

# A Critical Exploration into the Rhythm and Pitch of Capitalism in Music Education

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## Abstract

This narrative exploration utilizes Critical Race Theory to conceptualize the interconnectedness of capitalism and racism in music education. Rhythm and pitch—two foundational elements of music— are used to analyze how inequities in social, academic, economic, and political systems are perpetuated in music education. The elements of rhythm and pitch also provide sociocultural and historical perspective that reveal patterns of human oppression. This exploration provides a lens from a Black/African American music educator into the impact of capitalism in music education, specifically those who identify themselves within the Black/African diaspora. A greater understanding within this critical exploration provides insight that assists in identifying and dismantling barriers within current capitalistic systems, which could lead to the self-liberation of the Black community, as well as a socioacademically just, equitable, and inclusive music education that supports all people in K-12 and higher education.

## Keywords

Capitalism, racism, rhythm, pitch, Critical Race Theory

**A** musical composition comes packaged with a sense of perfection. It is the role and responsibility of the musical artist to appreciate, analyze, synthesize, interpret, and contextually shape the music to ensure that the musical systems crafted by the composer are elevated from the written document, and into the ears and musical souls that are experiencing the musical performance. Composers create musical ideas for many different reasons. Sometimes, those ideas can be contextually misinterpreted, incongruently riddled with mishaps by an unprepared ensemble, or conceptually misunderstood by the audience. With all of these layers of potential disaster that could happen on stage, that does not diminish the original intent of the artwork. The composition is not broken. Its intent is clear from the start. Capitalism, much like music, has a similar performance practice. Creating and filtering wealth to a few by exploiting those with less is the “perfection” of capitalism—and it is working (Svart 2019). Capitalism has situated musicing to strategically other Blackness by creating a stereotypical narrative that “formal” music education in Black communities is non-existent, and that music appreciation historically centered in the Black experience is insignificant (Buckner 1982). The elitist European music learning system, adopted by Lowell Mason, was brought to the New World with the intent of establishing colonialism, simultaneously while African slave trade was a major source of profit during that time (Abeles 1995). As Western European music traditions were being established, non-European music traditions were being characterized as unintelligent and uncivilized (Gustafson 2008), which led to the establishment of a capitalistic rhythm and pitch for the former. Later years brought forth conversations about “students at-risk” and the “culturally disadvantaged,” which led to socioeconomic foundations on which capitalism in music education stand now (Bulgozdy 2020).

Do current or historical Western Eurocentric philosophies, approaches, and/or policies in music education knowingly or unwittingly support racially motivated capitalist exploitation? The purpose of this critical exploration is to contextualize the influence of capitalistic systems in music education, using Critical Race Theory as a framework for considering the impact these systems have on decisions in music curriculum, pedagogy, and policy from the social, political, economic, and academic perspective of Black people, meaning those who socioculturally identify with racial origins that are rooted in any Black racial group in the African diaspora

(Cox and Tamir 2022). As my introduction concludes, I walk on this path of research beginning with an inquiry that leads to the purpose and framework of this study, followed by my process and positionality. My next set of footsteps led me into finding understandings of *cap* within the principles of capitalism. Subsequently, two elements of music—rhythm and pitch—are used metaphorically to describe and problematize capitalism. The discussion section, entitled “Put Some Respect on It,” connects the previous sections, while considering key concepts that support music education operating more equitably in a capitalistic society. Through most sections, a musical or rhetorical sample is used to lay a foundation for my thoughts to flow smoothly and cogently leading up to a melodic conclusion, in which the capitalistic descriptions of rhythm and pitch are combined and used to share final thoughts for this study. Marx (1867/1976) did not view the system of capitalism as exclusively economic, but social. He argued that capitalists succeed by being situated in a position of privilege to own the resources needed to produce, while socioeconomically manipulating the laborers. He pointed out that the relationship between two classes is exploitative: 1) the owners of property and production that control the supply and demand; 2) the producers who own nothing but have to sell labor power in exchange for a wage set by the owner. With an elite group maintaining a socioeconomic advantage in the system of capitalism, Marx (1867/1976) believed this situatedness “grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation” (799). The intersection of the human construct of race and the socioeconomic ideology of Marxism provides a window into the racial inequalities and other oppressive challenges implemented by the socioeconomically dominant function within the working class (Miles 1984; Solomos and Back 1995).

Neo-Marxists have attempted to avoid correlating capitalism with racism, specifically white supremacy, to avoid alienating the white working class from non-whites (Ogunrotifa 2022). Also, from the neo-Marxist perspective, intentionally exposing how whites have socioeconomically benefitted from racism can be counterproductive to disrupting systems of oppression (Cole 2017; Cole and Maisuria 2007; Hill 2009). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the framework that is used throughout this study to name racially oppressive structures, and to provide a platform where racially minoritized populations can empower or liberate themselves (Carmichael 1966; Ladson-Billings 1998; Matsuda 1991). The five basic principles

of CRT include: 1) Centralizing race and racism, along with other intersectionalities such as gender, class, and citizenship; 2) Challenging dominant narratives and centering marginalized and/or racially minoritized perspectives; 3) Commitment to and motivated by a social justice agenda; 4) Valuing experiential knowledge by building and centering on oral traditions within communities of color in order to understand social inequality; 5) The multidisciplinary perspective (Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). Using CRT as a framework can concatenate to Marxist thinking and being by highlighting the antidemocratic ways that white supremacy is linked to the social, political, and economic realities of the Black experience (Walton 2020).

