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Artistic Empathy in Music Education: A Curricular Response for a Shifting Sociopolitical Landscape

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Abstract

In the current sociopolitical moment, US society is operating within a politically charged environment, where policies seek to stifle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and to rewrite narratives surrounding marginalized identities. These efforts challenge the very foundation of inclusive education and, by extension, the role of music and the arts as spaces that engender empathy—to enter into the world of another, to see and feel beyond oneself, and to grasp the fragile dignity of human life in its plural forms. In this paper, we examine empathy through an artistic lens. Drawing from established theories of empathy, we extend these theories to artistic curricular and pedagogical implications in the music classroom and propose *artistic empathy* as a framework in response to the current sociopolitical climate. The framework includes four interrelated pillars: Relational aesthetics, critical emotional literacy, cultural positionality, and imaginative responsiveness. We provide examples of how educators may engage the framework to position music as both a vehicle for social understanding and a means of resisting epistemic and cultural erasure.

Keywords

Artistic empathy, empathy, divisive concept laws, curricular framework

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In the current sociopolitical moment, US society is currently operating within a politically charged environment, where policies and laws seek to stifle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and to rewrite narratives surrounding marginalized identities (Benitez, Reid, and Friedman 2025; Bylica, Hawley, and Lewis 2024; PEN America 2023; Salvador, Bohn and Martin 2023). These efforts, which aim to erase the realities of marginalized people, are coupled with repressive ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, location, ethnicity, language, ability, and social class, and challenge the very foundation of inclusive education. In the midst of an increasingly fraught political and cultural terrain, the discourse surrounding education—particularly arts and music education—finds itself entangled in ideological disputes that reveal not only the contours of political polarization but also a deeper contestation over the moral and epistemological foundations of public schooling.

In the US, the passage of Divisive Concept Laws—"legislative and executive orders that seek to restrict teaching, professional learning, and student learning in K–12 schools and higher education regarding race, gender, sexuality, and US history"—across various states constitutes a paradigmatic symptom of this conflict: legislation that seeks to delimit what may be thought, taught, and spoken within educational spaces (Salvador et al. 2023, 5). At the time of this article, in the US more than seventy bills were introduced across twenty-six states, with twenty-two becoming law in sixteen states (PEN America 2025). These laws proscribe discussion of race, gender, power, and historical trauma—not merely as factual content, but as lived experience, ethical concern, and aesthetic expression.[1] As such, they threaten to excise precisely those elements of human inquiry through which music and the humanities have historically spoken most powerfully. As a result of these laws, in 2023 the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) created a National Divisive Concept Laws and Music Education Report to highlight concerns that these loosely defined and unevenly enforced policies—often referred to as "educational gag orders"—create a chilling and censorial atmosphere for music educators, provoking many to restrict curricula and steer clear of particular musical genres, repertoire, and historical perspectives (Salvador et al. 2023).

Given this shifting educational landscape, as US-based teacher educators and artists, we are deeply concerned with the types of curricular experiences, pedagogical approaches, and artistic practices that can effectively "facilitate the creative

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elaboration of mutual understanding and recognition" (Foster and Yaseen 2019, 5). What is at stake, then, is not merely a set of curricular choices but an entire conception of education as an ethical encounter with alterity—a conception rooted in the philosophical tradition that views the arts not as ornamental, but as morally and affectively formative. The arts, and music in particular, have long been understood as cultivating what Martha Nussbaum (2010) calls the "moral imagination": that capacity to enter into the world of another, to see and feel beyond oneself, and to acknowledge the humanity and worth of individuals in many contexts unfamiliar to the self. Amidst the current policies and rhetoric, the moral imagination becomes bound, a closed form from possibility (Allsup 2016). In the face of these epistemic closures imposed by Divisive Concept Laws, the ethical role of music as a vehicle for empathy and social understanding becomes not only urgent but subversive—a form of resistance grounded in aesthetic relation.

Situating Empathy

Empathy, broadly construed, traverses a wide range of disciplinary terrains—from moral philosophy and social theory to neuroscience and aesthetics. While many provide definitions and theoretical discussions of the concept, none have captured total consensus (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, and Howat 2014). Within moral philosophy, thinkers such as Nussbaum (2010) have posited empathy as foundational to the cultivation of the moral imagination. It is through the act of imaginatively entering into another's inner world, she argues, that one becomes ethically attuned to the lives, suffering, and dignity of others. In this way, empathy is framed not as passive emotion but as an intentional and cultivated orientation toward justice. Yet such optimism has not gone unchallenged. Other theorists, such as Derek Matravers (2024), have questioned whether empathy is capable of transcending the biases and partialities that shape human perception. Empathy, they further, is often unreliable, context-dependent, and susceptible to distortion. An empathetic response is more likely to be drawn toward those who resemble one—culturally, ideologically, affectively—as it is to those who truly need one's understanding. In this light, empathy becomes less a path to justice and more a mirror of one's own preferences and exclusions.

