

# Playing Upon the Blue Guitar: Toward Re-imaginings of the U.S. National Anthems

Mya Scarlato

University of Bridgeport (USA)

## Abstract

Drawing upon Maxine Greene’s concepts of *wide awakesness* and *social imagination*, I argue for the necessity of re-imagining “The Star-Spangled Banner” (U.S. national anthem) to account for a plurality of American perspectives and to de-legitimize ways in which racism and White privilege have dictated “correct interpretations” of the anthem throughout U.S. history. Toward these ends, in this essay I explore the patriotic re-imaginings of the U.S. national anthem by Black musicians Jimi Hendrix, René Marie, and Jon Batiste—two of whom incorporated “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” otherwise known as “the Black national anthem,” into their musical renderings. I also look reflexively at my experience with the song as a White American music teacher striving to work toward anti-racist pedagogy and engagements with patriotic music in the classroom. While there are a variety of musical recordings linked throughout the essay, I recommend that the reader view the three video recordings list below before reading the essay.

## Keywords

Maxine Greene, wide awakesness, social imagination, Jimi Hendrix, Star-Spangled Banner (U.S.), Black National Anthem (U.S.)

## Youtube Links to Recordings Discussed

[Jimi Hendrix’s Star-Spangled Banner](#)

[René Marie’s National Anthem](#)

[Jon Batiste’s National Anthem](#)

When I became Kai's piano teacher, I hoped to help him explore music in ways that allowed for openness and exposure to an array of musical perspectives. I wanted to encourage Kai to explore the keyboard—to experiment, improvise, and be intrigued by the kinds of sounds it could make—to view these sounds as a palette from which he could paint his own musical consciousness. And, of course, I wanted him to be able to play the piano with two hands and ten fingers, to develop the dexterity he needed to reach for chords and melodies, to learn to let his right and left hands function both independently and simultaneously. Most of all, I hoped to model my belief that musical situations can and should be negotiable spaces open to re-mixings (Allsup 2016) and re-imaginings (Greene 1995) through thoughtful engagements with music's form and context.

During one particular lesson, Kai and I were leafing through my stack of beginning piano songbooks in search of new repertoire. I read through some of the titles and played a few arrangements before Kai delivered his choice: "The Star-Spangled Banner." I remember cringing inside, thinking about Black football players Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid who had recently gained national attention by kneeling instead of standing for the performance in protest of systemic racism and police brutality; I thought about former U.S. President Donald Trump's demand that they be dismissed from the National Football League (NFL) and the league's tacit acquiescence. *Why this song?* I wondered. Admittedly, I wasn't well versed in the song's background and was only peripherally aware of the controversy around its lyricist, Francis Scott Key—a slave owner and anti-abolitionist (Wilson 2016). Kai's nine-year-old preference for "The Star-Spangled Banner" was probably as simple as that it was a song he knew and had heard many times before. It was also probably because Kai, like me, is White—meaning that the narratives around patriotic music in the United States don't directly contradict or disparage his (and our) own lived experiences and societal privilege.

We worked on the anthem's melody together at the keyboard, then listened to a few recordings—male and female performances of the song—remarking on their virtuosity and marveling at the anticipated "high note" when they sang it with gusto. On the YouTube sidebar of suggested videos, I saw a video that advertised a "minor version of The Star-Spangled Banner." "Ooh," I said, "Let's see what this one sounds like." Kai had a beginner's understanding of major and minor tonalities and was accustomed to experimenting with the two in his own playing; Kai seemed

intrigued by the video title, too. We listened, enraptured by this chilling and powerful rendition, sung a cappella in a belted pop style from what appeared to be the performer's home recording studio. At the conclusion, Kai immediately remarked on how strange this version sounded, and how he didn't like it—but “could we listen again?”

As we continued to discuss the ways the minor tonality changed our experience of the song, I thought of a new idea, and googled Jimi Hendrix's 1969 Woodstock performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” on the electric guitar. From the moment Hendrix released that first blast of sound, Kai's discomfort was palpable. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched his expressions morph from the narrowing of his eyes—“what?”—to a face tightly scrunched—“*what?!?*”—to hands clasped over his ears before being cautiously lifted to hear more. The deliriously complex harmonies, the distortion of sounds that denature into stratospheric overtones, the familiar melody that forges through the chaos of rocketing glissandos and explosive chords: it was a lot for Kai—and for me—maybe for anyone—to take in. “Why?! Just—*WHY?!?*” he burst, halfway through the video.

At the conclusion of Hendrix's performance, Kai asked again, clearly in distress, “Why? Why would he do that?” I thought for a moment, knowing I wouldn't have a satisfying answer. “Maybe he wanted to create a version of the song that was different or like something nobody had ever heard?” I suggested. Kai's wide eyes and audible “Pfff!” suggested that perhaps the word “different” was too gross an understatement. “Maybe he thought it was beautiful?” I posed. This, too, was a hard sell for Kai, but I continued, “You and I might not be used to the sound of the electric guitar played in this way, but it was his instrument, just like the piano is yours . . . maybe he liked the sound of it the way you like the sound of the piano?” Kai still seemed skeptical but also slightly more receptive to this idea. “And,” I added, “Some people think that Jimi Hendrix played the song this way to protest the Vietnam War and the U.S. government . . . like maybe some of the loud, harsh sounds show that he was angry.” At this point, one of the after-school teaching assistants had come to collect Kai and bring him to his mom for pick-up. Our conversation ended abruptly without resolution.

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This essay is about awakenings—in large part my own—to the perspectives of others, particularly those of Black Americans—through musical and curricular engagements with patriotic music like “The Star-Spangled Banner.” It is also about imagination, as developed by educational philosopher Maxine Greene, and the idea of *re-imagining* the American<sup>1</sup> national anthem in ways that honor and represent a plurality of identities and lived American experiences. Lastly, this essay is about three Black musicians—Jimi Hendrix, René Marie, and Jon Batiste—whose re-imaginings of the U.S. national anthem problematized conventional representations of patriotism by including, celebrating, and awakening us to voices of Black Americans, who are often excluded. Their work represents the kinds of complex, contextualized musical engagements I believe Maxine Greene hoped would be present in our classrooms.

I began drafting this essay amid the fiery summer 2020 protests against racial injustice that blazed worldwide in response to the police murder of George Floyd—a Black American falsely accused of paying with a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store in my home city of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Two and a half weeks later, Rayshard Brooks was killed by Atlanta police after falling asleep in the drive-through of a Wendy’s five miles away from my Atlanta residence at the time. Ahmaud Arbery was also killed in southern Georgia by two White men in February of 2020, and yet his murderers roamed the state freely for nearly three months before their arrest. There is nothing remarkable about my own geographic proximity to the killings of these three Black Americans—racially-motivated acts of violence are present in every U.S. city, town, and suburb—but perhaps the connections brought the names of these men, whom I had never met, to the forefront of my privileged, White consciousness. What might it mean for me as a White music teacher, I began to wonder, to explicitly address racial injustice against Black Americans in the spaces where I worked and taught? How might I more purposely and consciously work against my own societal privilege, particularly in relation to my Black students? At a time in the U.S. when many White people like myself were at a loss for words, Black Americans had much to say.

Upon discovering his recorded performance of the U.S. national anthem released on July 30, 2020, I found myself listening and re-listening to the words and musical activism of Jon Batiste. What surprised me upon first hearing the performance was that in tandem with “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Batiste’s patriotic

rendering also pays respect to another anthem—"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"—a melody known as "the Black National Anthem," of which I had been formerly ignorant about its social and historical significance for many Black Americans. In a Facebook post attached to the sharing of his anthem, Batiste wrote, "My rendition of 'our national anthem' speaks to the moment and is a representation of what this country is grappling with in real time" (Batiste 2020b). Through song, Batiste offered an answer to some of the questions swirling inside of me—particularly how and why music (and music education) might be a part of both the struggle for justice and a celebration of Black Americans. As I sat with Batiste's musical offering—watching the video several times over—I wanted to know more about "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." I also began to reflect again upon the lesson with Kai, Jimi Hendrix, and my own relationship to music deemed "patriotic" as a White American music teacher. I return to "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," as well as Batiste's anthem, in greater detail later in the essay.

