

# ‘Unpacking the Keeper Current’ of Settler Colonialism: Why De- colonizing Work is Complicated for (White) Music Educators

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## Abstract

In this article, I explore several complicating factors that impact (White) music teachers as they work towards decolonizing their teaching practices. Created by the discursive structures of settler colonialism, these factors include the discourse of an additive multiculturalism, both in society and in the field of music education, the tendency to enact what Tuck and Yang call “moves to innocence” to avoid dealing with one’s privilege and complicity in systems of oppression, the Western penchant for spectacle and consumption resulting from an extractivist mindset, and a Western conception of music as works or pieces.

## Keywords

Decolonizing music education, settler colonialism, additive multiculturalism, settler moves to innocence, extractivism

“Decolonization” is a tricky word. Tuck and Yang (2012) assert that the work of decolonization is often taken up metaphorically in discourses of school improvement and social justice in a way that “makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence’” (1). Such moves are based on the assumption that knowledge production—and, for that matter, cultural production—can be power neutral, a claim that serves to center Whiteness and “remove involvement in and culpability for systems of domination” (Mawhinney 1998, 17).

Settler moves to innocence uphold the status quo. Meaningful decolonizing initiatives, then, must deal with the power systems undergirding a specific “theory of relationships” within which Whiteness is tacit and assumed to be the norm, while only the non-White other is perceived as “Other” (Battiste 2013, 106). In this article, I explore barriers to decolonizing music education as experienced and enacted by White music educators; I focus specifically on the discourse of multiculturalism, claiming good intentions, the appetite for spectacle and consumption implicit in a Western extractivist worldview whereby all resources, including cultural resources, are seen as available for the taking and consumption, and a Western conception of music education as the teaching of works or pieces rather than a human practice.

Gaining insight into White teachers’ thinking and practices, and the structures and discourse that shape their experiences, is necessary for decolonizing work in music education precisely because the majority of music educators in the so-called Western world are White (Perkins 2018). In a North American context, Hess (2018) notes that most elementary music educators in Canada are White women, and David Robinson (2000) speaks of the “overwhelming Whiteness of the teacher workforce,” reporting that 86% of American music educators in 2017 were White (5). This situation is unlikely to change anytime soon. A lack of diversity in undergraduate music programs continues to perpetuate the current demographics among music educators in the US and in my home country of Canada as well (Perkins 2018). I am suggesting that this “overwhelming Whiteness” is partly the result of the ongoing structures and practices of settler colonialism.

Over a period of two years, I had the chance to dialogue with a group of eight public school music educators from a city on the Canadian prairies who wanted to work towards decolonizing their teaching practices. Six taught elementary music, one taught elementary and senior high choral, one taught middle school band and was the music consultant for her school district, two conducted a district honour

choir in addition to teaching music in a school setting, and all were White women. I conversed with the teachers together and individually five times over the course of this research project to better understand the personal, discursive, and structural challenges that complicated decolonizing their teaching. In this article, I explore several complicating factors as experienced/enacted by these music teachers as they engaged in decolonizing their teaching practice. Before doing so, I share some thoughts about who I am in this work and offer some important definitions and explanations.

## Positionality and Some Key Definitions

In his book, *Hungry Listening* (2020), Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson suggests that positionality is “a process or state that fundamentally guides our actions and perceptions” (39). I offer the following articulation of my own positionality as a way of attempting to render transparent my ethical and scholarly commitments in this work.

I am a White female settler descendant. I live and work in the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis nation in what is now known as Winnipeg, Canada. I grew up in the province of Alberta, Canada, in Treaty 7 territory.<sup>1</sup> My mother’s grandparents came to the Canadian prairies from Hungary in the early 1900s to settle on land that they had purchased from the colonial government for \$25 in the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy. In order to keep the land, they were required to cultivate an entire hectare within four years of settling, which they did. In contrast to the Indigenous peoples who were displaced from that land and who have remained resilient in the face of generational trauma due to ongoing attempted assimilation (Barker, Rollo, and Lowman 2016), my family and I have benefitted from generational wealth due to land reconceived as property. In addition, I have recently discovered that my mother’s uncle made money from enticing other Hungarians to also come and settle on Blackfoot land. My family is complicit in settler colonialism.

Contributing to decolonizing and Indigenizing music education in Canada is part of my personal response to *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action* (2015a), and an acknowledgement of my responsibility as someone with privilege (i.e., White, tenured) in the society in which I live and work.