## Process and Positionality

Utilizing a critical narrative process for this study allowed for the emergence of philosophical perspectives that may have otherwise been marginalized due to the nature of capitalism and its association with oppression and suppression of thought that has historically been socioacademically diminished or invalidated (Green et al. 2006). Stauffer (2014) highlights that narrative positioning provides the researcher an opportunity to conjoin various ranges of perspectives about how a construct functions, as well as how it is experienced and embodied. The absence of unanimity around the parameters for most narrative forms provides flexibility in my style and interpretation of the research (Sukhera 2022). The complexity of the study requires cognitive openness in synthesizing and interpreting information (Ferrari 2015). The synthesis of literature was based on an iterative search that began with terms and phrases including, but not limited to, capitalism, capitalism in music education, inequalities in capitalism, and racism in capitalism. The search continued to evolve into more specific terms and phrases, such as exploitation, marginalization, economic slavery, wage earners, bourgeois, and whiteness. This type of search constantly evolves as I found more sources, but it also illuminated where gaps exist in the research (Efron and Ravid 2019). I intentionally present a lens that highlights resistance as research, names specific oppression directly impacting Black populations, humanizes the system of capitalism within music education that specifically impacts the Black community and possibly other marginalized populations, and centers Black liberation as the outcome (Stewart and Haynes

2019). Significantly, a critical perspective from this marginalized lens could provide a clearer understanding of capitalism, which could lead to more equitable opportunities for all who are impacted by music learning and teaching.

Throughout this study, please consider that the narrative framing originates from a Black, male music educator in the United States—an underrepresented, isolated, and often socially unprotected population (Bristol 2020; Subburayan 2024)—using CRT to center a lens of systemic oppression and injustice, based on how capitalism has been activated in my own lived experience. Operating as an endangered species, there is an inherent danger that I feel in presenting this work, because whiteness and all of its gaze promotes the silencing and the physical, social, and psychological violence against Black bodies. However, this study has not directly triggered my fears, but it has activated my faith. As a representative of the Black community, accompanied by my positionality as a music scholar, I am charged to speak truth, fight for justice, and shine a light on the injustices that have been exercised on my people through the institution of racial capitalism.



“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”  
Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*,  
Book 1, Chapter 2.

The perceived and popularized ideology of capitalism has been conveniently weaponized by certain advantaged sociopolitical groups to gain and maintain economic, social, and political power (Foster 2025). The advantaged group perceives that this ideology promotes healthy competition in the marketplace, which they believe will support a stronger society on the whole through entrepreneurship and a very exclusionary perspective of meritocracy (Thangevelu 2025). The opportunity for economic uplift is a perceived advantage in a capitalistic society, because private owners and corporations have sovereignty over the main components of production: labor, natural resources, capital goods, and entrepreneurship (Basu et al. 2023; Hayes 2023). Though some governments have a limited role in production (what to produce, how much to produce, when to produce), individuals who believe in capitalist ideology argue that marketplace freedom promotes greater opportunity for individual success (Banton 2023; Nik-Khah 2015). Demonstrated by enduring realities and inequalities, such as racism, the free market has many shortcomings, leading some to believe that the greatness achieved or rekindled through capitalism is *cap/capping*, an African American Vernacular English term which means untrue (Giblin and Doctorow 2023). I use *cap/capping* in this study to illuminate how the language and policies of freedom associated with capitalism are not fully established in truth and justice.

Capitalism is an exclusive and gated community, in which racism, colonialism, and many past and present political dictatorships reside. The “neighborhood association” within this gated community, which used their power and wealth to exploit and subjugate people throughout periods of history (e.g. Transatlantic slave trade and Industrial Revolution) has led to the emergence of many social justice movements (Jalata 2008). Formalized education is the instrument utilized by the socioeconomically dominant to socialize curriculum and pedagogy to their benefit (Mocombe 2006). Since the dominant group controls the financial resources to make or break educational institutions, they can elevate their culture as essential, while dismissing any social identities that deviate from their own (Schwalbe 1992).

The *cap* attributed to capitalism’s singular righteousness is exacerbated because the term capitalism has no one definition. It can be described as a system in which the bourgeois own and control property based on their own interests, marketing their properties by setting values with the thought of benefitting themselves and society as a whole (Jahan and Mahmud 2015). Level setting bourgeois as a

virtue evokes class war between the elite and the masses, or the one percent against the ninety-nine percent, where the prize is control of the social and economic destiny of all sides (Holcombe 2017; Marx and Engels 1848/2002; McCloskey 2010). For this study, I follow Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) in framing capitalism as an economic foreground with conditions that require exploitation in order to establish socioeconomic order.

### *For Sale*

“Everything in capitalism is up for sale. The revolution, your behind, your mind, the company itself is up for sale.” KRS One <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kui-fawQ3xtM>.

Capitalism is not on the brink of destruction. If there is capital, there is labor. If there is labor, there are laborers. If you are a member of either of these social classes, there is a general recognition between the two parties that each exists within a singular capitalistic society (Bukharin 1915). From this perspective, capitalism is a living organism hosted by the commodities of human labor and natural resources (Marx 1848/2002; Zhu 2018). Structurally, racist human constructs, such as Jim Crow in the United States and Apartheid in South Africa, served as sorting mechanisms that created an advantage for a predominant social group to control human labor and natural resources, as well as limit or eliminate access of those commodities to the racially minoritized (Yearby 2018). In this structure, a person’s racial identity is assigned value and diminished to just another commodity for sale (Leong 2013). Could it be that capitalism and racism are closely related? From a CRT perspective, wage earners in a capitalistic society are incorporated into a new kind of slavery, in which they are at the mercy of a small social group, who in their own interests control the political and economic forecast of the worker (Bell 1993; Roediger 2017). The advantaged social group effectively pays wages for the mental and physical energy of the worker, who does not share in the profits that employers accrue. Labor power is commodified, and it becomes an important factor in an operationalized capitalistic system (Marx 1848/2002). This position is the antithesis of a democratic environment, in which all people are equally invested in the decision-making processes. Utilizing capitalism as an agent of democracy is

contradictory, considering that capitalism itself is fundamentally undemocratic (Wolff 2015).