I firmly echo Deborah Bradley's (2007) acknowledgment that "writing about Whiteness will not undo my White privilege" and may even enforce it (138). I also believe, as Mica Pollock (2009) does, that White people must be willing to talk about our Whiteness—to reckon with our privilege and the ways it impacts our work each time we set foot in the classroom, to endeavor to work toward more equitable practices. Amidst these tensions, I offer my essay, with the humble hope that Black Americans who might find themselves reading these words may interpret them in the spirit of someone who is striving—and not always succeeding—to be an anti-racist accomplice in my scholarship and in my pedagogy: striving to remain open to and inviting of the stories shared by people whose lived experiences as "American" are not my own; striving to do my part to support the socially imaginative work of Black musicians like Hendrix, Marie, and Batiste in my own classroom.

### Celebrating ~ "America"

I confess I have never felt much of a connection to music that is typically deemed "patriotic." I tire of the Sousa marches looped endlessly during national holiday parades; I often leaf past arrangements of patriotic tunes in songbooks when I play piano, and I can't even remember the all words to "The Star-Spangled Banner"—I've already looked them up half a dozen times in writing this essay, in addition to

the definition of “ramparts,” a word I never even realized (or cared that) I didn’t know. And yet, these sentiments reflect a narrow set of assumptions about questions such as, “What is patriotic music?”, “Who are patriots?”, and “What might it mean to engage in an act of artistic patriotism?”

“*I am a patriot*,” Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) proclaims (585, emphasis added). She acknowledges, however, that “for most people who know me that statement probably comes as a surprise” (285). Why is it that an *American* woman who has spent her entire career in service to children in *American* public schools—a teacher and administrator in Philadelphia public schools, a researcher and professor of urban public-school education at an *American* university, president of the National Academy of Education, editor of the *American Educational Research Journal*—might not be thought of as “patriotic?” Of course, names and titles affiliated with “America” are not enough to make someone a patriot: Betsy DeVos was appointed secretary for the United States Department of Education, an institution she actively sought to devalue and defund throughout her four years of incompetent decision-making, which notably included diverting public-school funds to religious schools and reneging on loan forgiveness programs promised to millions of U.S. public-school teachers (Kingsbury et al. 2021; Jimenez and Flores 2019). Yet DeVos’s political presence as U.S. Secretary of Education speaks precisely to Ladson-Billings’s (2006) point that “the term ‘patriot’ has been hijacked by an increasingly narrow and undemocratic sector of society” (585).

Estelle Jorgensen (2003) offers a historical perspective to explain the remnants of narrowly conceived patriotism present in particular groups across the United States today: amid (and prior to) the rise of industrialization and urbanization of the U.S. in the early 20th century, Jorgensen suggests, “Western culture was considered the cornerstone of education, and educational ends were more or less agreed upon. Cultural uniformity was accepted without question, and the dissenting voices of women and minorities were more or less silent” (2). Yet as non-White, non-male voices have fought to be heard as members of society through mainstream social movements (i.e., Women’s Liberation, Civil Rights, Black Lives Matter) that have prompted legislative action such as the Equal Rights Amendment (1972),<sup>2</sup> the Voting Rights Act (1965),<sup>3</sup> the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (2021).<sup>4</sup> Notions of cultural uniformity in the United States have since undergone varying degrees of erosion. As women and minoritized people began to participate in democratic action and political activism, they often challenged the

status quo and the cultural values that have protected the interests and comforts of White people, and men, throughout history. These voices have challenged the idea that any one group of people might hold a monopoly on claims related to how one's American (U.S.) identity and patriotism ought to look, sound, and feel. It is no wonder, then, that the people who have long enjoyed the luxury of being able to dictate and define to their own benefit what it means to be an "American"—those who benefit from White and male privilege—are fighting to conserve their power. Those who feel the loss of power most acutely, Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests, favor a version of patriotism "more akin to indoctrination than critical and analytic citizenship and civic discourse" (585).

If "tradition," as Jorgensen gestures, is constituted by a set of commonly accepted practices that have been upheld by society and maintained by those in power, what kinds of artistic engagements have traditionally been deemed "patriotic" in the United States? This question is not terribly difficult to answer in the context of music education, as we (Americans) have been repeatedly presented with songs and musical practices that we have been told, in so many words, are "patriotic"; perhaps readers in the U.S. might reflect as I did at the beginning of this section on Sousa marches like "Stars and Stripes Forever," or on the canon of songs played at sports games or on the 4th of July<sup>5</sup>—songs like "America the Beautiful," "God Bless America," and "This Land is Your Land" (although Woody Guthrie's activist message of inclusion in the last of these songs is often unacknowledged by proponents of traditional American patriotism). Normative engagements with patriotic music, Abril (2012) suggests, are often bound by a physical embodiment of behaviors (particularly during performances of the national anthem) such as displaying a solemn or somber demeanor, holding a hand on one's heart, fixing one's gaze upon an American flag, and standing erectly. If an administrator asks a music teacher to teach their students a patriotic song to perform at a school sporting event or ceremony, for example, it would likely be a song from or related to this canon, and the audience would probably behave in similar ways.

One benefit of tradition, Jorgensen (2003) suggests, is that it can provide "a stable basis for music and instruction by clarifying expectations, establishing policies and precedents, and ensuring continuity of beliefs and practices" (41). Yet, when established norms become oppressive and inflict harm on groups of individ-

uals, the precedent of tradition can make it “difficult, if not impossible, for musicians and educators to forge new approaches” (41). Joyce McCall (2017) speaks directly to the force of tradition in reflecting on her experience as a Black doctoral student who sought to engage in scholarship related to racism in music education. McCall recounts being advised by both Black and White colleagues to wait until she had the protection of tenure to publish “controversial” scholarship and reflects on the turmoil she felt in defending her dissertation in a way that felt true to her experiences and identity as a Black scholar and music educator. hooks (2015) confirmed the assumption behind McCall’s colleagues’ advice: “Whenever Black artists work in ways that are transgressive, we are suspect, by our group and by the dominant culture” (111). In other words, Black scholars and musicians are penalized for actions taken that are not in accord with tradition, as it is defined and reinforced by those who hold power (e.g., White scholars and musicians). Rather than bowing to oppressive aspects of tradition, McCall (2017) poignantly urges music educators and scholars to “realize the untouched template of Whiteness” in our expectations for scholarly and artistic engagements (15).

Recently, I have been reflecting on RuPaul Charles’s 2017 album and single, “[American](#)”—a song that both celebrates and blows open normative templates for patriotic music. Like many patriotic songs, RuPaul’s “American” celebrates a sense of pride and togetherness that can flow from a shared national identity: “My, my, my, my country ‘tis of thee / these are all my friends, we are a family,” and references a well-known, patriotic song, “My Country ‘tis of Thee,” (Smith 1861). Yet instead of commanding uniformity of expression around what it might mean to be an American, RuPaul’s interpretation of patriotic music explicitly claims individuality and “difference” as facets of American identity: “Hey, hey, hey, despite what you think / This is who I am and who I want to be.” By referencing several well-known songs from the traditional patriotic canon, RuPaul interprets American identity directly within the context of the drag race phenomenon (and queer culture) as an example of Americans working toward personal and social freedom: “Everybody came here wantin’ to be free / New York to California, sea to shining sea” (a reference to Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land”). Just as Ladson-Billings (2006) forcefully declares, “I am a patriot,” RuPaul proclaims repeatedly in the song’s chorus, “I am American”—illustrations of which are provocatively enacted by [Season 10 American drag queens](#) Eureka, Asia O’Hara, Aquaria, and



Kameron Michaels, as they strut around in glitter and glam, whirling across the stage in a cascade of hair flips, high kicks, and drop splits.

### Awakening ~ To Plural Ways of Knowing

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is one of the oldest recorded stories of wide awakeness, wherein shackled prisoners view shadows—"their reality"—on the walls of a firelit cave. Not only are the prisoners prohibited from leaving the cave, they are also unaware of the world outside, until the day they are untied, dragged out of the cave into the daylight—"true reality"—and forced to stare at the sun (Bloom 1991). While it is often emphasized that the journey out of Plato's famous cave is agonizingly painful, and while Plato does account for the prisoners who willingly choose to go back to the cave, a generally-understood "moral of the story" is that it is better to be out of the cave than in it, better to be free than captive, and better to know than not know.