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*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) was a government commission resulting from a class-action settlement with survivors of residential schools. In Canada, as in many other places where the territory of Indigenous peoples was claimed by European colonizers, the colonial government oversaw the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and placed them in boarding schools far away from home. The schools were woefully under-funded, and students often endured harsh conditions, poor quality food and education, abuse, and worse. This is not ancient history; the last school in Canada closed in 1996. Over the 150 years the schools were in operation, many students did not return home.<sup>2</sup> Settler colonialism requires Indigenous peoples to disappear (Patel 2021), and so the “Indian Residential Schools” were part of a government-sanctioned attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples and eradicate Indigenous cultures,<sup>3</sup> in what the TRC asserts can only be considered “cultural genocide” (TRC 2015c, 5).<sup>4</sup>

Disruption of the transmission of traditional knowledge, language, and identity by removing children from community, denigration and suppression of Indigenous languages, prohibition of spiritual practices, restriction of movement and freedom of Indigenous peoples, and removal of people from the land that had sustained their way of life for generations are all tactics that have been used to assimilate Indigenous peoples in Canada (TRC 2015b) within the structures of settler colonialism.

### Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism is both an ongoing process and a structure that “arranges people relative to land, recast as property, and relative to each other, in the quest for empire” (Patel 2021, 41). This arrangement is accomplished through three interconnected continual practices. The first is seizure of desired land and laying claim to the resources, material goods, cultural practices of the land, and peoples connected to that land. In addition to taking land, which can then be reconceived as property that can be sold/used for profit, this element of settler colonialism serves to justify cultural appropriation and extraction of natural and cultural resources.

The second practice of settler colonialism is the erasure of Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity, which serves to justify settler claims to land and resources.<sup>5</sup> If Indigenous peoples and their way of life are disappearing, that means there is a vast wilderness in need of conquering, populating, and taming (ex. turning into

farmland and housing subdivisions). It also means that Indigenous cultural productions, including musics, “need” to be documented and “collected” before they disappear, thus justifying the extraction of artifacts and appropriation of cultural productions.<sup>6</sup>

The third related practice that keeps the wheels of settler colonialism turning is what Patel (2021, 3) refers to as “theft of labor,” which is enacted through chattel slavery and other labour practices in support of the economic project of settler colonialism. This practice begins with putting in doubt in some way the humanity of a specific group or groups of people (i.e. recasting them as heathens, subhuman, and/or an inferior race, or even as interchangeable workers whose value lies in their productivity and ability to maximize profit for a parent company or institution). This process of dehumanization facilitates the hierarchization of peoples in order to manufacture racism, which, in turn, serves to legitimize the use of a particular group or groups of humans as property or workers, thereby justifying free or inexpensive labour. In short, “the logic of property interests drives all institutions in settler societies to maximize profit for a few from the labor of many” (Patel 2021, 56). It is important to note that racism is an *instrument* of settler colonialism, not a *cause*; the category of race “was created to deliver racism” (58) in service of the project of settler colonialism.

To sum up, settler colonialism “concerns the land, it requires a specific structure of ideology to proceed, it is violent, and it is ongoing” (Cote-Meek 2014, 14). Settler colonialism, therefore, requires the ongoing seizure and settlement of land, the continual disappearance of Indigenous peoples, and the questioning of the humanity of the perceived Other, particularly through the lens of race. Like Patel, I am arguing that the discourse, structures, and practices of settler colonialism not only shape the social, political, and economic reality of Indigenous peoples in colonized territories in the present, but also undergird anti-Black racism, the exploitation of migrant workers, climate change denial, and the use of heteronormativity and gender binaries to “create ‘others,’ unfit for essential rights that are always revocable by those whose rights are unshakeable” (Patel 2021, 10). We all live in systems and relationships shaped by settler colonialism.

## Decolonizing Education

In addition to affecting individuals and people groups, the dynamics and practices of a settler colonial worldview also impact social institutions, including that of education. Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste (2013) uses the metaphor of a strong river or ocean current to describe the power and workings of settler colonialism. She suggests that decolonizing education therefore consists of:

a process of unpacking the keeper current in education: its powerful Eurocentric assumptions of education, its narratives of race and difference in curriculum and pedagogy, its establishing culturalism or cultural racism as a justification for the status quo, and the advocacy for Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate education topic. It is the channel for generating a postcolonial education system ... and disrupting those normalized discourses and singularities and allowing diverse voices and perspectives and objectives into “mainstream” schooling. (106–107)

These are powerful words outlining a powerful agenda that I assert can, and should be, taken up in music education. But just as swimming against the current is difficult, so, too, is the work of decolonizing music education, particularly when the majority of music educators are White settler descendants for whom the power structures of settler colonialism, and the ways White people are privileged in this system, are largely invisible (Mawhinney 1998). When White music educators work towards decolonizing their teaching, there are several discursive dynamics at play that make this work difficult. In the remainder of this article, I explore some of these difficulties.