Throughout history, racism in many regions of the world has successfully been installed with a bandwidth that was created and continues to broadcast a hierarchy of the dominant and the dominated (Wolff 2016). The ideological and legislative practices of British settler colonialism invaded Indigenous lands worldwide including, but not limited to, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Economic and civilizational progress posing as liberty and justice for all are capitalistic propaganda for white supremacy and the establishment of white men as the social, economic, and political kings (Gerrard et. al 2021). Because race and racialized structures have been multi-generationally conceptualized, race then becomes a pre-existing condition symptomatic of the systemic inequities in society (Wolff 2016). X (1964) believed that eventually there would be a great conflict between those who desired freedom and justice and those who have socially and economically benefitted from exploiting the disadvantaged. In this speech, he also proclaimed, “It is impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism, and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism.” X made this statement while fully anticipating the social, political, and economic revolt that would eventually manifest in the mid-twentieth century United States.

According to Robinson (2000), race is a requirement for capitalism to work. In Europe, racism existed before capitalism, consequently providing a modality for exploitation and social control (Robinson 2000). Because racialization was elemental in the feudal society of Europe, capitalism is an established world system associated with the colonial processes of slavery, invasion, and dispossession, all of which directly impacted the African diaspora, the Irish, Jews, and many other social groups (Kelley 2017; Robinson 2000). The uprising of capitalism was ushered in by European civilization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which shifted cultural and regionally dialectical contrasts into racial categorizations. This social system also led to the othering of non-Europeans, consequently creating value systems in education based on prejudiced notions of skill and aptitude. Modern slavery strategies, including various forms of forced labor—which impacts nearly twenty-eight million people worldwide, according to the International Labor Organization (2022)—are exclusively used in many industries in today’s global market, with a substantial profit of \$236 billion dollars. The International Labor

Organization also highlights that these strategies have the greatest impact on children, women, immigrants, the impoverished, and the socially minoritized (5–7).

## Obedience School

Public education in the United States has historically been controlled by white people. For non-whites, the curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and spaces for schooling in the United States has systemically operated with the goal of accessing and achieving white goodness (Justice 2023). While whiteness has not always been attributed to physical traits, knowledge acquired by the dominant society leaves individuals without privilege situated in a low position on the social ladder, needing the formal schooling supplied by the upper class to elevate themselves (Bourdieu 1977). CRT points to how the normative behaviors, which elevate whiteness as physically and intellectually superior, are institutionalized through entities such as government and schools, which consequently situate Blacks as second-class citizens (Davis 2021; Mills 1998; Woodson 1933). Schooling in the United States has propertized and capitalistically rewarded whiteness by creating disadvantages for those who are non-white (Harris 1993). Any freedoms experienced by non-whites in this educational system are reveries, as long as the power and control of education rests in the hands of whites, leaving non-whites stripped of their whoness, and forced to master the language and socioeconomic benchmarks of whiteness (Watkins 2001; Fanon 1952). This study, explicitly, will continue to pinpoint the *cap* within the constructs of capitalism associated with Black/African diasporic people. Other research highlights various perspectives that emphasize interracial as well as gender commonalities within capitalism (Banks 2012; Gilbert, Everett, and Casa Nova 2024; Melcher 2021; Zweig 2023). A CRT perspective shows that poverty among whites has less of a multi-generational impact than poverty in Black and Brown communities because of the constructed social superiority that whiteness provides, along with easier access points to federal programs such as Social Security and housing assistance (Delgado and Stefancic 2023).

The transformational and creative framework of education visualized by cultural theorists, including Bourdieu and Gintis, will not fully manifest if the institution itself is situated as a factory intended to reproduce the sociopolitical power structure desired by the ruling capitalist class (Mocombe 2006). The deficit model

of schooling intends therefore to produce laborers who can function at a lower position in the workforce. Race promotes linguistic and social standards that elevate whiteness as supreme, and minoritize any other culture that is non-white (Givens 2021). The laborers (minoritized) are controlled by the employer (socially majoritized), and pay is determined by the labor market value. The system of capitalism, in this case, operates as a totalitarian system because the owners and/or employers, typically one person or small group, has control over the larger group, the laborers (Stivers 2021). Thus, inequality is intentional and perpetual.

Capitalism is operationalized hierarchically in many school settings. School administrators, such as the principal and superintendent, control the implementation of school policy and structure. Families and communities have limited or no input, which models a democratic dictatorship (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Burns 2017). The transactional and structural nature of capitalism, according to Labov (1972), creates a system for Black students to be forced to “act” white, because of supposed cultural failures of the Black community, and negligence in recognizing the disadvantages and marginalizations systematized in schools: tracking, lack of materials and resources, low expectations, and lack of cultural competence or community relevance.

Standardized testing over holistic learning is also dictatorial, because student success is based on test scores, and teacher curriculum is limited to meeting the criteria for standardized test proficiency. Equality in schools is undermined financially as the economically affluent are incentivized to pay higher taxes for schooling that supports their own instead of financially supporting education for the marginalized and minoritized (Bowles and Gintis 2011). The failures of the impoverished and racially minoritized communities in schools, specifically predominantly Black/African American communities, cannot be oversimplified and solely attributed to poverty. Their failure is because the colonizing structure that favors the bourgeois is operationalized and has reinforced an ideological and linguistic standard that conflicts with the communal interests of the collective Afro-Diasporic agenda (Mocombe 2006).