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This tension is amplified by debates over the distinction between types of empathy, namely, cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy entails the intellectual capacity to take the perspective of another—to grasp, with some degree of accuracy, one's thoughts, beliefs, or emotions (Blair, Mitchell, and Blair 2005). By contrast, affective empathy involves a deeper, more immediate resonance: the felt experience of another's joy, pain, or despair (Blair, Mitchell, and Blair 2005, Hendricks 2018; Maibom 2017). While both dimensions are essential for social life, each carries ethical risks. Cognitive empathy, absent compassion, may remain cold, distant, and disengaged. Affective empathy, when unbounded, may result in what psychologists term emotional contagion—an overwhelming of the self by the suffering of others (Goldman 2006; Maibom 2017). For educators, contagion is not an abstract concern. In professions where emotional labor is central—teaching, social work, healthcare—the capacity to remain attuned to others without being consumed by their pain is a daily negotiation (Hackman 2023). As Felicity Laurence (2017) observes, compassion fatigue and moral burnout are not failures of empathy, but symptoms of its excess, especially when institutional conditions fail to support emotional resilience or collective care.

Amidst the multiple conceptions of empathy, what becomes increasingly clear is that empathy is not merely a private virtue, nor merely psychological, but a socially constructed practice shaped by cultural narratives and institutional power. One does not simply feel-with (Aragona 2016; Hendricks 2023); one is taught how and for whom to feel. Cultural and political structures mediate the very possibility of empathy—who is seen, who is heard, who is rendered legible as a subject worthy of compassion (Goodrich 2023). In contexts of race, gender, class, and coloniality, the distribution of empathy often follows the contours of privilege. This becomes especially evident in discourses of humanitarianism, where the suffering of distant others is consumed as spectacle. Examples of this include the normalization of surveillance and videorecording—without consent—of people in public places, often when they are in distress or struggle; these videos are often posted and shared widely online on social media. So, too, has this discourse seeped into education, where the emotional lives of marginalized students are often pathologized or ignored (Hendricks and Hess 2024) in order to foreground topics and content that can be easily assessed (Bernard and McBride 2020).

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This critique extends into the domain of music education, where empathy is often presumed to arise naturally through shared musical activity. Indeed, musical engagement demands interpersonal coordination, attunement, and responsiveness. When students play, sing, or improvise together, they must listen deeply, anticipate others' actions, and shape their own expressions in relation to the group. Karin Hendricks (2018) emphasizes how such practices cultivate forms of relationality that echo broader social and ethical dynamics: patience, reciprocity, and mutual recognition. Yet this vision of musical empathy is not without its limitations or critiques. As Juliet Hess (2019) cautions, many music education models continue to prioritize precision and technical mastery over emotional or cultural engagement.

Further, when uncritically invoked, empathy may perpetuate paternalism or reproduce dominant narratives under the lens of care (Hess 2019; Hendricks and Hess 2024). Within music education, this critique takes on particular urgency, given the historical privileging of Western classical traditions at the expense of other musical epistemologies (Davis 2017; Hess 2019). Such critique aligns with what Hess (2022) queries as the pedagogical need to "not understand"—or the refusal to understand—in matters as crucial as cases of dehumanization and extreme suffering. Thus, an ethic of empathy must be critical as well as affective—one that resists the hegemonic impulse to assimilate but instead embraces an encounter with the other in all their irreducible difference.

Yet empathy itself has become a contested terrain. Within the post-truth and algorithmically amplified discourses of the present, empathy is no longer universally valorized. Elon Musk's (CEO of Tesla, co-founder of PayPal, head of X/Twitter, former Senior Advisor to the 47th President of the United States, and the richest man on Earth at the time of this publication) assertion that empathy has become "weaponized" signals a broader suspicion of affective engagement in the public sphere, as though to feel-with another were always already an act of ideological coercion (Wolf 2025). Such critiques reflect a deeper anxiety about the power of emotional experience to unsettle normative structures of belief and belonging. Within education, this suspicion manifests as a retreat into so-called neutrality, a refusal to engage with the emotional and ethical dimensions of learning, particularly where they intersect with historical injustice.