## Multiculturalism, Racialization, and Claiming Good Intentions

### Vignette 1

*Before the pandemic, Carla organized a winter concert whose theme was celebrations around the world. She purchased a song collection for a concert which came with a script, a teachers' guide, and performance and accompaniment tracks. Included in the ten-song collection by the White male composer was a song for each of Dawali, Eid, and Kwanzaa, a traditional song arranged by the composer for each of Christmas and Hanukkah, and an arrangement of a pentatonic song composed by a White American children's performer about Chinese New Year. The description of the resource noted that the teacher “could use this as your winter concert, or you could teach the songs any time of year as part of a multicultural study.”<sup>7</sup> While the treatment of culture, people, and music in the*

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resource was tokenistic (Hess 2015), Carla tried to make it more meaningful. She shared videos of cultural dances in music class, created a Japanese-inspired dance with a group of students, and she borrowed a Chinese dragon. She also enlisted the librarian's help and arranged to have books about the cultures from the resource available to the home room teachers. She noted that in spite of her efforts, "the people that took them were [the] novice teachers. The seasoned teachers, they're too busy doing their own thing."

In addition to making resources available to the teachers, the school librarian also put up a map of the world and invited staff to add stick-on gems to show where students were born. Each homeroom teacher was given the task of placing the jewels for the students in their class on the map. Carla shared that "teachers took different approaches to that. Some teachers took the time to e-mail their parents ... other teachers just guessed [without having] their children participate ... Other teachers just had the conversation with the children themselves." As a result of the map, Carla was able to easily list off the birth places of the eight children who were born outside of the Canadian province where she taught. After the concert, Carla worked to extend the project. She did a presentation over the intercom for each of the holidays addressed in the musical as they arose throughout the year. To Carla's knowledge, nothing like this had ever been done in her school before.

Carla's project and the response of her school community provides a somewhat blunt example of how the discourse of an additive multiculturalism can play out in music education. In fact, it bears a striking resemblance to the way that multiculturalism is enacted in Canadian society, my starting place for this discussion.<sup>8</sup> In this section, I first provide an analysis of multiculturalism in a Canadian context to illustrate the ways that the discourse works to uphold the structures of settler colonialism and allows for those racialized as "superior" to claim good intentions. While multiculturalism takes different forms in different nations (Bradley 2006, Hesse 2000), my hope is that an exploration of how multiculturalism functions in a specific sociocultural context will serve as a useful case study for others. I next explore how multicultural discourse facilitates a specific move to innocence and how this move is potentially enacted by music teachers. Because schools and music programs are located within the specific discursive heritage of the society and community in which they are located, this discussion constitutes my attempt at a first

and second layer of “unpacking the keeper current in education,” as Battiste (2013) suggested.

Multiculturalism in Canada is both a sociocultural reality and federal government policy (Dewing 2009). Sociologically and historically speaking, a number of factors have led to a multicultural society in Canada including: (1) The diversity of Indigenous peoples who lived in various territories on Turtle Island prior to European colonization;<sup>9</sup> (2) The fact that, when France ceded all territory in Canada to Britain in 1783, Britain allowed French civil law and Roman Catholicism to continue and for French to be the official language in the newly formed province of Québec (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.); (3) The recruitment of settlers from many European nations to settle the land starting in the 18th century, along with African-American slaves and free persons fleeing the US, Chinese goldminers and labourers, and immigrants from Japan (Historica Canada 2022); and (4) Continual immigration, acceptance of refugees,<sup>10</sup> and settlement due to globalization and the ongoing forces of settler colonialism which have continued into the present. The 2016 Canadian Census documents newcomers from over 200 nations—from almost every nation on earth (Statistics Canada 2016). Politically speaking, Canadian multiculturalism has been codified through federal policy, government infrastructure, and as constitutional law via the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Section 15 (1) of the Charter officially recognizes the multicultural heritage of Canadians and enshrines equal rights and protection against discrimination based on “race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability” (Minister of Justice 2021, 50). Federal policy and rhetoric in Canada are founded upon the metaphor of the “Canadian mosaic,” whereby various distinct cultures are seen to co-exist within a cohesive whole (Henderson 2005).

The mosaic metaphor has its provenance with J. Murray Gibbons, who wrote of a “decorated surface, bright with inlays of separate coloured pieces ... (with) the original background in which the inlays are set is still visible” (Gibbons 1938, viii). I argue that the approach to multiculturalism represented by the Canadian mosaic is similar to the approach undertaken by many music educators: an additive approach whereby “other” cultures are sprinkled in for good measure to a curricular approach that centres White, European cultural productions.