How can schools claim to be fair and equitable when the social and financial capital is still primarily controlled by whites? As capitalism in the United States, for example, has hierarchically placed white people at the top of the pecking order, some school districts—like Chicago Public Schools, for example, whose teachers

and leadership are predominantly white, but student population is predominantly non-white (Chicago Public Schools 2025)—are invested in school learning initiatives, such as the framework of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The logic of STEM programs is to promote learning through challenging scholarship and career choices in and through science and math studies. When the corporate interest of the STEM initiative was prioritized over community interest, school closings in predominantly Black and Latiné communities in Chicago, notably in 2013, led to a strategically accepted divestment and expedited displacement of Black and Brown people from their properties—both physical and intellectual (Morales-Doyle and Gutstein 2019). The surface intention of newer schools was to improve the quality of education, but most families are more concerned about quality school education within *their* neighborhood, along with healthy relationship with the adults that work in their school community. School buildings being repurposed has become commonplace in many Black and Brown communities across the United States (Morales-Doyle and Gutstein 2019). When school closings in a given neighborhood occur, the hopes and dreams of a collective Black and Brown empowerment that is independent of predominantly white control are traumatically deferred, further serving the interest of racial capitalism (Andrews 2014; Gordon et. al 2018; Morales-Doyle and Gutstein 2019).

Upon reading this study up to this point, there could be an inclination to equate the Afro struggle to other social classes, such as poor whites. However, the emphasis of this study points to the psychological wage and inherent superiority of white privilege paid by a Black tax allocated toward the devaluing and dehumanizing of Blackness in a capitalistic society (Alexander 2016; Du Bois 1935; Roediger 2007).

## X and Y Coordinates

The dimensions of race have traditionally been centered on what is seen. Even though philosophers such as King (1963) homiletically advise and warn society against the visual judgement of people “by the color of their skin,” racism continues to be problematic. CRT authors note, however, that race matriculates beyond the gaze and ventures into a full body experience (James 2019; Sharpe 2016)—directly and indirectly—processed cognitively through sociopolitical systems of rhythm

and pitch (Ewell 2020; Mendieta 2014). Likewise, Mendieta (2014) posits race as an aural and visual experience of human embodiment's plurality.

One key rehearsal skill a conductor must have to improve an ensemble's performance is error detection. Critical strategies and skill used to make quick adjustments associated with compositional elements of a musical piece are vital to rehearsal planning and optimal performance. Utilizing a CRT mindset, I use key musical elements of rhythm and pitch—which music theory professor Steven Rings (2020) considers as the x and y coordinates of music theory—to detect errors that fundamentally exist in the working capitalist strands in music education, with the intent that a greater understanding of these strands will activate a more equitable, collaborative, and democratic space for music learning and teaching in K–12 and higher education.

Rhythm and pitch are two musically symbiotic elements that impact each other, because they both schematically allow humans to cognitively process music based on prior knowledge and experiences. These patterned perceptions are stimuli that lead to certain expectations in future musical occurrences (Krumhansl 2000). These two musical properties also require a basic level of knowledge and understanding of tonal and metrical relationships needed for musical rehearsal and performance, even without going deeper into other musical hierarchies such as dynamics, tempo, and articulation, to name a few (Henry 2011). I symbolically employ and compare rhythm and pitch to the characteristics of an undemocratic and racially oppressive functioning of capitalism in music education.

### *Rhythm*

“The rhythm in our heart is our freedom....” The Drum (Africa to America) by Sounds of Blackness <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se9CvaXGL7A>

According to Eldridge (2022) Nietzsche describes the nature of rhythm as fluid. He exclaims that an individual's lived experience and cultural connections determine how rhythm is understood, not the scientific approach to rhythm as laid out by his nineteenth century contemporaries. Nietzsche also highlights that the consequences of history, both positive and negative, create a situatedness of how social groups ontologically acquire rhythm (Eldridge 2022).

The perception of rhythm involves two interconnected processes: temporal grouping, which is the perception of how sonic patterns are sequenced over time, and beat induction, which is a dominant sensory point that happens within a temporal grouping (Todd et al. 2002). According to Todd and Lee (2015), understanding rhythm is based on the synchronicity of what one receives aurally and the representation of a sensorimotor reaction in the human body. Lefebvre (2004) describes rhythm as any type of interaction between space and time where energy conduction occurs. Although rhythm can be characterized as a universal component of musicing, it takes on various perspectives when cross-cultural epistemologies become factors. Rhythmic understandings happen as early as birth, and into infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Individuals acquire them through cultural and socialization activities (Kirschner and Ilari 2014; Tichko et. al 2022).

## Rhythmic Capitalism

Much like the cradle of civilization is rooted in Africa, so is the rhythmic perception of many of its descendants. The Black/African experience in music education has historically been an ongoing rhythmic adjustment in most predominantly white institutions (Butterfield 2010). During the age of segregation in the United States, many Black children struggled in school not because they were Black, but because they were situated in a system that epistemologically minoritized them (Lawrence 1980). The rhythm of music education for the historically enslaved African and their descendants has been a syncopated acculturation to white monometrics: the rhythmic cap of freedom and justice for all, in which many teachers force the racially minoritized to culturally and economically assimilate for survival in white spaces (Holder 2024; Thornton 2018; Whitt 2024). This racialized paradigm compromises the spirit and intraculturally shared identities of Blackness (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury 2018; Ogbu 2004), and it highlights how even working class, rural white traditions—such as country and Appalachian music—are both normalized and legitimized above Black musical epistemologies (Lipsitz 1994). When using CRT to address whiteness as property, meaning the possession of space, privilege, and right to exclude Blackness, the hierarchy of whiteness codifies any of its expansions of rhythmic understanding as socially elevated and esoterically beyond the realm of Blackness (McCall et al. 2023; Perchard 2015). CRT points out that in

white spaces, Blackness and Afrocentric approaches to the arts are only affirmed when whiteness authenticates it (Floyd 2008; Sarath et al. 2017). The musical artistry and expression that make Blackness unique can only be operationalized in chained events happening within systemic, metered white oppression (Redmond 2020; Schuller 1986).