The binary presented in Plato's allegory is that one is either inside or outside of the cave; one either knows the shadow puppet world or "true reality;" one is either asleep or awake. This characterization also aligns with some of the ways I've heard the slang version of wide awakeness—"woke"—used most recently by young people, in saying for example, "she's woke; he's not." To be "woke" in this way implies a before-and-after, such that if one is (or has been) "woke," then they are enlightened. The assumption is that a woke individual understands the world more fully than one who is not. To be woke is to possess the "right" information, while the opposite is to be ignorant and "in the dark." To me, this understanding of the word seems to be an uncritical remnant of the deeper, more powerful initiative started by Black Lives Matter and the movement's founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi to *#staywoke*; the movement began in 2012 in response to the murder of Black American teenager, Trayvon Martin and the police killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Black Lives Matter member and activist Brittany Packnett explains, "Now that you have been exposed—now that you have become aware of issues of police violence in our community—I need you to *stay* aware. I need you to *behave* like you're aware ... I need you to *get woke* and *stay woke*" (Grant 2016, emphasis added). As Packnett suggests, the act of *staying* woke (as opposed to *being* woke) requires a continual, active engagement in one's

“wokeness”; it speaks to the ongoing nature of the struggle to remain awake to perspectives and lived experiences of others.

Had she lived further into the 21st century, I think Black Lives Matter’s call to *stay woke* would have resonated deeply with Maxine Greene. Greene (1978) similarly characterized wide awakeness as a breaking free from the “routine,” the “habitual,” and the “mechanical” goings-on of everyday life (42). As Greene conceived it, wide awakeness is not an ideal to be attained, as if to say, “I once was asleep but now I’m awake”; rather, it is a process of persistent vigilance and commitment to becoming more aware of one’s positionalities—a willingness to reconsider one’s ways of knowing and being in the world—a commitment to *staying woke*. Drawing upon David Thoreau, Greene believed that “To be awake is to be alive” and that “we must learn to *reawaken* and *keep* ourselves awake” (Thoreau 1884/2006, emphasis added). Thus, wide awakeness—or rather, the process of *wide-awakening*—is a continuous mode of operation: an act of *learning*, *listening*, *reminding*, *becoming*, and *breaking* free. Awakening, as Greene saw it, ought to lead individuals down a path that widens their thinking to more questions, rather than narrowing to answers. Randall Allsup (2020) clarifies that for Maxine Greene, wide awakeness is less about quests for truth, as Plato’s allegory might suggest, and more about broadening one’s ways of knowing to the perspectives and *lived experiences of others*. “Wide awakeness is the awareness of polyphony, rarely a space of cognitive convergence,” he writes, asking, “Are we awake when we all agree?” (33).

The lesson with Kai around “The Star-Spangled Banner” was indeed a “wake-up call” for me; I realized I had much to learn about the song I had long referred to as the U.S. national anthem. The forceful, sonic experience of Jimi Hendrix’s patriotism roused me from the slumber of my complacency toward “The Star-Spangled Banner” that day; Hendrix’s imaginative activism dragged me from the cave of my own ignorance and into the blinding sun (or perhaps deafening blast) of a reality to which I had formerly been unaware—what Greene (1978) called “shocks of awareness” (185). And yet, Packnett (Grant 2016) and Greene (1978) remind me that unlike the act of “waking up,” which takes place in a single moment of time, acts of “*staying* woke” take place on a continuum; the persistence of ideas and attitudes throughout our lived lives that are inspired by these moments of awakening are what give the moments meaning. hooks (2015) wrote that “we must learn to see” through maintaining “heightened awareness and understanding—the intensification of one’s capacity to experience reality through the realm of the

senses” (111–12). Both the acts of “waking up” and “staying awake” are necessary for individuals’ journeys out of and beyond the cave: a kind of “both/and” change in music education proposed by Marsh et al. (2017).

Musicians Thandiwe and Niambi Sala of the Afro-futurism<sup>6</sup>-inspired group Oshun capture the continuum of awakening and staying awake in the song, “[I wake up](#)” (2015). Divided into two parts—“waking up” and “staying woke”—the song opens with a rousing, sermon-like call to understanding, delivered with the urgency of a rhythm that commands the words in forward motion: “Hear the sounds of your alarm / no snooze will sooth the tears of pews,” and “I’m reading you, feeding you, pleading you, *wake up*”—Plato’s prisoners being prodded, jostled, pulled to understanding. Yet, as excruciating as the wake-up call may be, Oshun shows us that remaining committed to *staying woke*—daily life outside the cave—is no small feat: “Five more minutes, my dream ain’t finished,” Thandi pleads against the persistence of her alarm: “I don’t feel like getting up today.” Even so, the singer ..acknowledges, “I still gotta get up, ‘cause my dreaming tells me so / reflecting truth and fate like divination from the soul is tiring but better than a wake like funerals.”

What happened to the prisoners who remained outside the cave after Plato put his pen down? What transpires for the people who choose to embrace the aching visions of a world previously unknown to them? At the very least, Oshun suggests that the journey *from* the cave might be just as difficult—if not more so—than being roused from our shadowy dreamworlds within the cave. Much of the remainder of this essay is a narration of my own stumbling around in the world outside the cave. The political acts of Eric Reid and Colin Kaepernick, the lesson with Kai, Jimi Hendrix’s “Star-Spangled Banner,” and the re-imagined anthems of René Marie and Jon Batiste are all parts of my continued awakening—toward becoming aware of other perspectives and ways of knowing related to what it means to live and be “an American”—and toward understanding how my Whiteness has privileged my perspective. These people are some of *my* American heroes: people who, through their actions and artistry, have demonstrated what it means to move about the world from their own vantages in the context of our shared national identities.

## Imagining ~ Plural Ways of Being

As Greene continued to develop the concept of wide awakeness—a breaking free

from the commonplace and the mundane—her interpretation became enlarged by the concept of *imagination*. Greene clarified that “imagination is not only the power to form mental images” . . . “It is also the power to mold experience into something new” (Greene 2001, 30) and to allow for the changing of “things as they are” (Stevens 1954, 165). Imagination is “a mode of grasping, of reaching out that allows what is perceived to be transformed” (Greene 2001, 31). *Social imagination*, as Greene (1995) calls it in her final work, goes beyond “waking up” in the sense that individuals begin to understand perspectives of reality that are not their own. Social imagination involves an *active*, creative engagement in artistic encounters and a willingness to incorporate understandings reached within one’s lived contexts. hooks (2015) concurred: “We must not deny the way aesthetics serves as the foundation for emerging visions. It is, for some of us, critical space that inspires and encourages artistic endeavor” (112).

Through continuing to reflect on my own awakening to perspectives on patriotic music, I now view this “critical space” which hooks named as what I was stumbling toward—grasping for—in the lesson with Kai, although I didn’t recognize it at the time. I recall the discomfort and uncertainty—perhaps fear—that I felt in trying to figure out how to respond to Kai’s selection of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” I was afraid to embark on a musical journey with a 9-year-old in a way that drew attention to the controversy around the song, not really knowing how to foster a discussion that would be meaningfully age-appropriate. I was afraid his parents might think I was trying to indoctrinate him toward a particular side in the politically polarized culture of the United States.

I relied on routine teaching instincts in those moments—shifting away from my own discomfort with the subject matter and turning instead toward notes and rhythms, fingerings, and procedures—the familiar and supposedly “politically neutral” version of music education focused on analysis of sonic form. Rather than discussing the anthem’s lyrics and their meanings, Kai and I focused on melody and the vocal technique of the singers we listened to on YouTube. Instead of exploring the sociocultural situations in which we might encounter performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” we talked about major and minor chords. I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with studying melody, vocal technique, fingerings, or chord patterns, but in reflecting on my own discomfort in the lesson, I can see that my inclination toward teaching this way was primarily based on avoidance of discomfort and uncertainty. And yet at the same time, I was also

afraid of saying nothing, of merely glossing over the surface, of ignoring what little I *did* know about the song in relation to Black Americans. In reaching for his 1969 Woodstock anthem, I'd hoped Jimi Hendrix would bring Kai and me into a more critical space: an educational realm that challenged us to explore musical form *and* context, works of art *and* artist perspectives, musical vantages of dominant *and* marginalized groups of Americans. I wonder now how Hendrix's art might have inspired Kai and me to re-imagine our own performances of "The Star-Spangled Banner," had we taken the anthem beyond the pages of Kai's songbook.