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Divisive Concept Laws, then, constitute a form of "curricular epistemicide" (Paraskeva 2016)—a silencing not only of content but of ways of knowing. They seek to render music ahistorical, to strip it of its dialogic power, and to reframe it as a neutral aesthetic commodity rather than a site of critical engagement. To speak of empathy in such neutral, de-political, de-historical, de-cultural contexts, then, is to speak of absence as much as presence. Whose music is heard? Whose voices are silenced? Which affective registers are deemed legitimate, and which are rendered excessive, unintelligible, or disruptive? These are not merely curricular questions; they are also ontological and ethical. What does this mean for curriculum and learning? How might music educators design learning experiences that enable students to engage with and name empathy in a profound and meaningful way—one that allows for a non-surface level understanding and connection to the perspectives and emotions of others?

To explore, we build upon foundational theories of empathy and extend them to artistic curricular and pedagogical implications in the music classroom. We propose *artistic empathy* as a sociological practice and curricular framework that places empathy at the core of the music education experience. An artistic empath experiences music and art in ways that cultivate both an intellectual and emotional understanding of the lived realities of others. The framework includes four interrelated pillars; together, the pillars create a resonant arc of empathy, where students might engage in sustained empathic practices. We provide examples of how educators may use the pillars in practice, and how the pillars work with one another. Central to this work is the concept of the "empathic bridge"—the pedagogical and aesthetic space where these pillars converge, allowing music to serve as both a vehicle for social understanding and as a means of resisting epistemic and cultural erasure. Through the empathic bridge, music becomes not merely expressive, but connective, linking individual emotion with shared, collective consciousness, and inviting students into ethically engaged, relational acts of knowing and ways of being.

Artistic Empathy

Situated pedagogically, empathy is a dynamic, intersubjective praxis. It is an embodied and imaginative enactment of perspective-taking, an act that music can

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uniquely enable. Thus, we offer artistic empathy, a cultivated, dynamic, and imaginative mode of relational understanding through which individuals, as artists or audiences, connect with, inhabit, and respond to the lived experiences, cultural identities, and expressive intentions embodied in artistic works. This reconceptualization of empathy as *artistic* in nature aligns with Nussbaum's (2001, 2010) assertion that the arts are central to the development of moral imagination and civic responsibility. Music, in its capacity to mediate complex affective states and diverse subjectivities, invites a form of understanding that is at once emotional, intellectual, and social. As such, it can function as a countermeasure to pedagogical fragmentation and ideological essentialism, offering students a means of imaginatively inhabiting the lives of others and critically engaging with structures of meaning, power, and belonging.

Artistic empathy is not a soft sentimentality but a radical orientation—an act of compassionate attention that compels students to engage with music as a bearer of historical memory, cultural struggle, and human longing. It aligns with the pedagogical commitments of critical consciousness (Freire 1970), urging students to discern and disrupt the power relations embedded within musical texts and contexts (Matravers 2024). Artistic empathy is philosophically animated by what Nussbaum (2010) terms the narrative imagination—the capacity to "think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself" (95–96). Yet, we expand upon this capacity through artistic empathy: we do not merely ask students to imagine, but to *experience*, *embody*, and *respond* through aesthetic form. This shift from passive contemplation to active interpretation is rooted in Maxine Greene's (1995) vision of the arts as a call to wakefulness—a means of "wide-awakeness" to the lives of others and the structures that contour them (35). Greene's insistence on the arts as a medium through which the moral imagination is stirred, the world made questionable, and new possibilities gleaned, informs the very heart of artistic empathy.

This artistic empathic curricular framework echoes Hendricks's (2018) call to move from the abstract to the active. As she describes through the lens of care, one progresses from "caring for" to "caring about" and ultimately, "caring with" (2023, 2025). Hendricks (2023) describes that "caring with" includes "the added awareness of another's values and world views, promoting action or support that is truly

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warranted or wanted by another" (15). In other words, along this empathic spectrum, one begins to think of empathy cognitively, in an abstract sense, of what it means to name the qualities of feeling; then, one moves into affectively feeling for (and with); and finally, one becomes compelled to move from feeling to action, or what she refers to as "compassionate empathy" (Hendricks 2018). The purpose of our work is to shift the focus toward curriculum—to structure what this action might look like in practice—moving from the abstract to the tangible, using the arts and artistic processes as the vehicle. We see this non passive approach to empathy as critical and central to addressing the issues that Divisive Concept Laws create and exacerbate. If the very idea of such laws is to divide, this framework does not merely provide a counter narrative, but a counter action, an active response to concrete policy. Thus, the teaching of empathy in music education moves beyond simple aesthetic appreciation and becomes a dynamic, dialogic, relational process through which students are encouraged to connect with the diverse human experiences that shape musical and artistic traditions.