The Canadian cultural mosaic is often touted as a social model where difference is accepted and celebrated (Vaugeois 2013). However, this widely embraced



narrative of a multicultural Canada, and multiculturalism in general, is problematic in a number of ways. First, it erases the history, resilience, and resistance of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Gibbons' "original background" is not meant to signify the culture of the First Peoples who have lived on the land from time immemorial,<sup>11</sup> or even the French and English founders of the Canadian origin myth. Gibbons means "English Canadian" (Henderson 2005). His pluralism is "built upon ... an immutable background of white Anglo-Celt (male) hegemony," which is unquestionably centered as the "original background in which the inlays are set" (Henderson 2005, 141–42). Because the hegemonic culture is normalized, by default all non-Anglo cultures and bodies are coded as being "second-tier Others" as compared to the "original" (White) Canadian (Vaugeois 2013, 208). As a result, the cultures of anyone whose provenance does not relate back to Great Britain are the "colourful bits" within the Canadian mosaic. The Other, including the Indigenous Other, adds interest and is fetishized for their exoticism while individuals and cultural productions of the hegemonic culture serve as a marker for "normal." Other cultures and peoples can only ever be essentialized, and the portrayal and performance of difference is primarily for the consumption of those of the dominant group (Davis 1996, Hess 2015). Canadian multiculturalism thus becomes a tool for cataloguing and commodifying difference, where the norm against which all cultures, bodies, and people groups are measured is White Anglo culture. This sorting of people is a feature of multiculturalism outside of Canada as well; regardless of place-specific particularities, multiculturalism is, at heart, "a racial project" (Bradley 2006, 10).

### Multiculturalism and Racialization

If we think of racism as being "a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced" (Grosfuguel 2016, 10), the discourse of additive multiculturalism can be theorized as an instrument of a specific kind of racism based on culture and ethnicity rather than just skin colour. Grosfuguel notes that racism takes different forms "depending on the different colonial histories in diverse regions of the world" (10). He goes on to note that "racism can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion" (10) and gives the example of English racism

towards Irish people, which used religion as the primary determinant of racial superiority/inferiority.

Although the process of racialization, at base, sorts people into binary categories of human/non-human (or human/less human depending on the context and people groups), Grosfuguel's model appeals to me precisely because it allows for intersectional analysis of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw 2021/1989, 1991). Within any form of racism, certain groups are marked as being above or below a particular line of superiority/inferiority, but Grosfuguel suggests that the people groups on either side of the line are also stratified. This means that anyone in the hierarchy potentially will experience certain forms of oppression regardless of where they are situated by the system. The difference is that those who are categorized as being above the line of superiority "live all those oppressions *mitigated* by racial privilege" whereas, for those who are marked as being below the line, their "multiple oppressions are *aggravated* by racial oppression" (Grosfuguel 2016, 12, emphasis in original). The result is that even members of the hegemonic group can experience oppression depending on other aspects of their identity, but their privilege diminishes the impact. For example, as a White, straight, Christian woman living in Canada, I have tremendous privilege because of the way that I am racialized in the Canadian version of this hierarchy. However, I may experience oppression due to my gender,<sup>12</sup> and this would be even more true if I were from a conservative Christian, Jewish, or Muslim religious sect, disabled, trans, or gay, although my Whiteness would mitigate the oppressions I experienced (as opposed to if I were Indigenous, Black, Brown, or Asian). In the Canadian context, White non-Anglo newcomers might be in the superior zone and experience certain oppressions, whereas Indigenous peoples are clearly below the line of inferiority, or, in Fanon's (2008/1952) terms, below the line of what counts as human in the zone of non-being.<sup>13</sup>

In other expressions of nationhood/nationalism elsewhere in the world, racism might be rendered differently with religion or language as the primary marker of superiority/inferiority (although both markers of difference, as well as the other markers enumerated on Grosfuguel's list above, play a part in Canada's historically constructed form of racism within official policy, social structures, and as experienced by non-Anglo members of Canadian society).<sup>14</sup>

### Claiming Good Intentions: A Settler Move to Innocence

What I am asserting is that, in the Canadian context, (1) cultural racism is a primary form of racism; (2) that this racism is disguised and reinscribed through the discourse of additive multiculturalism/the “Canadian mosaic”; (3) racism in all its forms is an invention and tool of the economic project of settler colonialism; and (4) the discourse of multiculturalism lays the groundwork for the settler move to innocence of *claiming good intentions*.

Here is how it works:

The discourse of an additive multiculturalism subtly stratifies various groups based on race, coded as culture/ethnicity as outlined in the preceding section. This hierarchization of racialized groups contributes to the dehumanization of all those who are not of the hegemonic group, thereby facilitating the ongoing processes of settler colonialism articulated by Patel (2021): Justification for taking land, dehumanization and erasure of Indigenous peoples, and theft of labour (including contemporary forms of slavery, sweatshops, child labour, etc.) from anyone racialized as Other. Those that benefit from settler colonialism in large or small measure, including those that work in a given society’s political and social structures (for example, university professors like me and music educators in schools), can use multiculturalism to claim good intent for “including”/“tolerating” and/or “celebrating” cultural diversity without having to cede their position in the hierarchy or problematize the ideology and processes of settler colonialism. The discourse and practices of multiculturalism thereby allow individuals “to ignore the systemic operation of racism and colonialism at the structural and institutional levels” (Marom 2016, 27), thus facilitating what Mawhinney (1998) calls *a claim of good intentions*.