Jimi Hendrix's imaginative, 1969 Woodstock appearance forcefully challenged norms around performances of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Not only did he offer a sonically unconventional rendering of the song, but Hendrix's anthem is also an explicit and contextually-situated commentary on the racial and political realities of his time. "To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real," Greene (1995, 19) wrote, such that "in contradicting the established, or the given, art reaches beyond what is established" (30). Greene's concept of imagination assumes acts of "breaking free," challenging the status quo, and resisting oppressive forces. While the act of "re-imagining" is embedded in and functionally similar to Greene's concept of imagination, I employ this form of the verb throughout the essay for its association with other verbs like "*re*-sistance," "*re*-tooling," "*re*-shaping," and "*re*-thinking." The prefix *re*-minds readers that work needs to be done to dismantle pervasive and singular concepts around what it means to be "American"; educators must continue *re*-constructing expectations around how musical engagements with patriotic music might sound when they are built around a plurality of voices and perspectives. In this way, I view Hendrix's anthem as a *re-imagination* of normative political engagement that *re*-fuses monophonic representations of American patriotism.

Although the Woodstock performance is undoubtedly the most famous, Hendrix had performed versions of "The Star-Spangled Banner" over 60 times before Woodstock, between January 1968 and August 1969 (Clague 2014). Contrary to the view of Hendrix's Woodstock performance as a spontaneous, improvisatory outburst of musical ecstasy, Whiteley (2017) suggests that Hendrix's "Banner" was, rather, a well "thought-through, personal statement with all the trademarks of Hendrix's performance style" (26). Hendrix demonstrated an unwavering commit-

ment to performing “The Star-Spangled Banner” in the face of adversity, well before it inspired controversy on a national scale. In the hours before a concert in Dallas, Texas, on May 20, 1969 (four months before Woodstock), Hendrix and his White tour manager were cornered backstage by a group of five Texas men: “You tell that fucking n[...] if he plays ‘Star-Spangled Banner’ in this hall tonight he won’t live to get out of the building,” one of the men shouted at the manager. “Did you hear what I said? No one does that in Dallas, Texas, and lives to tell about it” (McDermott and Kramer 1992, 182). Yet hours after the abusive and life-threatening encounter, Hendrix *still* performed “The Star-Spangled Banner” for his Dallas audience.

Hendrix’s steadfast commitment to performing “the Banner” (particularly after Woodstock) has continued to captivate, anger, and perplex the American public. But what did Hendrix have to say about the meaning of his re-imagined anthem? Clague (2014) suggests Hendrix’s response to the question posed by Kai (and millions of Americans), “*Why did he do that?*” varied depending on his audience. During concerts, among his fans and in the presence of rock musicians who understood his craft, Hendrix spoke more candidly, less filtered. Yet in the face of mainstream news sources, reporters, and talk show hosts, Hendrix was more reserved, non-committal, and somewhat abstract in discussing musical intent and the political contexts of his art (Clague 2014). To understand Hendrix’s sometimes evasive responses that lacked explicit detail around intended meaning in his anthem, Clague (2014) and Whiteley (2017) suggest looking to the sociopolitical climate of the 1960’s for contextualized meaning—Hendrix articulated verbal and musical meaning in ways that were intelligible to those who were hospitable to his work and who understood the particular moments in time from which his art arose.

As a decade, the 1960s in the United States was marked by an uprising of resistance groups and public discord; demonstrations of opposition to and support for the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement occupied prominent spaces in public discourse. Clarke (2005) and Whiteley (2017) acknowledge that while a plurality of interpretations may arise from Hendrix’s “Banner,” certain musical ideas translated directly into culturally-situated meaning for his audiences. Most notably, his quote of the military “Taps” melody near the midpoint of Hendrix’s performance served as a direct and recognizable reference to his audience, signifying “the death of American soldiers in Vietnam, and perhaps more generally to the death of

the ‘American dream’” (Clarke 2005, 57). As a former member of the 101st Airborne Division, Hendrix was intimately familiar with the sonic landscape of war—talk show host Dick Cavett (1969) reminded his audience of this fact in his conversation with Hendrix about the performance.

While depictions of war through musical imagery such as the “Taps” melody and the bomb-like explosions of electricity are often used to draw connections between Hendrix’s performance and anti-war sentiments, Whiteley (2017) also urges that it is important to understand the ways in which racism—and Jimi Hendrix’s status as a Black soldier in the Vietnam War—is inextricably connected to these allusions to war in Hendrix’s performance of the “Banner.” Hendrix’s famous Woodstock performance occurred in the midst of public, racial reckoning—not unlike today—in the United States: six years after the March on Washington, four years after the death of Malcolm X, and one year after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Hendrix was intimately aware of the military positions held by Black men during the Vietnam War: Black soldiers represented “two percent of the officers and were assigned to 28 percent of the combat missions” (Whiteley 2017, 25). Hendrix “understood all too well,” Whiteley argues, “who was paying the price in Vietnam” (26).

Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2006) remembers being aware as a child of her family members’ military service: “I knew that we were Americans because there were photos of my dad and the other adult men in my family—uncles and cousins—on display throughout our home, smiling at me in their military uniforms” (586). She recalls feelings of pride in her family at the time, and yet, later in her adult years, Ladson-Billings learned the truth about the services they had performed—that her family members had “served in segregated units and did the most menial and dangerous work the military required” as “cooks, launderers, and ammunition handlers” (586). Not only does Hendrix’s re-imagining of “The Star-Spangled Banner” provoke a visceral soundscape of warring and destruction, but it points to the ironies of Black men fighting in Vietnam for “their country”—the country that continues to deny them so many basic rights despite having been founded upon the principal that “all men are created equal.” Similarly, American rapper, Meek Mill, illustrates this idea in the challenge to his listeners in “[Stay Woke](#)” (2018): “How can I pledge allegiance to the flag / when they killin’ all our sons, all our dads?” To expect Jimi Hendrix to express a version of patriotism that was inconsistent with his experience as a Black man who lived in the wake of Jim

Crow Era America<sup>7</sup> after his conscription to fight abroad for “freedom” and “the American Dream” is to deny his own lived reality.

Among other missed opportunities, I wish the lesson with Kai had included a viewing of an interview clip of 26-year-old Hendrix on the Dick Cavett show (season two, episode 27), speaking about his performance, which I didn’t watch until later after the lesson. When Cavett asked the very same question posed by Kai—“why?”—a docile, contemplative Hendrix responded, “I don’t know, man ... I’m an American, so I played it. They made me sing it in school, so it was a flashback” (Cavett 1969). Yet as Cavett invited the audience to remember that Hendrix served in the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. army before judging his “unorthodox” performance, Hendrix became more animated. He interjected, “Well listen, it’s not unorthodox!”—Cavett: “It isn’t unorthodox?”—Hendrix: “No, no ... I thought it was beautiful ... but there you go.” The audience applauded.

When Cavett asked Hendrix about the controversy around his performance of the national anthem, Hendrix was evasive: “I don’t know, man ... I’m American, so I played it.” Yet given the Dallas concert incident and knowledge that Hendrix still played the anthem after receiving racial slurs and death threats, one can safely assume that Hendrix *did* have a reason for playing the anthem, even if it was one he was unwilling to discuss on national television. Viewers of the interview might also observe the tension around patriotic norms between Hendrix’s nod to conventional patriotism in conversation—“I played it [because] they made me sing it in school”—and the extent to which Hendrix’s performance disrupted traditional renderings of the anthem (Roby 2012). Hendrix refused, though, to acknowledge this tension in the conversation with Cavett, gesturing instead toward a more plural view of patriotic expression through music: “It’s not unorthodox; I thought it was beautiful.”

While his performance of the “Banner” has garnered substantial scholarly attention in the years since his performance (e.g. Clague 2014; Clarke 2005; Waksman 1999; Whiteley 2017), I want to linger with Hendrix a bit longer in the context of Greene’s concept of social imagination; in the latter half of this essay, I turn to two Black musicians who have recently re-imagined “The Star-Spangled Banner” into new social contexts, and it is on Hendrix’s shoulders that they stand (Batiste 2020a).

Throughout her later works, Greene often returned to Wallace Stevens’s poem,



“The Man with the Blue Guitar”— in this case, I extend the metaphor to Jimi Hendrix on his white, Fender Stratocaster. Through the persona of the guitarist, Stevens wrestled with the tension between perceptions of *reality* and *imagination*—the latter of which is famously signified by “the blue guitar,” on which things are not played “as they are” (Cerna 1975; Stevens 1954). Written in 33 parts, the first section of Stevens’s poem begins as a conversation between a guitarist—Hendrix, for my purpose in this essay—and his audience—Kai and me—over the composition and performance of poetry, which I interpret in the context of music. The audience speaks to the guitarist:

A man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.  
They said, “You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.”