Artistic Empathy as Curricular Framework

If empathy is to become more than a sentimental posture—to rise to the level of a pedagogical and philosophical imperative—then curriculum must be reconceived beyond content delivery and as a generative, ethical, and aesthetic space in which students are invited to inhabit the complexity of human experience. Thus, what we propose here is not empathy as outcome or method, but empathy as process and structure—a guiding ethos for curriculum itself. Goldstein and Winner (2012) found that arts-based perspective-taking activities can significantly enhance empathic skills in students (4). As a result, we offer a framework for pre-K-12 through which students can come to feel, understand, and respond to the lives of others through the embodied and ethical work of artmaking. The framework, when used in whole, creates a resonant arc, a pathway to sustainable artistic and empathic understanding and practice. We use the word resonant with purpose, as resonance (from a musician's standpoint) refers to a vibration of sound where one's own voice is matched with another's. In this moment, one can hear and feel oneself and another. The arc is not linear, but sequential. Within the arc are four pillars: relational aesthetics, critical emotional literacy, cultural positionality, and imaginative responsiveness. These pillars are not discrete "units" but ontological orientations—

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ways of being and becoming in the music classroom that open students to the practice of empathic engagement through the arts. We depict our visual conception of the artistic empathy framework below in Figure 1:

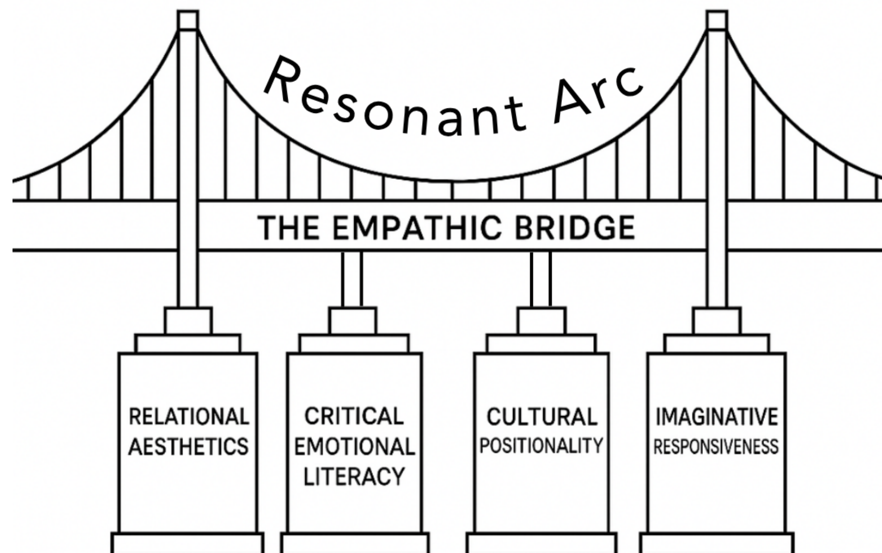

Figure 1: Visual of artistic empathy framework.

In what follows, we provide a definition of each pillar and outline their salient aspects. We then situate the pillars in practice and provide examples for a secondary classroom, demonstrating how each pillar builds upon the previous, using possible examples of art, music and media, as well as pedagogical questioning techniques. Finally, the "Putting it Together" section serves as a short summary to bring both the conceptual and practical in concert together, linking theory to practice through extant literature. As this framework is not a methodology, the curricular suggestions made in this are not time-bound. These examples may serve as short segments within a lesson, or they may be extended to take up longer time; further, the pillars may occur over multiple lessons or units, or they can be embedded within a yearlong curriculum. Teachers may scaffold with questions and prompts as they see fit, keeping in mind that they should not be overly heavy handed or outcome oriented.

