

Historical Roots and Creative Relations

Lauren Kapalka Richerme
Indiana University (USA)

All music education endeavors involve a combination of historical roots and evolving relations. Historical roots ground individuals, groups, and cultural practices, allowing for continuity over time. Music education practices can strengthen and extend artistic endeavors rooted in students' home and local cultures. Alternatively, music education can work in tension with community music making, uprooting students from their familiar environments and leaving them ungrounded. Consistent with much ACT scholarship, the authors in this issue critique the Eurocentric musical practices that continue rooting and delimiting contemporary music education. Simultaneously, music educators and students are historically rooted within hierarchical systems, including capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, all of which are explored in this issue.

For me the word “root” evokes Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) philosophical figuration of a tree, with its deep roots stabilizing its preset growth trajectories. Roots, branches, leaves, and trunks each serve defined, inflexible functions. As such, Deleuze and Guattari associate the tree with stagnation and the verb “to be” (25). While ultimately calling for an ongoing mixture of arboreal and rhizomatic motion, they problematize trees’ immobility and coherence, writing: “The tree and the root

inspire a sad image of thought that is forever imitating the multiple on the basis of a centered or segmented higher unity” (16).

Yet, roots are not always problematic. As I have written elsewhere: “What is most troubling, however, is not arboreal growth and its related thinking in themselves, but that individuals have presupposed such practices as natural and universal” (Richerme 2020, 135). In challenging the ways of being musical and systems of domination that many music educators continue accepting as natural and universal, the authors in this issue set down new roots, from which robust, creative relational networks can grow.

My use of Deleuze and Guattari’s scholarship demonstrates that my own philosophical roots are heavily influenced and constrained by white, European male voices. Refreshingly, the authors in this issue draw on philosophical traditions beyond the Western canon, ranging from Black history to critical disability studies to Black feminism. These divergent ways of knowing uproot the epistemologies that too often ground and constrain music education scholarship, enabling new, creative theoretical relations.

In a piece inspired by Carter G. Woodson’s book *The Miseducation of the Negro*, **Loneka Battiste** details the harms caused by teacher education primarily focused on the Western classical music aesthetic. She vividly describes:

I have watched African American musicians who thrived in Black musical traditions apply for admission to music teacher preparation programs. Their piano skills included playing by ear with ease, improvising, incorporating complex chord progressions, and anticipating chord changes in unknown songs. I have also watched the same musicians, if not rejected at college entrance audition, weeded out of music programs after repeatedly failing music theory, change majors, or drop out of college altogether. Frequently, they complete music teacher preparation programs with feelings of inadequacy, doubtful they can succeed as music educators. They are unaware they possess a treasure trove of musicality that could invigorate and transform their pedagogy.

In response, Battiste calls for rooting African American preservice music teacher education in the Black musical aesthetic. While noting that not all African American students will identify with this aesthetic, she defends the need to center it by explaining that it “has been highly influential in the development of American music and is prevalent in African American communities.” Battiste suggests incorporating the Black musical aesthetic into classes ranging from music theory to keyboard to methods courses and clinical experiences.

Extending this critique of Eurocentric practices to notions of musical ability, **Adam Harry** illustrates how exclusionary systems continue to function in high school instrumental ensembles. Using critical disability studies as a lens to analyze students' discourse, Harry reveals how racialized, ableist norms continue rooting K–12 music education. For example, one student explained: "I have no musical talent, probably, but I do have musical skill. I probably will hit that point where I am like, 'Oh, I have gotten to my max skill, but I need some actual talent, which I can never get.' Cause, you know, you start off with that talent—natural born—and then you got skill." More broadly, students understood making musical mistakes as moral failings rather than as part of the educative process. In short: "institutional processes are used to rank and distribute bodies based on musical ability to produce a particular tactical and disciplinary effect. Students who demonstrate higher musical ability are rewarded with access to more learning opportunities, social status, and a deeper sense of belonging in the music area, whereas low-ability students are socially and spatially marginalized." Such sorting undermines opportunities for creative relationship building with diverse others, thus inhibiting both knowledge about differences and opportunities for solidarity.