## Diversity Meter

Capitalism has evolved into a temporal grouping of neoliberalism, where diversity and freedom are conceptualized as economic principles instead of core human values (Kalmes 2024). This perception makes systemic racism more invisible and colorblind, and structural inequalities are often overlooked if minoritized individuals have success. When neoliberalism is activated through the lens of economic diversity, education becomes racialized through beat inductions, such as issues of land possession, labor alienation, and, specifically, the commercial valuing of diversity initiatives, which further validate white supremacy (Gerrard et al. 2021). Diversity, which in its own way is a temporal grouping for other socially trending subtopics, is a covertly coded term in many facets of education that symbolizes, or perhaps signifies, an attempt by institutions—at a baseline level—to include historically marginalized and racially minoritized groups into curriculum, textbooks, and overall school culture. It does not necessarily mean embracing the epistemologies and ontologies of these social groups (Boethel 2003; Swartz 2009).

As racially minoritized groups begin to assimilate through the diversity metric, multiculturalism is promoted, leaving them in a societal dysrhythmia, unable to conceptualize their own identity, individual or collective, and left powerless against the dominant narrative (Myrie et al. 2021). Either someone with little to no experience in non-white musicing is educating from an ignorant and culturally misappropriating lens, or, in the spirit of neoliberal *doing*, diverse repertoire is injected and packaged for educators to *do* without sociocultural understanding (McCall 2021).

The socio-culturally based ingredients in the artistically soulful sauce are where the focus of learning and teaching should lie, not in racially capitalizing manufactured method books that intend to copy an authentic recipe, while extracting the love and soul in which that sauce was concocted. Positions of objectivity,

colorblindness, and neutrality may appear progressive, but they are *cap* to the Black experience, racially centering capitalistic strategies connected to mastering whiteness. The neoliberal agenda promotes a softer diversity rhetoric, not directly addressing the issues of race and racism, and perpetuates a pattern where the marginalized are situated to aim for the middle ground (McCall et. al 2023; West 2017; DeCuir and Dixson 2004; Fanon 1952).

Although discrimination is outlawed in the United States, specifically for the intention to provide equitable opportunities in education for racially minoritized populations, a CRT lens reveals that *enough* inclusion is a product of the quota that undermines true diversity. At its core, the proponents of diversity should value both an increased quantity of diverse populations and a cultural understanding and sensitivity that supports the lived experience of the racially minoritized in open, egalitarian spaces (Tienda 2013). Next, I connect an interplay of the current rhythm of capitalism to a melodic motive, thus creating a groove, which Pressing (2002) describes as an Afro-Diasporic expression of music that links dance with pan-African social commonalities.

### *Pitch*

“Hiding like thieves in the night from life, illusions of oasis making  
you look twice.... Stop hiding your face.”

“Thieves in the Night” by Black Star, quoting from  
Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW4Tm5wWW34>

Morrison (1970) points out how Eurocentric standards in art and literature have caused internal racism toward Afrocentrism. Symbolically, the “bluest eye” is the model of beauty, oppressing non-white thinking and being. Bey and Kweli (2003) describe the freedom that Black people believe they have as only an illusion created through the influence of whiteness. Bey and Kweli’s rap vocals inflect pitches within a melody that resemble an oasis, but their lyrics are actually undertones of a mental prison that oppresses, dilutes, and pacifies Afrocentricity.

The quality of a sound is very connected to the vibrations producing it. Sounds can then be placed in a particular order of highest to lowest, based on the frequency of the vibration. The perception of those sounds, which is called pitch, is determined by what the human ear understands them to be in relation to other sounds

(Laudanski et al. 2014). These musical sound waves create a dominant fundamental pitch, along with overtones, albeit determinate or indeterminate pitch based on a given instrument (Mueller et. al 2012). Sounds can be produced on various types of instruments and create a myriad of subjective content for the listener, but the pitch remains the same (Oxenham 2012). Through socially constructed scales and tonal hierarchies that humans process cognitively from sustained tonal centers, pitch also determines melody and harmony (Bispham 2006). Western European conservatory modalities of understanding pitch and tonal relationships continue to dominate narratives in institutionalized music theory and practice, while othering non-white music theoretical epistemologies as part of the ongoing vibrations of the racialized and colonizing agenda of white supremacy (Agawu 2019; Ewell 2020).

Much like rhythm, both musically and culturally speaking, pitch can be perceived as early as infancy (Wong et al. 2012). In reference to speech acquisition, pitch patterns of highness and lowness determine the meanings of words and phrases in a given language (Oxenham 2012). When connecting pitch with culture, meaning systems of communication and norms within a social group, different societies perceive and process pitch in varying ways. In tonal languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Zulu, Yoruba, or Navajo, the inflection and the pronunciation of the language work simultaneously to create meaning. In non-tonal languages, such as English, French, Russian, and Arabic, the meaning of a word stays the same, regardless of the highness or lowness of the pitch (Wong et. al 2012). CRT reveals that the accent and pitch of whiteness is founded in a sonic dysconsciousness, where the vocalization of white superiority—even at the substandard and stigmatic level of whiteness labeled as “white trash”—is normalized and elevated above Blackness (Bridges 2019; Shirley 2003; Terrell 2020). This “public and psychological wage,” as Du Bois (1935) called it, continues to press a knee on the neck of the racialized, choking out the already marginalized voice, suffocating them to physical and/or social death.