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The Skeptical, the Obvious, and the Weary: An Acknowledgement and a Disclosure

At the risk of proposing another new curricular idea, we fully anticipate responses of skepticism, tones of obviousness, and weariness from readers—particularly experienced pre-K–12 teachers and academics—which we acknowledge. This framework does not propose a new set of standards to be met, nor is it about creating activities to address existing standards within music or social emotional learning. Similarly, it is not a collection of "tips and tricks" for injecting empathy into the music classroom. Rather, it is an invitation to refine and reflect upon a way of thinking—one that is already alive in much of what arts educators do, but which often goes unnamed or undervalued (Nussbaum 2010). The framework's purpose is to offer a conceptual lens through which music educators might interpret and orient their existing practices, rather than a checklist to be implemented or a method to be mastered. Its value lies not in prescribing *what* to do, but in naming and opening the *why* and *how* of empathetic engagement within artistic practice and teaching.

Some may seem skeptical about such an approach. Why another framework? Aren't there enough? We recognize anecdotally that discussions of emotions or other "soft" skills—when not firmly rooted in empirical data—can become overly sentimental and can lack a certain type of academic validity. Yet, amidst the Divisive Concept Laws and other policies and rhetoric, foregrounding discussions of the role of music and the arts in humane ends in teaching seems critical for the moment.

Further, one may feel that this framework is obvious. Who wouldn't use a multitude of works of art in one's teaching in a music classroom? Has this not been done before as a curricular approach (e.g., Barrett 2023; Barrett, Veblen, and McCoy 1997). An educator may look at the overarching aspects of this framework and say, "I already do this." However, while such aspects may seem obvious, we have noticed that when notions of empathy are employed in the music classroom, they have often—unintentionally—been ancillary from the artistic process, incorporated through more general strategies rather than through a merging of the human and the artistic. Too often, when empathy is invoked in arts education, it is added peripherally—adjacent to the artistic process rather than embedded within

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it. Empathy becomes a talking point, a learning objective, or a social-emotional checkmark, rather than a felt, artistic encounter. As some have suggested (e.g., Benedict 2020; Bylica 2020; Yob and Jorgensen 2020), this disconnection limits the transformative potential of both empathy and art. An artistic empathy framework embraces the arts and music as the medium through which music is explored—not a general framework being applied to a specific subject area.

Finally, upon hearing a new framework, some may instinctively become weary. Teachers—especially those in public schools—have been inundated with initiatives framed as moral imperatives (Santoro 2021; Walker 2022): SEL programs, character education models, and various mandated curricula du jour that too often arrive as external impositions rather than organically evolving from classroom practice. In this climate, with the added Divisive Concept Laws, it is easy (and fair) to feel weary (and also, in turn, perhaps skeptical) of any new framework that presents itself as a tool.

Our intention is not to create a tidy framework to be neatly incorporated, as the artistic process is not a tidy one. We ask academics and practitioners to embrace the nuances and uncertainties of teaching that the arts have always championed. We reposition music, art and the humanities as central to empathic understanding. We shift the order that, at the heart of individual empathic response is the collective humane response to artistic engagement.

Empathic Bridge

At the heart of the resonant arc is the empathic bridge—a symbolic, artistic, or personal conduit that carries one from the familiar world into the lived perspective of another. The empathic bridge draws upon one's existing ways of knowing—biases, cultural background, prior experiences—and links the familiar to the unfamiliar through a resonant point of contact: a song, a painting, a story, a familiar face, or a cultural reference, enabling a psychological "pivot"—a moment when the familiar acts as a safe passageway into the unfamiliar (see Decety and Jackson 2004, 71).

For example, in the film *Philadelphia*, Tom Hanks became the empathic bridge for audiences who may not have related to the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community or the AIDS crisis. The audience's trust in Hanks as an actor allowed them to feel with his character, opening a perspective they might otherwise have resisted (Cart-

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wright 2016). Educationally, teachers may intentionally use bridges—trusted figures, familiar artistic forms, or shared cultural references—to help students access and understand perspectives that might otherwise remain abstract or emotionally distant. Students might ask: What was the bridge for me? What sound, image, or moment enabled me to cross into a new understanding? As Nussbaum (2001) argues, narrative imagination is the key to empathy: "We are able to imagine what it is like to be in the position of a person different from ourselves, and to understand the emotions, wishes, and desires that person might have" (10). The empathic bridge is the artistic or symbolic structure that makes this act of imagination possible and safe.