Kai’s response to Hendrix’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” seems to be in agreement with the audience of Stevens’s guitarist, characterized by his visible and audible discomfort—“Why?!”— when he experienced Hendrix’s rendition for the first time. Hendrix clearly challenged Kai’s expectations of a more familiar version of the song. I don’t want to speak for Kai or presume to understand the nature of his feelings about Hendrix’s performance during this lesson; I do wonder, though, what it was about the performance that prompted such an emotive response in Kai.

Kertz-Welzel (2008) suggests that “philosophical inquiry is not uncommon to [children’s] thinking. It is part of their way of questioning the world” (197). While Kai’s emotive response seemed in some ways dismissive of unfamiliar renderings of the anthem, I heard his comments as also prompted by curiosity, evidenced by his delivery of judgment toward the minor key “Star-Spangled Banner”—“I don’t like it”— followed by his request that we listen to it again. “Aesthetics is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty,” hooks (2015) wrote, “it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and *becoming*” (104, emphasis added). Part of helping children “become” in aesthetic spaces means helping them question and “be aware of their hidden assumptions” about art “in order to transform and enrich them” (Kertz-Welzel 2008, 198). In retrospect, I wish I had probed deeper or challenged Kai’s initial response to Hendrix’s anthem beyond dislike. Was it simply the sounds—the volume, distortion, thick texture, tone quality of the electric guitar? Was it the liberties in tempo Hendrix took, or the melodic

discontinuity and insertion of “Taps”? What were the qualities of “blue-ness” to which Kai reacted? Or, perhaps, qualities he perceived as *Blackness*? As Stevens’s (1954, 165) guitarist continues, in dialogue with his audience:

The man replied, “Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

Hendrix resisted Dick Cavett’s characterization of his performance as “unorthodox,” offering that he preferred to think of it as “beautiful.” Yet, his version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the end of the 1969 Woodstock festival was undoubtedly original, stirring, and provocative; “The Star-Spangled Banner” “as it was” had indeed been changed upon Hendrix’s guitar. Perhaps what Hendrix resisted instead were the negative connotations of the word “unorthodox”—that a reimagined relationship with the national anthem somehow makes one “un-American.” Perhaps he, like Stevens, wrestled with the question of what might make art recognizable yet imaginative, the tension between “loyalty to his own thoughts (or imagination) and loyalty to an average audience (or reason) which unwaveringly demands for ‘things as they are’” (Cerna 1975, 18).

Another nationally broadcasted interview (Roby 2012), shortly after Woodstock, centered around the question of “Why *this* anthem.” Hendrix’s answer began similarly to his response on the Cavett show: “Oh, because we’re all Americans ... it was written and played in a very beautiful—what they call a ‘beautiful state.’ Nice, inspiring, your heart throbs, and you say, Great. I’m American.” Unlike his response on the Cavett show, though, Hendrix’s words moved beyond the expected, normative patriotic sentiments: “But nowadays when we play it,” he countered, “We don’t play it to take away all this greatness that America is *supposed* to have. We play it the way the air is in America today—the air is slightly static, isn’t it?” (Roby 2012, 217).

The concept of “static” also arose in Hendrix’s interview on the Cavett show: “The music is loud, the air is loud; we’re trying to settle things down,” Hendrix explained (Cavett 1969). Cavett remarked on the thoughtful quality of Hendrix’s answer concerning the “static”—“I asked a practical question and got a philosophical answer”—and while Hendrix may have been speaking more literally about the concept as excess noise—“Is that philosophical?” he responds—a metaphorical extension of the word also adds meaning to the context of Hendrix’s art: “static” is what Stevens’s audience demands of the guitar player—things as they are—and yet

Hendrix made a compelling case to his audience for the imperative of a performance that cuts through the static: Hendrix’s anthem celebrates the United States not only for what it has been or is presently, but what the country might *become*—a version that is greater than what it once was, and an acknowledgment that there is still more “greatness” for the nation to attain.

Interestingly, I have never heard a critic of Hendrix’s anthem question its identity as “The Star-Spangled Banner”; the anthem’s melody plays too prominent a role in Hendrix’s rendering for it to be confused for or reasonably argued as any other song. What I *have* heard critics speak about is the degree to which they feel the interpretation is “appropriate”—a word I will return to and develop further in the next section. Cerna (1975) supports that imagination, as Stevens conceives of it in his poem, does not exist on its own, in the abstract, or apart from reality: it flows “into the level of a common or possible experience” (19). Imagination develops, enlarges, challenges, and adds to what we already perceive: “things as they are.” In other words, if listeners didn’t perceive the connection between Hendrix’s anthem and “The Star-Spangled Banner,” it would not be perceived as an alternative rendering.

The audience in Stevens’s poem continues in dialogue:

And they said then, “But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,  
A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are.”

A seemingly impossible task is demanded of the guitarist in these stanzas: the performance of a tune that is both familiar and unfamiliar to his audience, a rendering that is both the same and different from what they know. From both Kai’s emotive response to Hendrix’s performance and the controversy that the anthem met in 1969, a clash of dissonance between a White audience’s expectations and a Black artist’s performance becomes evident. “Play ... a tune beyond us,” the audience demands: “Give us something fresh and new.” Yet the audience’s threshold for change has its limits, desiring “a tune beyond us, *yet ourselves* ... of things exactly as they are.” In other words, “Give us “The Star-Spangled Banner”—*our* Star-Spangled Banner—and make it interesting—but not *too* interesting,” as if saying to Hendrix, “It’s still *our* national anthem, not *yours*.”

In his famous Woodstock performance, Hendrix gave his audience—including

Kai and me—a glimpse of his reality of life in the United States, challenging the assumption that a White person's reality represents "things as they are" or is the same as *his* reality. Brian Eno (1996) suggests that the distortion in a rock musician's performance may be viewed as "a way of making the medium fail" and of "bursting out of the material," as if to say, "I'm too big for this medium" (195). I think it might also have been Hendrix's way of saying, "I refuse to pretend that your reality—your lived experience as a White American—is mine." Thus, I believe it was Hendrix's transforming of—his *bursting* from—a song that represents both "ourselves" as White Americans and "things as they are" into "a tune beyond us"—the patriotic voice of a Black American—that caused Kai and me to stop, to wonder about, and even to react in pain toward the unexpectedness of Hendrix's rendering.

In one of his final recorded interviews of 1969—four months after Woodstock and nine months before his sudden and tragic death—Hendrix spoke once again about his re-imagined anthem (Roby 2012). In this interview with Susan Cassidy Clark, a musically knowledgeable journalist for *Rolling Stone*, Hendrix spoke more directly than in previous interviews. The fact that he had been performing and speaking about his anthem for over a year may have prompted Hendrix to articulate his criticism of American patriotism more decisively in the moment: "It's time for a new national anthem," Hendrix declared, arguing that "something has to happen or else you can just keep on bein' dragged along with the program, which is based on the past" (Roby 2012, 252). The image of "being dragged along with the program" is similar to the concept of "static" that Hendrix mentioned in several other interviews. It emphasizes the experience of repetition and losing oneself in the mundane, of playing the game and singing the song because that's what individuals are taught to do in school. "America is divided into two definite divisions," Hendrix declared, "Old and young—not the age, but the *way of thinking*" (Roby 2012, 251, emphasis added). In his call to move away from versions of patriotism that represent engagements conforming to society's expectations and to the past, Hendrix invited listeners to think in ways that are "young," or rather, as he then clarified, "new." Perhaps being able to think in young or new ways is part of what it means to *stay* woke: to actively work against uncritical, static ways of thinking and being in the world, straining to listen through the noise to the frequencies and voices of those whom one may have been unaware (Greene 2001).