In "A Critical Exploration into the Rhythm and Pitch of Capitalism in Music Education" **Adrian Davis** theorizes how the relationship between capitalism and racism plays out in everyday schooling. Similar to **Harry**, **Davis** offers that pervasive measures of excellence oppress certain individuals and groups. For example, **Davis** states that the "dog whistle" words grit and rigor encourage "learners to comply to a system of learning and teaching that is already codified to oppress them." While many ACT authors have addressed relationships between capitalist ills and music education, most notably in the recent special issue on the topic (Powell 2025), Davis centers capitalism's racist workings. He writes: "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." Importantly, Davis notes that calling attention to white supremacy not only illuminates existing social privileges but, problematically for capitalism, exposes "socio-economic structures intended to subordinate Black people." Davis's proposed way forward, which he derives from the seven principles of Kwanzaa, includes Ujima or 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.” Such cooperative action shares similarities with the relations key to **Lewis’s** article.

Also problematizing contemporary economic exploitation, **Eva Georgii-Hemming** and **Nadia Moberg** call for deemphasizing individual narratives in favor of class consciousness. They argue that “Despite ample evidence of persistent structural inequalities, much research in music education continues to frame such issues through the lens of individual experience.” They note that personal stories can offer important insights into experiences of marginalization, as demonstrated in this issue through **Battiste’s** and **Lewis’s** writing. While acknowledging that structural perspectives can “may appear more abstract and detached,” **Georgii-Hemming** and **Moberg** assert that decentering them “can inadvertently deflect attention from the broader systems that shape and sustain” systems of domination. They invite researchers to adopt a “relational perspective” attentive “to how structural conditions shape experiences. These include educational policy, institutional frameworks, and the unequal distribution of material, cultural, and symbolic resources across educational settings.” They understand such undertakings not just as a methodological choice but as a “political act.”

Also acknowledging how systemic inequities function within music education, in “Interconnectedness, Mycelium, and Black Feminism: An Anti-Oppressive Praxis for Music Educators” **Amy Lewis** advocates centering interpersonal relationships. She describes anti-oppressive praxis as “grounded in the ability to reimagine, build, and dream about creating practices and structures that center empathy and embrace the complex humanity within our multifaceted lived experiences.” Such reflective action provides a compelling counter to the ableist assumptions about excellence described by **Harry** and the dehumanizing effects of racial capitalism detailed by **Davis**.

Also key to **Lewis’s** article is the concept of the mycelium: “an incredibly strong and complex interconnected system of fungus and mushrooms. This system can be used to warn of harm and support strong connections.” I cannot read Lewis’s piece without relating the mycelium to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) philosophical figuration of the rhizome. Felicity Colman (2005) explains, “To think in terms of the rhizome is to reveal the multiple ways that you might approach any thought, activity, or a concept—what you always bring with you are the many and various ways of entering any body, of assembling thought and action through the world” (233). While similar in relational spreading to the rhizome, the mycelium

has the unique advantage of being able to communicate potential harm via its connections. Uprooting my Deleuzian predispositions enables me to find inspiration in the benefits of other creative relations. Moreover, **Lewis** speaks to the relationship between roots and relations: “interconnectedness can strengthen roots to one another and break down barriers, in order to create a healthy or more liberated classroom environment and ecosystem.”

Inspired by these authors, I conclude with a small attempt to get beyond my own philosophical roots and find new relations. Seeking out a non-Deleuzian quotation that I think speaks to both the articles in this issue and how readers might engage with them, I turn to Audre Lorde’s (1988) statement: “We must recognize and nurture the creative parts of each other without always understanding what will be created” (173). Thank you to the authors for challenging me to learn about new root systems and imagine multiple creative forms of relating.

References

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