Relational Aesthetics

Relational aesthetics reorients aesthetic value from the individual contemplation of an object to the shared experience of presence, vulnerability, and connection. In this view, art does not exist in isolation, nor is it merely to be consumed (Abrahams 2024); it is co-constructed in the interplay between the one who creates, the one who receives, and the space in between. Music, in particular, is uniquely positioned for this kind of relational work; it unfolds in time, requires breath, and is received not only through the ears but through the nervous system, the body, the memory. It lives in the tension between self and other, sound and silence, offering what could be called a temporary commons—where being together becomes the medium to make meaning. In the music classroom, this phase of the arc asks students to encounter works that do not merely entertain or impress, but to invite (Greene 1995). A choral setting of a spiritual, a protest song, or a communal soundscape installation may serve as relational invitations.

In Practice

Students are prompted to reflect on the specific words and how they interpret them. For this practice, we center around the following: "What thoughts or feelings come to mind when thinking about the words 'mother,' 'father,' 'parent,' 'guardian,' or 'caregiver'?" To respond to this prompt, students may write, draw, or respond however they wish. Each student will have a different conception, lived experience, and relationship to these words; some may have positive associations to these

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terms, while others may not even know how to begin due to a fraught relationship (so, too, might similar responses occur when giving a prompt to share thoughts or feelings about the word "home," as home has many connotations for folks—some as a warm and nurturing place, some as an ideal they never had or experienced, and some as an unsafe place, for example).

Participation should remain voluntary, with alternative or silent modes of engagement always available, and without expectation of personal disclosures—teachers should approach this work with a trauma-informed mindset if necessary.[2] Some students may draw a picture of their own caregiver, or perhaps even the societal view of what these familial terms represent. Others might journal at length. Further, some students might write minimally or simply sit, as they may not feel these responses are yet available to them. The complexities of responses are welcomed and encouraged, allowing for students to access their range of emotions and responses (e.g., Maas 2021; Perkins 2021). After this initial prompt, they listen to a recording of "This is to Mother You" by Sinead O'Connor (2015), arranged for chorus by Craig Hella Johnson and add to their inventory of the familial terms. Students take stock in how their personal reflections and emotional responses connect to—or may even be further enriched—by engaging with the performance. This may be done through small or large group conversation, or even through providing a graphic organizer as a guide.

Putting it Together

In this moment, empathy is not demanded—it is prepared. The listening experience softens the internal resistance many students carry, especially when engaging unfamiliar or painful histories. It builds an emotional scaffolding that can hold the weight of the image. This is empathy not as projection or assumption, but as an affective co-presence—a sense that the interior world of another is worthy of attention. The bridge between music and image collapses the notion that aesthetic experience is private. It affirms that one often feels most deeply not in solitude, but in community. The act of listening—together—becomes a rehearsal for encountering difference with openness. Dewey (1934) describes this as "the live creature in the live world" (19), and recent research confirms that shared music-making increases empathic concern and social bonding (Rabinowitch, Cross, and Burnard 2013, 186).

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Critical Emotional Literacy

Critical emotional literacy insists that emotion, like language or history, is constructed. It does not deny that one feels—but it interrogates the sources and structures of those feelings (Winans 2012). In this frame, emotion is not apolitical, and neither is art. Particularly in music, where emotional manipulation is often a feature, not a flaw, educators must ask: What is this music asking me to feel? And who benefits from that feeling? Critical emotional literacy teaches one to hold their emotional reactions up to the light—to examine them not only for what they reveal, but for what they obscure.

In Practice

Returning to "Mother," students are prompted to reflect not just on what they felt while listening, but why.

> Why might the breathless delivery of a lyric make them feel a particular way?
>
> Why do you think setting the idea of "caregiver" to music can elicit so many different reactions and responses—to both the lyrics and the music/performance?

Through questions such as this, students begin to unearth the emotional coding embedded in the music. And further, to draw connections between that emotional coding to their own individual response. From there, the conversation begins to pivot:

> What assumptions or memories did I bring to this musical listening?
>
> From an emotional standpoint, what feelings did I access quickly and what required deeper awareness and reflection?

While students remark on this prompt, the teacher might consider, what cultural stories are my students unknowingly repeating when feeling this kind of grief, this joy, or this kind of comfort?

Putting it Together

This pillar toward empathy is not comfortable or tidy. The pedagogical moments ask the student to not only feel in the abstract but to question *how* they learned to feel in the first place. This critical stance is echoed by Michalinos Zembylas (2007), who emphasizes the need for "emotional capital" in education—an ability to reflect

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on and learn from one's emotional responses (447). Such ability is something that has been echoed in empathy literature within music education, where Hendricks (2018), in speaking about compassionate music teachers, refers to the importance of a teacher's ability to "read" and interpret students while teaching with empathy (65). We extend this act of "reading" to the students themselves (Moje 2008). Through the critical emotional literacy pillar, students begin to access their tools to read emotion within themselves, in order to eventually read the emotions of another and respond to them. The act of reading and interpreting oneself plants the seed for empathetic interactions with others to bloom.