A claim of good intentions occurs when individuals story themselves as “*outside of the relations of racism*” (Mawhinney 1998, 104). Provided with “the comfort of the appearance of good intentions,” this move to innocence allows those racialized as superior to ignore the ways they contribute to upholding various systems of oppression “in general and context specific terms” (104). The inequities and burdens created by settler colonialism and racialized constructions are located with the racialized person and are therefore treated as being *beyond* the social terrain of an allegedly tolerant and welcoming [insert country here] where the “innocent”

and good-intentioned bystander (including the well-meaning music teacher intending to expose their students to diversity) is located.

### Claiming Good Intentions in the Music Classroom

Returning to Carla's concert program and her attempt to include materials from "other" cultures, there is no question that Carla genuinely had good intentions. However, the vignette provides an example of how the move to innocence can be enacted by music educators who approach their teaching through the lens of an additive multiculturalism. All that is required of Carla to be able to claim good intentions is to purchase, and teach from, a pre-made resource. As long as she has songs for her students to learn and perform that highlight "palatable narratives of difference" (Robinson 2020, 50), Carla can claim to have exposed students to "different" cultures in her teaching and can also claim virtuous intent. It did not matter that in the resource she chose, cultural/religious celebrations stand in for culture (and culture stands in for race), and that there are people in her very own community who likely celebrate most of the holidays that are part of the spectacle, even though the resource positions them as celebrations from "around the world." And it did not matter that the majority of the songs in the musical only described superficial aspects of how each holiday is celebrated: Dawali is a festival of lights that lasts five nights, Eid is a day where someone gives to charity, Kwanza is a celebration of someone's race that lasts for seven days... *Who* that "someone" is remains unclear, and, although absent and erased, what *is* clear is that they are Other.

The surface approach to decolonizing music education taken up by both Carla and the composer of the musical highlight the fact that, in an additive multicultural frame, bits and pieces storied as exotic difference from the cultures of the Other are available to those of the colonizing culture for extraction and spectacle. These differences are the shiny "coloured pieces" of the Canadian mosaic or similar constructions of an additive multiculturalism, and while Carla's resource is unquestionably problematic, this same dynamic potentially takes place whenever the discourse of multiculturalism is uncritically invoked in music education.<sup>15</sup> Music teachers' actions are often guided by a specific Western penchant for spectacle, which is driven by the dynamics of consumption necessary both for settler colonialism and capitalism.<sup>16</sup> This requirement drives the extraction of the material and

cultural resources of the land, and the dehumanization, essentialization, and/or erasure of those racialized as Other seen in Carla's resource.

## Spectacle, Consumption and Extractivism

Hess (2015) asserts that multiculturalism is, in fact, mainly about spectacle, and I suggest that a sense of spectacle is also implicit in the performing and visual arts. The desire to share/exhibit/perform/create spectacle is perhaps a common tendency tied to human sociality, as is the tendency to spectate, at least in Western culture(s) (Poignant 2004). As a Western social dynamic, spectacle is intersubjective and needs both a performer or artist and an audience. Regarding the latter, Reason et al. (2022) note that humans tend to "fall into (spectating) naturally whenever anything novel or bright and shiny crosses our path" (3), and thus, these two related tendencies make the spectacle of multiculturalism both compelling to perform and easy to consume.

Writing of the American sociocultural context in the late 20th century, Angela Davis (1996) observes, "Multiculturalism has acquired a quality akin to spectacle. The metaphor that has displaced the melting pot is the salad. A salad consists of many ingredients, is colorful and beautiful, and it is to be consumed by someone" (45). In the colonial discourses and practices of an additive multiculturalism, the demand for content to consume is ever present, and the consumption of "palatable narratives of difference" (Dylan Robinson 2020, 50) quietly reinforces who is "us" and who is the exotic "them." It also facilitates the essentialization that occurs when the culture and experience of the Other is prepared for consumption.<sup>17</sup> Often this means packaging culture as bite-sized pieces of food, clothing, music, or dance which are easy to consume without much engagement required from the spectator. Spectacle and consumption are, in fact, ideal orientations for facilitating settler moves to innocence; difficult relational histories are erased along with contemporary lived experience. Only the dances, clothing, food, and music from another time and place are represented as spectacle. Multiculturalism and spectacle are useful tools that help not only to "disappear" Indigenous peoples but also helps to erase slavery and other unsavory practices.