## Playing ~ Upon Blue Guitars

What might re-imagining a national anthem entail, then, in classrooms, societies, and musical engagements? How might playing upon blue guitars, as Hendrix did, help “assemble a coherent world” and look toward “more vibrant ways of *being*?” (Greene 1995, 3, emphasis added). While questions of “what a national anthem is” or “ought to be” often take the forefront of this conversation, Greene’s concept of social imagination and Hendrix’s provocative performance speak more to the question, *for whom is this anthem meaningful*? Julia Koza (2008) urges that in answering this question, one must first acknowledge—by listening for—the Whiteness embedded in musical traditions, such as in performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In particular, the re-imagined anthems of Hendrix, Marie, and Batiste discussed in this section help make the voices of Black people heard by helping listeners realize the *absence* of Blackness in traditional renderings of “the Banner.”

Hendrix’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” opens our senses to the idea that a singular, performative ideal of an anthem—one interpretation, one perspective—cannot account for the plurality of experiences and voices in a diverse society. Abril (2007) argues that “absolutist portrayals of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’” (70) undermine those whom the song supposedly represents: “people of various races, creeds, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, sexual orientations, disabilities, and genders—the very people who comprise our society” (82). One cannot force individuals to feel attachment for a musical work that is incompatible with their life experiences—what Antonio Gramsci (1971) calls *contradictory consciousness*. In order for people to feel they belong to their country—given their unique perspectives and experiences—encouraging the re-imaginings of national anthems becomes necessary. Abril (2007) argues that “an anthem can only be brought to life through performance,” through which it is “interpreted and realized by the performer(s), situated in a sociocultural and historical context, and reconstructed by the listeners” (73). Thus, *every* performance of a national anthem represents a mix of performers’ identities and their interpretive, artistic decisions; once one acknowledges this, one might begin to see re-imaginings of anthems not so much as “correct” or “incorrect” but as renderings of musical meaning that may resemble one’s own and/or awaken new perspectives on national belonging.

Despite garnering substantial controversy when it was originally performed, Hendrix's anthem is typically viewed now as a historically relevant act of democratic protest (Abril 2007). Yet there are others whose musical renderings of their American identities have continued to push the public and political spheres to continue grappling with the question of "whom does this anthem serve?" I now turn to two present-day musicians who have, to use Greene's term, "recaptured" my imagination through their creative and socially provocative presentations of the U.S. national anthem (Greene 1978, 1995). They also represent what I believe Allsup (2020) has in mind when he questions the notion that those with whom we disagree will eventually "come around to *our* point of view if we just keep talking;" Allsup instead wonders instead what might be negotiated through the process of "mak[ing] art together" (34). René Marie and Jon Batiste each have much to say about patriotism and American music; the anthems re-imagined by both musicians embody a powerful "together-ing" of musical practices and patriotic identities through their embrace of both "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"—otherwise known as the Black National Anthem.

### *Lifting ~ Every Voice*

Composed between the years 1900 and 1905 by brothers James Weldon Johnson (lyrics) and J. Rosamund Johnson (music), "[Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing](#)" was officially adopted as a national anthem by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1921—ten years *before* U.S. President Herbert Hoover deemed Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner" as such (Redmond 2015). Unsurprisingly, the two anthems stand in stark contrast in their portrayals of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. As Pål Kolstø (2006) notes, historical, cultural symbols are sometimes controversial because "different ethnic and political groups often hark back to different pasts" (697).

"The Star-Spangled Banner's" lyrics depict a battle—"the perilous fight"—fought and won—"our flag was still there"—and describe the event in past tense: "so proudly we *hailed*;" "*were* so gallantly streaming;" "our flag *was* still there." The final phrase signals to the listener that the end of this battle marks the beginning of the United States as "the land of the free and the home of the brave," or as Shana Redmond (2015) notes, it "documents a community *already made*" (101). "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," conversely, is a call to action and solidarity, right here

and right now: “Lift ev’ry voice and sing / ‘Til earth and heaven ring,” and later, “Facing the rising sun of our new day begun / Let us march on ‘til victory is won.” Like “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” recounts a dark past—“Stony the road we trod / Bitter the chastening rod / Felt in the days when hope unborn had died.” Yet unlike “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” celebrates hope through perseverance and a continued struggle for freedom: “Keep us forever on the path, we pray” and “May we forever stand / True to our God / True to our native land.” While “The Star-Spangled Banner” recounts a past overcome, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” acknowledges the past, present, and future; its lyrics celebrate trials surmounted while also continuing to “trouble the time-worn claims of the United States as the ‘land of the free” (Redmond 2015, 101). Perhaps the most obvious contrast of meaning is apparent in the anthems’ titles: “The Star-Spangled Banner”—which more abstractly glorifies U.S. struggles through the cultural symbol of a flag, and “Lift Every Voice and Sing”—which focuses directly on elevating the people of the U.S. Endeavoring to lift *every* voice in public discourse is part of what it means to *stay woke*: to actively make room in conversation for all voices, to strive to incorporate new perspectives into our world views, and to acknowledge that no one is free until everyone is free (Baldwin 1985).

During the summer of 2008, composer and Grammy-nominated jazz vocalist René Marie was asked to perform the U.S. national anthem for the State of the City address in Denver, Colorado (Marie 2008; Redmond 2015); Marie agreed to sing that day, provided she was allowed to perform her own version of the song (Marie 2008). At the start of the address, on July 1, 2008, Marie was called to the microphone, and out of the hushed crowd came a powerful mezzo voice; one note, held softly—the word, “Lift”—a swell, and then a lingering pause; her voice descends by a minor third, and then a major one—the characteristic “sol-mi-do” that leads into the melody of The Star-Spangled Banner—but in this version, one does not hear “things as they are” (Stevens 1954, 165); “The Star-Spangled Banner” is changed upon Marie’s blue guitar. While the familiar melody is unmistakably present in her performance—peppered with effortless-sounding riffs, a smooth, ascending slide to the iconic high note, a light vocal growl for emphasis—the lyrics are not Francis Scott Key’s. Instead, the words of Marie’s anthem belong to the Black Americans who have been singing them for nearly a century: they are the call to hope, solidarity, and action in “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Marie’s performance was musically expressive and technically masterful as she seamlessly folded the first verse of the

Black National Anthem into the somewhat angular melody of "The Star-Spangled Banner" with its wide, often inaccessible vocal range.

The recording of Marie's performance on YouTube, uploaded by the Denver Post, is titled, "[Black National Anthem Replaces Star-Spangled Banner](#)"—a declaration that misinterprets and deeply underestimates the meaning in her musical offering. The newspaper also details comments from former Colorado governor, Bill Ritter, on the event: "If you invite someone to sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at an event, you invite them to do just that ... she was invited to do one thing, and she chose to do another thing" (Osher 2008). Marie's performance wasn't simply a substitution of one anthem for another as the former Colorado governor and Denver Post suggested, but rather, it was a re-combining of traditions, a re-mixing of values, and a re-imagining of a national anthem that encompassed her identities as both American and Black. When accused that her musical liberties had been taken selfishly and should have been focused on serving the people of Denver, Marie responded (to this grievance and others) in an articulate statement on her personal website: "I agree," Marie writes, "It was for the Denver community. If I may say so, I consider myself a part of that community and, as an artist in that community, wherever I am, there my art is also" (Marie 2008). The critique that Marie's re-imagined anthem was somehow "not for the Denver community" is laden with assumptions of singularity, namely that the sentiments expressed in "The Star-Spangled Banner" are unequivocally meaningful to members of the Denver community regardless of their perspectives and life experiences. It illustrates the extent to which the White President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, in 1931, held the political and cultural power to deem a musical work "the national anthem" and enforce its celebration, while a national organization for Black Americans in 1921 (NAACP) did not. What critics of Marie's performance were really saying was that her music should have been directed toward the *White* Denver community: "Give us the White National Anthem."

Redmond (2015) describes the tension of identities present in Marie's national anthem and its reception in the Denver community as "a tug-of-war between race and nation that is never fully reconciled in spite of its constant negotiation" (98). Although written before the 2016 NFL protests began, I imagine that Redmond's words might also resonate with Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid. In a 2017 op ed for *The New York Times*, "Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee," Reid described the conversations he and Kaepernick had in planning their protest



against systemic racism and police brutality by kneeling during performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner”: “We came to the conclusion that we should kneel rather than sit ... because it’s a respectful gesture ... like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy” (Reid 2017, para. 5). Reid acknowledged his admiration for those who died fighting for the United States and emphasized that the fight for justice and freedom of these American heroes also includes the right to protest. “It baffles me that our protest is still being misconstrued as disrespectful to the country,” Reid (2017, para. 7) lamented, “I love my country and I’m proud to be an American,” but “I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (quoting James Baldwin 1983, 7). René Marie also found herself having to make patriotic justifications for her 2008 engagement with “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In her post-performance statement, Marie explained that the anthem she shared was the third and final movement in an original, composed suite entitled, “Voice of My Beautiful Country”; the first two movements include the lyrics of “America the Beautiful” and “My Country Tis of Thee” with re-imagined melodies. “[The suite] is a love song to my country,” Marie explained, and similarly acknowledged that the ability to take “personal action” to make “social change” is what makes her most proud to be an American (Marie 2008, para. 8).