Cultural Positionality

Cultural positionality is the ongoing practice of recognizing that one's knowledge, reactions, biases, and moral intuitions are shaped by their specific social and historical location. This pillar is not a theory of difference for difference's sake, but a call to situate oneself ethically in relation to others whose realities may be radically different from their own (Greene 1995). Cultural positionality resists the myth of neutrality—especially in arts education—where aesthetic values often reflect the preferences and power of dominant cultures (Nussbaum 2001). Shifting perspective, cultural positionality invites students to begin not with the question, "What does this mean to me?" but "From where do I view this, and what does that vantage point allow me to see—or prevent me from seeing?"

In Practice

Students view artist Titus Kaphar's *CBS Sunday Morning* (2020) feature on his artwork, highlighting the segment on his paintings that depict an absence of Black children, which he creates by physically cutting them out of the canvas. In the segment, Kaphar—a Black artist—describes that his artistic choice to omit these children serves to highlight the fears, anxieties, and incomparable pain surrounding the experiences of Black mothers, particularly the human losses in relation to systemic issues such as police violence and racial injustice. This omission is not just a visual technique—it is a confrontation and provocation. The erasure implicates the viewer, and may prompt such questions as: What don't you see? Why don't you see it? What realities are hidden from your frame of reference? Paired with the earlier

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emotional work of "Mother" described above, the visual, and the stories found within Kaphar's aesthetic, now functions as a kind of epistemological test, where students can reflect solo, in pairs, or groups: Are you ready to see more than what you were taught to see?

Putting it Together

Here, through the use of music and lyric, empathy begins to shift from a cognitive to more affective position, from thinking to feeling (Bloom 2005). A reflection on cultural positionality may remind one that before they can understand another, they must understand where *their* understanding begins—and ends. Empathy requires that one imagines lives unlike their own. But if one does not first locate the limits of their own perspective, they risk confusing empathy with projection. Locating one's limits may prevent one from speaking for others and allow them to listen to another instead. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) writes, "The absence of a self-defined standpoint… encourages members of subordinated groups to accept the dominant group's frame of reference as natural, normal, and universal" (28). Recognizing one's own standpoint—and the limitations of that standpoint—is thus essential for meaningful, respectful empathy.

Imaginative Responsiveness

Imaginative responsiveness is the act of translating understanding into creation. It builds upon the previous preparatory and responsive prompts and moments for perspective shifts and invites an application of this shift in an artistic way. This application is not simply a performance of a piece of existing repertoire. In this pillar, the student moves from recipient to maker (Hendricks 2023). Drawing upon the aesthetic insight gained through earlier stages, they respond—not with essays or exams, but with acts of creation. Engagement into imaginative responsiveness may include asking questions like: How do we honor what we have heard or experienced—not just in word, but in artistic sound, gesture, color, and form?

In Practice

In this pillar, students are invited to respond creatively and generate art that represents their own emotional investment in art while considering the investments

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of others: a soundscape of absence, a short poem, a piece of silent movement, a visual offering. Here, the prompt is open, but the goal is not expression for expression's sake. It is a response, grounded in what students have seen, heard, and felt. This work is not an "assignment"—it is an affirmation of perspective through art-making. Prompts might be:

> What might absence (of another/thing, from another/thing) sound like?
>
> What might it look like or feel like within the body?
>
> How do we sing/play about someone who's no longer here?
>
> How might we represent that through sound, visually, other?
>
> What tools and knowings do we need to represent this?

Students may brainstorm these questions and decide the best creation medium for them, and the ways in which they may begin to outwardly show empathy through creation. In particular, the last question in the prompts allows students to appraise what materials they may need, and what knowledge and practices they need to draw from in order to create (Bernard 2022, Moje 2008).

Again, while this pillar may be open to students to enter and create however they choose, students might reference Kaphar's work or O'Connor/Johnson's "Mother" piece as artistic examples to guide them, looking at the many aspects of the pieces discussed, analyzed, and interpreted in previous classes and considering the salient aspects that may be used in their own work. Students may choose to share these creations in a more public sphere with the class or privately in digital dialogue with teachers, close friends, and family. In this sharing they may impart (through speaking, writing, interdisciplinary, media, or a multimodal response) how the work intersects, overlaps, or sits alongside their perspectives and the perspectives of others they have artistically (perhaps not physically) come to know through this process.

