America's racist history relate to contemporary discussions about white privilege. Consider, for example, that some districts across the US have not only banned books that discuss antiracism, but they have also removed books that refer to any of America's historical and racial injustices (Garcia 2022). Some of these bans might also result in the removal of songs related to civil rights or social justice (e.g., "We Shall Overcome"). In practice, these laws and policies might restrict music educators from mentioning anything about racism, which would thereby preclude the possibility to thoughtfully erase to radically replace.

In addition, music teachers are often required to closely align their instruction with music standards, which means they might be limited in their endeavors to thoughtfully erase to radically replace (i.e., time constraints due to an emphasis on concept-based instruction). However, this does mean they cannot apply related

tenets. For instance, perhaps students and teacher discover the racist histories of folk songs; this might lead to the songs' erasure and a discussion about which songs might be useful to teach the same musical concepts (e.g., a replacement for the mi-re-do pattern in "Jump Jim Joe" if adherence to standards is mandated). While students would not thoughtfully erase to radically replace in its fullest form, they would still participate in the decision-making process, which is preferable to the simplistic acts of erasing and replacing.

I began by referring to posts from teachers on elementary music Facebook pages who contested the use of folk songs with racist origins, which led to their choices to erase and replace folk songs absent from student engagement. Instead of the hostile type of dialogue to which I initially referred, imagine if elementary general music teachers shared stories about the manner in which they thoughtfully erased to radically replace. Teachers might exchange ideas about what might be possible when fully enacting the process, and they might also share the newly composed songs they created with their students—songs that convey antiracist sentiments and songs that stimulate conversations about inclusivity. As the field continues to learn about the histories of racist folk songs, it is my hope that teachers and students will dismantle them, radically replace them, and center BBIA communities in the process. Accordingly, thoughtfully erasing to radically replace creates possibilities for students and teachers to create equitable musical spaces vis-à-vis their unwavering commitment to antiracist work.

## About the Author

Ian Cicco is Assistant Professor of Music Education at The University of Southern Mississippi, and his research interests include critical examinations of elementary music curricula/pedagogical approaches, antiracist pedagogy in music education, vertical alignment between elementary and secondary music, and belongingness in Orff Schulwerk. His research has been published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*, *Visions of Research in Music Education*, and *The Orff Echo*. He also has a published chapter titled "Classroom Music" in *A Music Pedagogy for Our Time* (GIA Publications). Ian currently serves on the *The Orff Echo* editorial board and as the Vice President for the MS Orff Chapter #100.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lorelei Batislaong, who is content coordinator and lead editor for the website Decolonizing the Music Room (<https://www.decolonizingthemusicroom.com/>), coined the term BBIA. For further discussion, see <https://youtu.be/nMrlgoYmLUo>.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that organizations such as the Organization of American Kodály Educators (OAKE) and the American Orff Schulwerk Association (AOSA) have been intentional with their choices to include leadership for diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA). For example, AOSA recently developed a crisis response form for issues related to bias and discrimination (see <https://member.aosa.org/member/member-services/diversity-equity-inclusion-and-access>) as well as a Song Selection Statement (see <https://member.aosa.org/member/professional-development/aosa-song-selection-statement>).

<sup>3</sup> For a richer discussion on informal music learning, see Green (2005), Papazachariou-Christoforou (2023), and Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010).

<sup>4</sup> I purposefully chose to share my positionality at this point in the article. Namely, this structural choice was made in consideration of my discussion on who should be making related decisions, in addition to considering who is inflicted by racism (i.e., BBIA individuals). I determined this was the best placement for this statement so it did not elongate the introduction or interrupt the flow of my earlier argument and initial reimagining.