In closing his essay, Reid (2017) wrote, “What we need now is numbers ... Not only do we need more of our fellow Black and Brown Americans to stand with us, but also people of other races” (para. 13). Four years after the two men began kneeling during the national anthems played at NFL games, Kaepernick remains unsigned by any NFL team; Reid, who later joined the Carolina Panthers, continued to kneel in protest during performances of the anthem. Reid’s call for athletes to stand together was taken up early on by members of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and later by the Men’s NBA who, amidst the series of worldwide protests against racial injustice in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, have begun to use their platform as athletes to organize and speak out. On July 30, 2020, members of the Utah Jazz and the New Orleans Pelicans gathered in a quarantined arena amidst the COVID-19 pandemic to play their first game since March 11, 2020. The players and coaches of both teams assembled in a line on one side of the court, and as the announcer introduced a performance of the national anthem, the camera panned across a wave of athletes swiftly dropping to one knee; the players bowed their heads and placed their arms around one another. As the music began, viewers could see that each athlete wore a Black Lives Matter t-shirt. Several

coaches bore name tags that read “racial justice,” and one athlete held a Black Power fist in the air (Batiste 2020a).

The national anthem was performed that night by Jon Batiste, heralded by the announcer as “musician, producer, activist, and Louisiana native.” Although just under two minutes in duration, [Batiste’s re-imagination of the U.S. national anthem](#) burst with social allusion. Like Marie’s performance, Batiste also paid homage to two anthems: “Lift Ev’ry Voice” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.” From the opening, both melodies were present, and they remained this way throughout the anthem: “The Star-Spangled Banner” began in the tinkling register of Batiste’s piano in tandem with “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” played in the rich, woody bass notes of a cello and accompanied by a few, sparse timpani punctuations. Although each melody typically employs a rhythmic meter that emphasizes groups of three, “The Star-Spangled Banner’s” march-like, accented downbeats created a duple feel in contrast to the lilting compound meter—which Batiste called an “African 6/8 rhythm” (Batiste 2020b, para. 4)—of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Together, the melodies produced the tension of a hemiollic, two versus three feel, pushing back against one another throughout the song as if to reconcile their contrasting metric subdivisions. As the opening section of each anthem came to a resting point, Batiste substituted the percussive timpani for a New Orleans-style bounce music backbeat (Batiste 2020b, para. 4); he then left his piano to pull a white, Fender Stratocaster into position in time to play, “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air,” a forceful nod of respect to Hendrix. The two anthems forged on and eventually led into a flourishing coda of arpeggios that climbed to a climactic clash of two notes in the stratospheric register of Batiste’s piano, a half step apart; then a timpani roll signaled the anthem’s close.

Like Marie’s, Batiste’s re-mix of the U.S. national anthem isn’t his only engagement in music that may be described as “nationalistic.” In a performance documentary for *The Atlantic*, Batiste described his re-interpretation of “[Battle Hymn of the Republic](#)” as a “true mash-up of cultures” (Batiste 2017, 0:27): the original melody played on piano, a New Orleans Bamboula rhythm, a verse sung in a Gospel style, and a percussive accompaniment played on prepared piano that mimics a Bluesy banjo. “To me, it all works, somehow,” Batiste reflected; “That’s America. That’s what we’re about, so, I think it’s very appropriate” (2:35). Batiste’s choice of the word “appropriate” in this quote seems to have been purposefully selected and

has significant implications: while he could have described the re-mix as “interesting,” “engaging,” or “new,” Batiste’s use of *appropriate* implies a “right-ness,” or a “just-ness” in the musical expression. Critics of artistic acts that balk tradition often use the word *inappropriate* to bolster their arguments to suggest that interpretive decisions that deviate from an accepted norm are not only undesirable, but incorrect and unsuitable. Yet in calling the re-interpretation *appropriate*, Batiste seemed to make a moral argument: there is justice in representing cultural complexity as a part of patriotic music, that perhaps nationalistic music conceived of in this way is *more suitable* in accounting for the vastness of experience that constitutes what it might mean to be “American.”

Greene (1995) wrote that “to play upon the blue guitar”—to re-imagine a musical work—“is to evoke listeners’ ambivalence” through sound (19). In considering the political engagements of Marie and Batiste through their imaginative art-making and articulate statements, I have become aware of *my* ambivalence over the years toward music that is traditionally deemed “patriotic.” I think about the composition to which Marie referred as “a love song to my country” and can’t honestly imagine myself feeling—let alone *expressing* so beautifully through music—the depth and intimacy of Marie’s American patriotism. The patriotic acts of Hendrix, Marie, Batiste, Kaepernick, and Reid related to “The Star-Spangled Banner” are awakening me to the idea that I *could* care—that there are more stories to be told through art around what it means to be “American”—stories that dominant narratives around patriotic music often exclude. Their resistance to and re-imagining of traditional (White) engagements with “The Star-Spangled Banner” show me that there is more at stake when people stand for the national anthem than a ritualistic paying of homage to “the past.” What I have begun to understand, though, is that *my ambivalence, too, is a part of my privilege as a White American*—what Gary Howard (2016) calls the “luxury of ignorance” (17). I have come to realize that this is, in large part, because no one has ever demanded it of *me*; no one has ever questioned *my* American-ness as a White woman, nor questioned the legitimacy of *my* artistic engagements with American music.

As Abril (2007) notes, threatening cultural norms and traditions has historically resulted in political hardships for public figures, as it has for Eric Reid and Colin Kaepernick. While Hendrix’s “Star-Spangled Banner” in 1969 and Marie’s musical fusion of anthems for the City of Denver in 2008 were met initially with substantial resistance (Clarke 2005; Marie 2008), the United States—or at the very

least, the NBA—seems to have been more receptive to Batiste’s blue guitar performance. Composed in the midst of an outcry against and a nationwide reckoning with systemic racial injustice, Batiste’s anthem was forged from the depths of Black Americans’ pain during the summer of 2020. Unlike traditional renderings, his version of the national anthem harks back to a different, more complicated past (Kolstø 2006). Batiste commends the NBA athletes for their acts of protest and freedom, likening their knelt statement to American heroes, past and present. These are the people for whom Batiste’s anthem came into being.

### Teaching ~ For Re-imagination

One of most important aspects of imagination, Greene (1995) suggested, is that it allows one to strive toward empathy: to consider others’ consciousness of reality, to strive toward what Greene described as “becoming a friend of someone else’s mind” (38). After the piano lesson with Kai, I found myself wondering more about who Hendrix was. As I sat at my computer after that piano lesson with Kai, googling what basic information I could find about Hendrix, a host of questions began to arise. What had it been like to rise to such musical stardom as a Black man in the 1950s and 60s? To serve in an army and fight in a war he didn’t believe in? What did it feel like to have so much to say, musically, and to have the imaginative, performance facility to express it so viscerally? What was it like to struggle with the kind of substance addiction that ultimately claimed Hendrix’s life in 1970? It is empathy that allows us to see a person’s humanity rather than seeing them as the Other, and while I don’t pretend to understand how it might have felt to be Jimi Hendrix at any point in his life, I *can* say that it is his art that has caused me to wonder, to strive for understanding. I think these are the kinds of open, honest, and meaningful discussions that Greene hoped art might provoke in classrooms: teaching for empathy ought to be at the forefront of imaginative, curricular encounters with art.