Putting it Together

In this phase, the student moves from recipient to maker, acknowledging the affective and beyond. Drawing upon the aesthetic insight gained through earlier stages, they respond—through purposeful creative expression rather than evaluative commentary. Empathy can only be transformative when it leads to some form of action. Through an imaginative responsiveness, students create artistically in

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response to the shift in mindset and (hopefully) perspective gained. Through art-making and creation, students place themselves in conversation with new perspective. This kind of empathy is generative. Greene (1995) describes these moments as acts of "wide-awakeness," a state in which imagination and empathy fuel ethical action (35). Such moments of wide awakeness provide opportunity for change by requiring students to give something of themselves through an artistic medium. In this way, the act of artistic response becomes not only a reflection of inner transformation but an opening toward the kind of dialogic consciousness Freire (1970) envisioned—a consciousness in which the aesthetic becomes a site of ethical encounter, capable of unsettling passive perception and awakening the capacity to reimagine the world, beginning with the seeing, recognizing, and empathizing another.

The Resonant Arc does not close here; rather, it continues to bend—toward greater attunement with others, their frames of reference and ways of knowing, toward the ability to render the emotional realities of another as visible and felt, and toward the application of this sensibility within and beyond the artistic domain.

Imagining Otherwise

Ultimately, a curriculum of artistic empathy does not seek to make students "more empathetic" in the superficial sense. It seeks to cultivate within them a more complicated, situated, and durable capacity for being affected—and for acting in response to that affect. In this sense, the aesthetic becomes ethical, and music education becomes a space not just of artistic skill, but of moral courage. And, in turn, students become the empathic bridge within their lives, accessing their empathetic tools in and out of the classroom.

If the present educational moment is marked by ideological fracture and the erosion of shared civic language, then empathy—once regarded as a virtue of moral clarity—has become an ambiguous and embattled term. Legislative efforts such as Divisive Concept Laws have sought to delimit what content may be taught, as well as how students may come to feel, interpret, and respond to the world through educational experience. Such laws do not merely police curriculum; they constrain the moral and emotional horizons of young people. As Nussbaum (2010) insists, we must educate the emotions themselves, recognizing that the civic health of our

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democracy, and the moral life of our students, may depend on our ability to hear the world's pain—and to respond with imagination, humility, and resolve. To reclaim empathy as a meaningful force in music education, artistic empathy requires a philosophical reckoning with its conditions, its contradictions, and its curricular possibilities.

Against the backdrop of educational policies that marginalize nuanced cultural discourse and restrict curricular autonomy, music classrooms have the potential to emerge as sites of resistance and renewal. Artistic empathy, as a philosophical and pedagogical commitment, challenges the threats of curricular epistemicide (Paraskeva 2016) and positions music education as a space of radical possibility—where the work of ethical becoming unfolds not through didactic instruction, but through shared acts of artistic interpretation, relational listening, and imaginative reorientation. It reframes the music classroom not as a site of neutral transmission but as a forum where the human capacities for empathy and transformation are cultivated in concert. In an age defined by political fragmentation, ecological precarity, and cultural erasure, artistic empathy offers a vision of education beyond naïvety or nostalgia, but one that is courageously hopeful. It calls upon educators to resist the reduction of music to entertainment or technique and to embrace its power as a site of healing, critique, and collective remembering. It is our hope that this framework might provide tangible strategies and reflective (and, at times, even uncertain) space for artistically-based empathy practices, a crucial counterforce to contemporary social and political discourses. And, that such a framework may reimagine and reignite music and the arts as spaces that have always championed, imagined, and sought to enact a more humane world.

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Notes

[1] Examples of Divisive Concept Laws include the "Don't Say Gay" Bill in Florida (House Bill 1557 and Senate Bill 1834), which prohibits any classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in grades kindergarten through three; Tennessee barring educators from teaching about critical race theory in public schools (Senate Bill 377); and an increase in parental power over curricular materials in many states.

[2] While the most caring and empathetic of teachers may be well-versed in trauma-informed pedagogies, when strong emotional responses arise, collaboration and consultation with mental health professionals is both appropriate and encouraged. Our aim here is to model artistic experience and cultivate empathy through communal reflection and ethical care, *not* to evaluate or elicit emotional response.

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