## Dog Whistles

In many education communities, there are “higher frequency” pitches called dog whistles, because they are coded terms/phrases used to camouflage systemic bias,

and are intended to only be heard by specific people (Shapiro 2020). Dog whistles are meant to normalize and separate the “good” group (us) from the “evil” group (them), in a way that penalizes the evil group for being a threat to the mainstream establishment (Åkerlund 2021). Dog whistle messaging, according to Sidhu (2024), is not directly provocative, but the message is meant to imply and/or support racist principles. CRT highlights that the language of racial capitalism in public institutions is often coded to vertically distinguish good/private as white from bad/public as Black (Kelley 2017; Haymes 1995). Here are some examples of dog whistles that contextually appear throughout education:

- **Grit/Rigor**—stiffening learners to comply to a system of learning and teaching that is already codified to oppress them.
- **Standardized**—learning and teaching intended to meet the academic and social needs of able-bodied, white, and socioeconomically advantaged individuals.
- **Perfect attendance**—students are obligated to forgo family and/or personal needs, mental health concerns, and other life challenges to be present and on time to classes.
- **Poverty/high needs**—though this term is not exclusively for Black people, it contextually is used to indicate a situatedness associated with race.

There have also been dog whistles specifically in music education contextually signaling particular social groups. Here are a few examples:

- **Excellence**—signals the elevation of Western Anglo-Saxon European classical music notation and performance above all other musical ways of knowing (Robinson 2021; Thornton and Hess 2023).
- **Alternative music ensembles/ Non-traditional music ensembles**—implies the deification of the school music trilogy—band, choir, orchestra—and categorizes any other forms of music learning and teaching as blasphemous (Colley 2009; Mixon 2009; Rideout 2005).
- **Meeting the musical standard**—white inferiority complex triggered leading to cultural erasure and Western Eurocentric music conservatory bias, reaffirming that the Western European standard in music is superior to all music (Brown 2025; Fanon 1967; *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2019; Shadle 2018).
- **Diverse programming/repertoire**—From a CRT perspective, white lives ultimately matter more, whiteness is recognized as the status quo, white fragility is centralized (Cabrera et.al 2017; Elpus 2015; Nelson 2020; Robinson 2021; Whitehead 2021).

- **Modern music/ensemble**—signifies elitism by categorizing Western European classical music traditions as high art, while diminishing the value and/or silencing of non-white traditions and/or popular musicing (Gellerstein 2021; Hein 2021; Hess 2017; Gaztambide-Fernández 2011; Middleton 2000).

In observing the high frequency pitches that continue to reverberate, racial capitalism consequently becomes operationalized in music education, because diversity appears to be promoted, but the socioeconomic value, perspective, and identity of non-whites is situated to benefit and preserve the long-standing inertia of whiteness (Battiste 2024; Davis 2021; Maulsby 2014; Stoumbos 2023). In an effort to disrupt centuries-old inertia and *capping*, I aim to initiate movement, from a Black perspective, towards balancing the scale of justice within a system that socially caters to the needs and capitalistic advancement of white people in music education.

## Put Some Respect On It: Making Capitalism Work

“You the kind of gentleman that want everything your way, take the sheet off  
your face, boy, it's a brand new day....

If you don't respect yourself ain't nobody gonna give a good cahoot.”

“Respect Yourself” by The Staples Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InYaB16xEdo>

Black history is both inter-and intraculturally complicated. There is unifying pride in the pan-African struggle for freedom and justice, but there is a collective understanding that serves as a consciousness base across the Black polyolith: The structure of capitalism from its Eurocentric feudal roots of social ordering in ancient Rome, to the “Christening” of medieval Europe, and the invasion of the New World have been designed to commodify non-white people (Robinson 2000). Capitalism functions, particularly in the Westernized regions, in favor of white dominance, by constructing social and economic advantages that situate Black people in an inferior position. Because racism was already a centuries-old reality of Western European society, modern capitalism is neither new nor radically unique. It is a remix of feudalism that functions through iterations and manifestations of slavery, savagery, militarism, and ethnic cleansing (Kelley 2017).

The capitalistic production and reproduction of racism and inequality is manufactured in systems of education throughout various regions across the world,

which have been used to sort, disconnect, multiculturalize, and dehumanize people based on race (Gerrard et al. 2021). These systems, which have processed the second-class citizenship of Black people worldwide through suffering, dispossession, and white supremacy, are also deeply rooted in socially cultivated and normalized behaviors intended for white ownership to maintain socioeconomic control and extract a substantial profit (Ahmed 2019; Gilmore 2007; Robinson 2000).

Despite the negative connotation that has been historically attached, capitalism is not going anywhere. It has succeeded in uniting most of the world's economic systems by rewarding the exchange of goods globally. Capitalism has also supported a common sociocultural ideology: Making as much money as possible for self and community preservation (Milanovic 2019). From that perspective, Sandel (2013) suggested that capitalism is not the expansion of greed, but a wider network of market opportunities in places that are underserved or overlooked. Nevertheless, the failures of capitalism in the social, economic, political, and academic life of the Black community are well documented and legendary folklore. However, the potential for changing that social narrative could also be in the hands of the Black community. The liberation of Black people in a capitalistic society means that the traditional social actor, the perpetual 'buked and scorned victim—which has its legitimacy—must transition to another role: the active agent of social and economic change (Gyimah and Rose 2019).