It is no accident that consumption is the driving force behind an additive multiculturalism. Dylan Robinson (2020) asserts that consumption is the privileged settler colonial orientation to musical and artistic events and expressions. He calls

this form of perception “hungry listening” and explains that it results from “a settler’s starving orientation” (2) whereby one’s need to consume is never satiated. He argues that this orientation is part of an extractivist mindset in which land, water, animals, cultural productions, and people are reconceived as resources to be consumed, and “the act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning” (Betasamosake Simpson and Klein, cited in Dylan Robinson 2020, 14). *Extractivism* is integral to a settler colonial worldview and to the discursive structures and practices of settler colonialism, including the structures and practices of music education.

While spectacle and extractivism are both in evidence in the above vignette, there is another dynamic that comes about due to Western extractivist tendencies, and this dynamic facilitates consumption in music education and stands in the way of decolonizing initiatives undertaken by music educators. Many music programs in the West are organized around the consumption of discrete musical expressions, each conceived of as a “piece” of music. Each piece stands in as a unit of study and object of art. In the Western imagination, pieces are treated as sonic objects, and the notated representation of each piece literally turns it into a physical object. Because it is written down, a piece is tangible and real.<sup>18</sup> This conception of music as piece/object stands in sharp relief to an Indigenous perspective where music is spiritual practice, medicine, and can even have agency with no need for a human actor to call it into being (Dylan Robinson 2020). Dylan Robinson (2019) explains that “many cultures consider song to have life, and have more-than-aesthetic functions” (139). He speaks to the *epistemic violence* that can be wrought when Indigenous musics are approached through the lens of Western structures of analysis, composition, and performance, and, I add, Western structures of teaching and learning. Settler colonialism and hungry listening erase ways of knowing implicit in Indigenous and non-Western European musical practices, such as the aurality of musical practices, and spiritual, healing, historical, and legal functions of song (Robinson 2020), and enforce others, such as Western notions of composition and authorship, the assumption that music’s function is to be listened to,<sup>19</sup> and the assumption of an inherent right to consume what is different.

## Moving Forward: Beyond Additive Multiculturalism, Extractivism, and Teaching Pieces

### Vignette 2

*When the first wave of the pandemic meant that classes moved online while students sheltered at home, Elizabeth made sure her students took a band instrument and a method book home. However, the latency of the school board's chosen online platform meant that her ensemble classes could no longer play together and so, Elizabeth began creating projects.*

*For example, Elizabeth asked her seventh and eighth grade students to create a playlist based on the life story of the oldest person that they were able to interview in their family. First, students interviewed their family member about significant historical and life events in order to create a timeline, and then they were invited to create a playlist based on that timeline. Once students had made their playlist, the last part of the assignment was to share it with the interviewee. Many of the students were newcomers or their parents were first generation Canadians, and so this project provided a rich opportunity to learn about personal, familial, and sociopolitical history while introducing students and Elizabeth to songs from various musical practices from different times and places.*

*Elizabeth also assigned her students the task of learning and recording a tune a day on their instrument from the method book, which they were invited to submit "just to try and get them to play more when they were at home." Because "the band method book is full of tunes that have been poached from various cultures in the name of multiculturalism," Elizabeth started doing research on some of the songs, which she shared with her students in their online music classes. Together, they talked about categories/functions of songs represented in the book, why people write songs, and how songs of various kinds come to be.*

*Due to the Wellerman TikTok craze of the moment,<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth explored sea shanties as an example of songs that have a function and discussed the way deck hands and sailors used these tunes and improvised verses as they worked. She then gave students a list of traditional songs from different cultures from the band method book they had at home and invited students to do their own research on a specific song, to be shared with the rest of the class. Some exciting learning ensued. For example, when a student who had recently moved to Canada from China talked to her parents about the Yangtze Boat Song in the book, the student*

discovered that a Yangtze boat song was “not really a song, it’s a tradition.” According to the student’s family, a Yangtze boat song was basically a river shanty. It turned out that the allegedly well-known tune that appears as “The Yangtze Boat Song” in North American song collections (including in the band method book Elizabeth was using), was not known to the students’ family at all. This discovery provided an interesting connection to the Wellerman video and the class’s earlier discussions about sea shanties. It also provided an opportunity for a rich discussion about looking at music through the lens of musical practices, which was an idea that had begun to take shape in Elizabeth’s thinking at the beginning of this research project thanks to Hess’ (2015) comparative musics model. Elizabeth shared, “Since I read the article about comparative musics, it has changed the way I think about how music is constructed and how it doesn’t have to be one tradition or another tradition from a different country.”