A brief glance at literature in music education practitioner journals suggests that these kinds of questions and re-imaginings remain largely absent in our professional discourse around curricular engagements with “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Several articles emphasize supplementary resources such as picture books with period-esque illustrations of the song’s lyrics, assertions of the song’s wide

popularity and embodiment of universal values, reports of noteworthy school performances of the anthem, and textual analyses of the song's lyrics. In 2005, during George W. Bush's presidency, the U.S. National Association for Music Educators (NAfME, formerly MENC) began "The National Anthem Project"—a movement that encouraged music teachers to foster national solidarity by giving "The Star-Spangled Banner" a more prominent place in curriculum. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., "The Star-Spangled Banner" may have been more widely seen as a unifying anthem than it is now. Several NAfME articles include perspectives from teachers who shared lesson-planning tips related to "The Star-Spangled Banner," most of which revolved around diction, vocal tone, breath support, pronunciation of the anthem's lyrics, and an emphasis on the historical achievements of lyricist Francis Scott Key. One teacher did mention Hendrix in a conversation with elementary students, in which students were asked to decide whether his performance of the anthem was disrespectful or appropriate; I wonder if Batiste's answer to this question might also be included in the discussion.

My point is not to cast blame, but to suggest that teachers—of which I include myself—can and should think more deeply, to reach outward toward more plural ways of understanding national anthems, to endeavor actively re-imagining them alongside those in communities, to strive toward lifting *every* American voice. Teaching for re-imagination is often uncomfortable, particularly when the task requires coming to terms with and striving to destabilize the social privilege of our individual perspectives—it's a riskier endeavor than teaching notes and rhythms, diction and breath support, melodies and chords. But I am learning that this discomfort is often productive when it contributes to our awakenings and imaginings, if we allow it to lead us to more questions, more perspectives, and more art-making.

I teach a course at my university called "Music in America." Class participants are typically quite diverse both racially and by major, since the course may be taken by music majors for music history credit and by out-of-program students for fine arts credit. Some of the students in class come from countries outside of the U.S., and many of the U.S. students hold "first generation" status—they identify as being among first members of their families to attend a four-year university. Of the 40+ students typically enrolled in the course, White students make up a relatively small portion of the class. Although composing, improvising, and performing are beyond

the scope of the course, I encourage students to awaken to ideas central to this paper, namely: 1) being “American” is not synonymous with being “White.” 2) American music (with an emphasis on popular styles) is comprised of a multitude of perspectives. 3) In spite of the many ways in which the music industry and mainstream society have elevated White musicians and musical traditions throughout American history (often by marginalizing minority voices and appropriating non-White musical cultures for monetary gain), Black and Latinx musicians, in particular, have influenced music that is deemed “American” in more ways than are often recognized.

On the first day of class one semester, I played recordings of songs I viewed as “patriotic”: Woody Guthrie’s (1956) “[This Land is Your Land](#),” a version of the Star-Spangled Banner—“[El Pendón Estrellado](#)”—sung in Spanish by the Nurse Heroes Hispanic Star Choir (2021), RuPaul’s (2017) “American,” and Jon Batiste’s (2017) “Battle Hymn (of the Republic) Remixed.” I asked the class after playing each of these recordings what the musicians might have to tell us about what it means to be “American.” The students were reluctant to participate, which I attributed to first-day-of-class jitters and the anticipation of discomfort in raising one’s hand to speak among a large audience of peers. “What might RuPaul be trying to tell us in “American?” When the question met with silence, I tried another angle: “If you googled “American” right now, what kinds of images might come up?” I thought perhaps a White politician—a senator, judge, or the current president. “Do you think a Black American drag queen would be in the top 10 or 20 results?” A decisive side-to-side shaking of heads fluttered across the auditorium, accompanied by a few softly uttered “no’s.” Interesting, I thought. “So maybe that’s part of what RuPaul is trying to show us in this song—or the choir who sang ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ in Spanish—that being American can mean a lot of different things to people who live in this country.”

As I reflected on the lesson in my office afterward, I googled “American” on my computer, and what I found surprised me. Instead of the sea of White politicians that I had anticipated, the Google image search primarily presented to me an array of American flags—star-spangled banners—in addition to several photographs of other American symbols such as the bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, and the U.S. Capitol building. The moment reminded me of the differences in values portrayed by the anthem titles, “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “Lift Ev’ry

Voice and Sing,” however overt or subtle the distinction might seem. What is a political symbol, if not a stand in for the American people? I thought. I continue to feel perturbed by this emphasis on symbols and objects over people. People are messier, though, I suppose—more difficult to categorize, summarize, or represent succinctly.

Upon sharing a preliminary draft of this essay with a few faculty members at my university, I learned that one of my colleagues—a veteran English teacher and professor in the education department—had attended Jimi Hendrix’s famous Woodstock performance of 1969—she had experienced with her senses the full force of Hendrix’s imagination that day, unfiltered by the noise created by recording instruments unprepared to take in the sounds his instrument released. I was awestruck and a bit jealous. “I liked your paper,” she said, in so many words, “and I have one question for you: how far are you willing to go in standing up for these ideas? Would you give up a job in the face of adversity? And would you advise music educators who teach in conservative communities to do the same?”

I am grateful to my colleague for posing these unexpectedly direct yet important questions. The only honest answer I could (and still can) give is, “I don’t know, although I’d like to say I would.” Yet I am reminded again of Joyce McCall’s (2017) stories of being a Black doctoral student who had to balance her need to engage in scholarship directly connected to racism in the field of music education with her desire to be accepted and hired by mainstream academic institutions. I am becoming more aware of the ironic privilege I am afforded as a White person in writing, talking, and teaching about racism in public spaces. Perhaps this realization has caused me to feel a greater sense of responsibility to teach against racism in my music classes. What I can say definitively, however, is that I am now better equipped to do the work of anti-racist teaching—particularly as it relates to patriotic music—than I was five years ago in the piano lesson with Kai. In preparing for the Music in America course now, I continue to reflect on the work of Black scholars (i.e., McCall, hooks, Redmond, Ladson-Billings), Black musicians like Jimi Hendrix, René Marie, Jon Batiste; Black football players such as Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid, and Maxine Greene. These American patriots are helping me build the knowledge, skills, and stamina necessary for working through the discomfort of attending to topics that most White people would rather not address. They are helping me strive in my incompleteness to stay awake and have the courage to take

actions that involve re-imagining the educational spaces I share with students each day to become more equitable, just, and free.

## About the Author

Mya Scarlato is Chair of Music and Assistant Professor of Music/Music Education at the University of Bridgeport. Prior to her work in higher education, Scarlato taught K-12 music in a variety of schools including general music and beginning band at an international school in Seoul, South Korea, as well as general music and studio lessons in public and private schools in New York City. Her primary scholarly interests center around qualitative research designs that emphasize critical perspectives, philosophical lenses, and narrative methodologies. Scarlato's scholarship has been published in *Bulletin for the Council of Research in Music Education*, *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, and *Journal of General Music Education*.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the term “American” to refer specifically to citizens of the United States as well as “America” to refer to the United States as a nation, as do the majority of the scholars and musicians I draw upon throughout this paper (e.g. Baldwin 1983; Batiste 2017; Clague 2014; Hendrix 1969; Marie 2008; Pollock 2009; Redmond 2015; Reid 2017; Charles 2017; Whiteley 2017). I acknowledge the imprecision of these terms as they might refer more broadly to members of North, Central, and South American countries in certain contexts. Because the colloquial versions of “American” and “America” are widely used in specific reference to the citizens and nation of the United States, and given that a succinct, more precise term has yet to become widely used in the English language to represent citizens of the United States of America (i.e. “United States-ers” or “United Statesians”), I employ these terms with reservation on account of their U.S.-centricity throughout the essay.

<sup>2</sup> The Equal Rights Amendment was passed by the U.S. Congress (House and Senate) in 1972; it has been ratified by 37 of the needed 38 states to become an official, constitutional amendment.

<sup>3</sup> The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed into law in 1965 and grants the right to vote for all U.S. citizens.

<sup>4</sup> The Justice for George Floyd Policing Act was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2021 and failed to pass in the U.S. Senate.

<sup>5</sup> July 4th is a holiday celebrated in the United States that marks the country's Declaration of Independence from English rule in 1776.

<sup>6</sup> Afro-futurism includes philosophical, historical, and aesthetic portrayals of the African diaspora through evoking imagery from science fiction stories (i.e. "alien invasions" and "alien abductions") to express the colonization of African countries as well as the forceful removal and enslavement of African peoples by the United States and other Western countries (e.g. see Steingo 2017).

<sup>7</sup> "Jim Crow Laws" represent the colloquial namesake for racial segregation laws that prevailed in the United States (particularly in the south) from the mid 1850s through the mid 1960s; these laws prevented Black Americans from sharing public spaces with White Americans and enforced separation between races.