Considering the intersectionalities that comprise Blackness, CRT acknowledges that as the polyolith of Blackness has evolved over time, and that there is an intelligence and affirmation of Blackness that does not need the authentication of white space (Evans 2020). Whiteness is codified by taking intraculturally affirming concepts that are relevant to non-whites and using these concepts as sport to capitalize interculturally across predominantly white spaces, while erasing the bodies and spirits from which the culture originated. Black culture is popularized by many white people who insist that their intent is pure, but who are only perpetuating Blackface minstrelsy by taking ownership and making a mockery of something that does not belong to them (Smithsonian 2023). As the soul of the Black body is snatched away, a society already suffering from the ongoing pandemic of racism continues to reimagine non-white bodies as not fully human, which leads to physical and/or psychological violence, followed swiftly by social death (Davis 2021; Norris 2020; Patterson 1982).

Blackness and/or non-whiteness in curriculum and pedagogy must transcend any and all established whiteness to have a greater impact on academia as a whole (Hope 2019). Ladson-Billings (1995) points out that the dialogue regarding the equalizing of content is important for challenging the culturally dominant narrative, as well as making intracultural meaning that leads to self-liberation. The beauty and excellence of Blackness can thrive without the need for white affirmation, and it includes a liberating, collective acknowledgement by white people as the historical primary couriers of institutional racism (Davis 2021; Ladson-Billings 1995). This process of human liberation is also an intracultural analysis that reclaims Blackness from the self-degradation and deculturing that has contributed to white dominance and the perpetuating cycle of oppression which has negatively impacted the Black/African diaspora in a racially capitalist society (Wilson 2020). The power redistribution needed for liberation is a constructive direction toward reclaiming Black identity. It is also an activist position against white supremacy, emphasizing self-sufficiency and collective responsibility within the Black community (Karenga 2010; X and Haley 1973).

## Competition

Perspectives of music education are multi-dimensional. Powell (2021) highlights that a one-track mindedness in the curricular and pedagogical agendas displayed by school music programs is a sign of allegiance to competition, a cornerstone of capitalism. Powell also implicates competition as an inescapable inevitability in many school music programs, whether as adjudicated formal events or intensified performance standards within mechanized curricula. Competition has the potential to alter the value of learning, because learning outcomes no longer are of *use-value*, meaning the commodity is useful to the laborer. The commodity now becomes *exchange-value*, which indicates that the work of the laborer is compared to the value of other laborers in the market (Abramo 2017; Marx 1867/1976). In the spirit of competition, some music educators advocate for curricula reflecting traditions representative of the culturally pluralistic landscape of the United States (Lundquist 1991). Lundquist and Sims (1996) contend that music education advocates could find common ground through an ethnomusicological approach to mu-

music education, with no musical hierarchies, but a high value in all traditions of music education. Studies from other general education and music education proponents highly suggest that a culturally pluralistic approach to education is politically characterized as divisive. Some social and political leaders believe this concept is antithetical to their expectation of schooling in capitalist society—homogenization in thought leading to sustainability in labor practices (Graham et al. 2024; Ravitch 1990; Salvador et al. 2024).

## Fear

Within communities of anti-Blackness, there is fear that the exposure of white supremacy is capitalistically problematic, because socioeconomic structures intended to subordinate Black people would be exposed, which would ignite a social movement of resistance from the Black collective (Abdallah et al. 2025; Robinson 2000). However, a greater awareness of Blackness provides a newer social trajectory and economical sustainability for humanity (Gordon 2022; Lopez and Jean-Marie 2021). At one level, there is Black consciousness that qualifies for non-Blacks as an awareness of the struggle, which is an impetus for social change. The murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery are primary examples of reactive Black consciousness, because during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people in masks protested in solidarity to show the police and government the sociocultural significance of breath, and fight against the pandemic of racism. While admirable, that type of Black consciousness is not consistent, and it still frames Black people as a commodity within a capitalist system controlled by whites, while potentially being subjected to white neoliberal politics. CRT reveals another stream of critical intracultural awareness that exposes white supremacy called Black consciousness, where Black people are self-activated by their own knowledge and history (Gordon 2022; Gillborn 2015). CRT also identifies solidarity in the Black experience across the diaspora, because anti-Black communities greatly fear Black consciousness. Activating the spirit of Umoja, a Swahili term meaning unity or togetherness, the true liberation of Black people shifts the capitalistic advantages and privileges that whites have had for centuries to a true free-

dom and democracy where Black folks are unapologetic about their diasporic heritage and have a sustainable social, economic, and academic future with, or without dependence on, oppressive white Eurocentric systems (Gordon 2022).

In many regions of the world impacted by white supremacy, music education continues to segregate itself from other global traditions by lifting up the Western Anglo-Saxon European conservatory model as the dominant standard and rooting out any other musical traditions in an effort to create a monocultural system of musicing (Nompula 2011; Floyd 1982). As whiteness maintains its social dominance by propertizing itself through the commodification of Black people in music curriculum and pedagogy, capitalism will continue to function as a means to subordinate Blackness (Howard 2018; Bourke 2016; Harris 1993).

Because slavery, Jim Crow, and other discriminatory laws were outlawed in the United States, and with the political adoption of the ideology of colorblindness and a post-racial society, some believe that segregation no longer exists (Alexander 2016). According to Bakare (2020), sociopolitical activist Angela Davis believes that segregation still thrives through social control tactics such as gentrification, school closings, and the targeted policing of the racially minoritized. Because of the subtle nature of segregation in today's world, the opportunity for the Black community to take control of its own intracultural destiny in the global market continues to pose a great challenge (Wilson 2020). Racialized neoliberalism, meaning the individual socioeconomic freedoms within a system built on institutional racism, is the framework in which the Black community is situated in white space. From the social justice lens of CRT, operationalizing the Black community in a racially capitalistic society means that the "Black socioeconomics"—which has been allocated for the uplift of the neoliberal, capitalistic white agenda—must be reappropriated and controlled by Black people to specifically meet the social, economic, and academic needs of the Black community (Gyimah and Rose 2019).