There are several things that strike me about Elizabeth’s pedagogy. First, this second vignette shows a teacher whose thinking is moving away from an additive multicultural framework and maybe even Western conceptions of culture tied to race and nationalism. Rather than approaching cultural identities as stemming from “fixed physiological categories” (Morton 2001, 33), Elizabeth’s interview/playlist project created space for more personal and familial senses of cultural identity to be constructed by each student, which also allowed for them to see themselves potentially as belonging to multiple cultures (Kinchloe and Steinberg 1997). Elizabeth provided a learning opportunity with possibilities for constructing personal cultural identity rather than evoking cultural categories. As such, the curriculum in Elizabeth’s music class had the potential to be transformed into a curriculum of *becoming*, in that it “emphasiz[ed] a reflective reviewing of self and world, as well as the taken-for-granted assumptions that make possible our seeing and acting” (Aoki 2005, 361). Elizabeth’s students had the opportunity to move beyond the production and consumption of pieces of music to situating and making sense of music, musical practices, and themselves in the world.

Secondly, the ideas of *comparison* (Hess 2015) and of music as *practice* seemed to help Elizabeth to make and explore connections across cultures with her students rather than focusing on narratives of difference.<sup>21</sup> By exploring the ways that people used music in their lives with her students, Elizabeth effectively moved her teaching beyond teaching pieces for performing and consuming, although this



was admittedly helped by the fact that students were logistically unable to play ensemble pieces due to the pandemic.

While I find both of the above developments to be quite exciting, a lack of awareness and a willingness to undertake work related to the *truth* part of truth and reconciliation in Elizabeth's teaching and thinking may remain. In other words, Elizabeth was not yet wrestling with settler colonialism and its oppressive structures and practices, including noticing and acknowledging the very different lived experiences of those who are racialized as Other in this discursive system. Fine (cited in Mawhinney 1998) notes that those at or near the top of the hierarchy of difference are often unable or unwilling to "analyse how those who inherit privilege do so." As a result, "the intricate institutional webbing that connects 'Whiteness' and 'other colors'" remains 'camouflaged'" (Fine, cited in Mawhinney 1998, 106), and one can claim an "absence of experience of oppressive power relations" (Mawhinney 1998, 100). This move may be the ultimate settler move to innocence, perhaps the most potent of all tools in perpetuating and reproducing settler colonialism. It is indeed difficult for White music teachers to notice the discursive structures and practices of settler colonialism.

## Final Thoughts

In this article, my intent has been to explore certain dynamics that make it difficult for White music educators to engage in the work of decolonizing their teaching practice. I have taken Marie Battiste's (2013) metaphor of decolonizing as "unpacking the keeper current" to heart in the hopes that this analysis may be helpful in unpacking what the system and practices of settler colonialism camouflage so well. I have attempted to show how the discourse of an additive multiculturalism upholds the practices and structures of settler colonialism and enables music educators to claim good intentions, how engaging in a Western appetite for spectacle and consumption and an extractivist worldview have the potential to enact epistemic violence on the musics and peoples racialized as Other, how framing teaching music primarily as teaching pieces, and how the inability to see one's involvement in systems of oppression all work together to complicate decolonizing initiatives in our field. Helping White music educators to notice racist structures and ideas, troubling the discourse of multiculturalism, developing awareness of, and finding alternatives to, an extractivist mindset and exploring models of pedagogy that go

beyond the teaching of pieces as musical objects are all necessary endeavours in shifting this landscape towards a decolonizing music education. They are also an important part of addressing the underlying structures and systems that, more importantly, result in the majority of music educators being White on land colonized by Europeans in many places all over the world. All these issues will take time to address and will depend on the willingness of music educators, music teacher educators, and those who are in leadership in professional music education associations to move beyond the “inertia of habit” (Dewey 1934, 272) towards alternative futurities. Such movement will require more than empathy and affect (Dylan Robinson 2020). Any alternative path forward must make space for and center the voices, bodies, and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples along with those of Black, Brown, and Asian peoples, while actively seeking to banish structures of colonial dominance tacitly implied in Western music education. What is needed, in the words of Dylan Robinson (2019), is an “allyship of persistent, embodied obstruction to the normative processes” of our discipline (141).

## About the Author

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Treaty 7 is one of 11 numbered treaties between the Crown and specific Indigenous nations that were made between 1871 and 1921. See <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100028574/1529354437231> for more details. In many instances, the Government of Canada has not fulfilled their side of these agreements.

<sup>2</sup> In May 2021 the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation discovered 215 unmarked graves on the grounds of a former residential school in Kamloops, BC and since then, Indigenous communities across Canada have made searches at other former school sites. To date there are 1800 confirmed or suspected unmarked graves that have been identified in addition to the 4100 children who are officially on the record as having died while at school. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/where-searches-for-remains-are-happening-at-former-residential-school-sites-1.5754222>

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<sup>3</sup> Many would argue that the practice of removing Indigenous children from their families continues through the child welfare system. See Sinclair (2016) for a discussion of this issue.