## They Know

Many schools of music are aware of the *capping* and hegemony that exists in their spaces, but many opt into willful ignorance. In higher education, for example, despite data suggesting an overrepresentation of whiteness in enrollment, curricu-

lum, and pedagogy at schools of music (Regus 2023; Battiste 2024; National Association for Schools of Music 2022; McCall 2021), many institutions still neglect or negate racial and/or ethnic diversity in an authentic, non-performative way. There have historically been Black music scholars and performers operating in predominantly white schools of music space, possibly signaling the notion of racial progress (Davis 2021; DuPont 2019; Southern 1983). Who is to say that the present Black musicians in these spaces will choose to stay? Should prospective Black musicians even care about fitting into white spaces?

Given the landscape of white supremacy culture that still dominates education, and specifically music education, if music institutions do not expeditiously change their climate to support a positive and healthy sociocultural rhythm and pitch, then Black people could strategically sabotage these institutions by collectively leaving, causing these capitalist systems that have thrived on systemic inequality and fear to suffer a severe financial crisis (Baines and Hager 2021; Claessens and Kose 2013; Davis 2021). When there is a financial crisis, there is usually a significant downshift in the credit availability and asset values of an institution, which could impact the services that an institution provides and the funding they receive from the government, businesses, and other financial institutions (Claessens and Kose 2013). Loss of power leads to loss of two vital components for all capitalists: revenue and assets (Baines and Hager 2021). White power would cease to exist if there were no Black people (assets) to control. Although Black enrollment in predominantly white institutions is relatively low, *any* loss in today's climate of federal funds and grants being reduced and cut is problematic for a school, and it also would create a public relations nightmare, where the lack of diversity and a perpetuation of institutional racism are exposed, despite the rhetoric and mission statements that say the opposite (Davis, 2021; Mayorga 2014).

### *Uplift*

For the sake of the racial uplift of the Black community in white music education spaces, and while the possibility of Black mass exodus looms, it is valuable—using the CRT lens—for pan-African people to purge racism from their collective soul by embracing Afrocentric principles that promote racial uplift and economic prosperity in a capitalistic society. The Nguzo Saba, or seven principles of Kwanzaa, as established by Dr. Maulana Karenga (2010), are necessary and valuable tools that

can be intraculturally activated for a social, academic, and economic liberation of diasporic citizens in the pan-African culture (Mayes 2009). Although Karenga created Kwanzaa as a weeklong celebration to highlight and reinforce African culture, his perspective on the impact of whiteness in education is insightful, “The white university is not primarily an educational institution but a political one, and it seeks to maintain the power base of American society.” The following are the seven principles of Kwanzaa created by Karenga (2010) that pan-Africans can collectively utilize as tools of prosperity in a racially capitalist space:

- **Umoja (Unity)**—To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.
- **Kujichagulia (Self-knowledge; determination)**—To define, name, create and speak for ourselves.
- **Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)**—To build and maintain our community together and make our brother’s and sister’s problems our problems and to solve them together.
- **Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)**—To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.
- **Nia (Purpose)**—To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
- **Kuumba (Creativity)**—To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.
- **Imani (Faith)**—To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

The Afrocentric principles of Kwanzaa are not intended to cancel the sociocultural value of Eurocentrism. Instead, the principles of Kwanzaa serve as counter-knowledge for the uplift of pan-African culture and economics. These guiding principles also dispel the social narrative of savagery and barbarism that white supremacy culture normalized for capitalistic purposes (Bulgozdy 2020). In the final section, I summarize this study by repositioning and redistributing captialistic power in a way to support a more equitable and inclusive music education.

## A Melodic Conclusion

“I’m not scared of werewolves, vampires. But man I’d always lose sleep as I dream that I could set my people free....” “Sinners” by Rod Wave  
<https://youtu.be/eS3BSM8oJ1U?si=rsqYefpEHU-02xR6>

The individuals or social groups currently positioned to control the rhythm and pitch of capitalism must decenter their own profit (financial and social) as the main goal and prioritize social needs that support the marginalized without attempting to profit from them. This can be done with a greater increase in Black/Brown educational leadership, which in turn could support the liberation of white people from their own oppression and stereotypical impression of Black/Brown intelligence in music education (McCord 2016; Freire 1970). CRT reveals how structural racism contributes to negative perceptions of Black intelligence and value. Black leadership in music education challenges those assumptions and could improve cross-cultural understandings, leading to a more democratic capitalism by expanding economic networks which could benefit all people (Gates 1998; Lewis 2023; Washington 1901). This melodic shift in music education could see racism eradicated expeditiously, because it is the same process that was initially used to support white supremacy (Yunus 2008).

The ideology of capitalism does not provide any assurances of consonant harmony. It is how the rhythm and pitch of capitalism are synthesized, interpreted, rehearsed, and performed. The nature of capitalism, according to Piketty (2017), produces inequality, but a critical approach that exposes capitalism as racist, could lead to a shift in music education that disrupts and/or eliminates socioculturally hegemonic norms (Gonzalez and Butcher 2021). In Afro-based music traditions, a groove is a presence of subdivision which can connect pan-African musical and social commonalities to other global traditions (Perchard 2015; Pressing 2002). The mindset of making capitalism work for everyone in music education is about finding the groove, where rhythm and pitch align to make progress, not perfection, and where music learning and teaching is not atomistic, but part of a holistic education experience (Nikkanen and Westurland 2017; Benedict 2013).

## About the Author

Adrian Davis is an Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Minnesota. His research interests are connected to his experiences and skills as a K–12 music educator. His focus areas center diversity and equity, with an emphasis in critical pedagogies, amplifying marginalized and racially minoritized voices, and democratizing K–12 and post-secondary systems and pathways in music education.

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