<sup>4</sup> The TRC (2015b) defines cultural genocide as “destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (1).

<sup>5</sup> Canada’s Indian Residential Schools were an instrument of this practice of settler colonialism.

<sup>6</sup> I feel it important to note that in spite of the intense pressures of settler colonialism to cede land and assimilate, along with harm inflicted in a variety of ways, Indigenous peoples have remained resilient and adaptive and, in the words of Nuxalk and Onondaga rapper JB the First Lady, they are “still here.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGTqXZrH374&ab\\_channel=JBTheFirstLady](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGTqXZrH374&ab_channel=JBTheFirstLady)

<sup>7</sup> This text is from the description on the website of the company that created and sells the resource. I have purposely avoided naming the company and citing the website.

<sup>8</sup> I am extending Hess’ (2015) argument that “Canadian music curricula actually reflect Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism” (338) to include teachers’ practices and the discipline of music education in general.

<sup>9</sup> See Dickason and Newbigging (2015) Chapter 2 for a discussion of how Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island made cultural adaptations in response to the resources and climate of their traditional territories.

<sup>10</sup> The UN Refugee Agency reports that “Canada has welcomed 1, 088, 015 refugees since 1980” <https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugees-in-canada/#:~:text=Canada%20has%20a%20strong%20tradition,who%20were%20resettled%20from%20overseas>. although Canada’s refugee track record is not universally lauded. See Melnyk and Parker (2021) for a discussion <https://read.aupress.ca/read/finding-refuge-in-canada/section/ccd30f33-e86f-4195-8f13-2c98280d9462>

<sup>11</sup> Dickason and Newbigging (2015) explain that the term “time immemorial” “refers to a point that exceeds human memory...In the Indigenous sense its meaning...also refers to the fact that First Peoples see time as being cyclical. In this understanding, events from the distant past do not require a specific date as that is a linear, and Eurocentric, construct” (Chapter 1, Note 1, 381).



<sup>12</sup> I am writing this the day after Roe has been overturned by the Supreme Court in the U.S. and, although not American, this development has made me very aware of the ways I am coded as less human in the Western imagination because I am female.

<sup>13</sup> This intersectional feature of any racializing construct is what allows those in the highest group to successfully undertake the move to innocence Mawhinney (1998) calls “the rush to the margins” (109) whereby White individuals shift their focus away from racism to “their experience of other oppressions” (110).

<sup>14</sup> See Bannerji (2000), Chapter 1 for a detailed exploration of differing manifestations of multiculturalism in Canada, the US, and Britain.

<sup>15</sup> Bradley (2015) points out that even though one of the initial intents of multicultural education was to “(rectify) the abuses of racism ... concerns about race and racism have been muted from the multicultural discourse” (13).

<sup>16</sup> Because settler colonialism reconceives of land, people, and cultural productions of the other as property to be used for capital gain, there are strong links between the ideologies and practices of colonialism and capitalism (Simpson, James, and Mack 2011). Coulthard writes of the “violent transformation of non-capitalist forms of life into capitalist ones” (2014, 8).

<sup>17</sup> My thanks to ACT editor Deborah Bradley who pointed out the connection between consuming the other, as I’ve outlined here, and bell hooks’ (1992) analysis on “eating the other.”

<sup>18</sup> Many readers will likely make the connection that this description of a Western view of music-as-object could be conceived as an articulation of an aesthetic formalism akin to Hanslick’s (1986) notion of piece as work of art. See Alperson (1991) for a philosophical critique.

<sup>19</sup> Sparshott (1994) sums up a Western view of the purpose of music as follows: “the simplest and most obvious way of specifying the end and means of music is to say that it exists to provide something to listen to” (51).

<sup>20</sup> *Soon May the Wellerman Come* is a sea song about the provision ships owned by the Weller brothers that sold goods to whaling stations in New Zealand during the 1800s (Jøn 2014). Although not technically a sea shanty in that it is not a work song (Whates 1937), a TikTok video of the song uploaded by Nathan Evans in December 2020 went viral and renewed public interest in sea shanties and sea songs. NBCnews.com reports that “videos tagged #Wellerman have since racked up more than 65 million views on TikTok.” Here is the original video:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@nathanevanss/video/6910995345421962498>

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<sup>21</sup> Praxial conceptions of music have been discussed at length both in the field of music education generally, and in this journal. Sparshott (1986), Wolterstorff (1986), Alperson (1991), Regelski (1992), and Elliott (1995) were some of the earlier contributors to a practice turn in music and music education philosophy, and the work of ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1974) and musicologist/ethnomusicologist Christopher Small (1998) have also been influential in that they situate music as human activity rather than sound.