

# Can I Speak, When and How? Colonization, Subalternity, and Contested Practice

André de Quadros

Boston University

## Abstract

Anchored in the work of Fanon (1952), Mbembe (2019), and Spivak (1988), I take an autoethnographic journey that traces colonization and the subtle forces of coercion that exist in the academy and society, particularly in the US. I draw on Holland et al. (1998) to position myself in a figured world, a unique constellatory network of histories, relationships, geographies, and more. Through this autoethnographic account, I describe my role as a music teacher, one who seeks a transgressive pathway in the fragile territory of a new awareness of diversity that continues to perpetuate subtle epistemic violence. I locate my work as “situated knowledge” within the geographies of marginalization, from the colonized world to prisons.

## Keywords

Decolonization, race, prisons, exilic condition, forced migration

When I was a little boy, my family attempted to cross a border in an exercise of our constitutional rights. Our family was barred from crossing over. In an attempt to circumvent this border, in a daring and hazardous exercise, we were disguised and smuggled in a perilous boat in the middle of the night. I lost my sandal in the water when a smuggler carried me into the boat. Although I was little, I knew, fearfully, that I had to be silent and to hide in the body of the boat. I was aware of the search lights of the police coastguard. We made it across, and I was in hiding for weeks before returning to school. A few years later, our family migrated to two White countries in search of asylum. None of those White countries worked out, so we returned to our place of origin (de Quadros 2020b).

It was not easy, decades ago, to be an asylum-seeker and a refugee and it is particularly challenging for me to recount this narrative so publicly. What follows is a continuation of an autoethnography in which I seek to demonstrate that my early childhood experiences and later understandings have critically influenced my work in race and forced migration.

After living in the United States for almost twenty years and in the wake of the 2020 nationwide reckoning on race as a result of the murder of George Floyd, I started to label myself as a Latino Asian. This term is unfamiliar in the US because “Latino” is synonymous with “Latin American.” It is used less commonly to refer to Spanish-Portuguese colonization that stretched worldwide, from South and Central America and the Caribbean through Africa to Asia (Disney 2009). One of the longest held European colonies was the Portuguese settlement of Goa in the Indian subcontinent, from which my family hails. There, our original Hindu cultural history and family names were erased, making me yet another colonial product, a person without a connection to pre-colonial land and culture. For settlers, non-immigrants, and those with limited colonial connection, such histories and their present-day consequences are difficult, if not almost impossible, to comprehend.

There are many ways in which I might choose to position myself, and the label of Latino Asian is only one way I do so both within and outside the academy. This public identifying represents a milestone transitioning; for many years, I was unable to find words to distinguish myself from the dominant White majority in the United States. Being visibly different and speaking a different English vernacular

had forced me to narrow the gap between the academy and me, rather than celebrating the difference and distance. In short, I assimilated, or tried to do so.

This article presents an autoethnographic account written as a response to *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education's* (ACT) anti-racist prompt, framed in Mbembe's (2019) borderless theory and Fanon's (1952) postcolonial critique. My autoethnography is methodologically based on Holland et al.'s (1998) concept of the *figured world*. Using Bakhtin (1981) as a theoretical foundation, Holland et al. argue that all individuals are positioned in a unique constellatory network of relationships, systems, geographies, and power dynamics—figured worlds—that allow for narrating dynamic autoethnographies. I am also informed by Donna Haraway's (1988) framing of “situated knowledges” as connective tissue between knowledge and place: “an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning” (590).

## Early Days

The interweaving of the personal and the professional anchors my autoethnographic narrative. As Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) writes, such narratives require a union between “the epistemic and aesthetic demands of autoethnography and autoethnographic performance” (297). This approach to writing resonates with Bruner's (1991) “Self-Making and World-Making,” in which he invites authors and narrativists to consider how they might be constantly engaged in the act of reframing and reconstituting the past in the present.

I grew up during post-Indian independence and was educated in a school with a British curriculum taught by Spanish Jesuits. It is no wonder that I became convinced that White countries were superior. When my family was forced to flee to Australia in the 1960s during the White Australia Policy (Windschuttle 2004), I was the only Brown boy in the city of Melbourne as far as I could see—the only Brown boy on the playground, on the trams, and on the streets. In other words, I was made Brown in the way that Boyah Farah (2022) recounts in *America Made Me a Black Man: A Memoir*. Continuing to flee, we became asylum-seekers in Portugal. Unable to settle in the White world, my family returned to India, where I completed my undergraduate degree. While in college, two pivotal events occurred. I fell in love with Western classical music. At about the same time, I became involved in radical decolonizing thinking, largely influenced by Fanon (1952), Freire

(1970), and other anti-colonial thinkers, although I do not remember encountering the “decolonizing” word in those days. These two love affairs were in collision, of course. After all, classical music in India is a continuing colonial legacy that the anti-colonial discourse challenged and resisted.

Migrating again to Australia in 1975 after college in India, and after the lifting of the White Australia Policy, I traveled in three parallel professional trajectories: school music education, orchestral and choral conducting, and community music. In schools, I was given the freedom, fortunately, to engage in experimental, improvisational, non-Eurocentric practices. Simultaneously, I conducted relatively conservative and traditional concerts with professional and community ensembles in Australia, Europe, and Southeast Asia. My community music activity allowed me immense liberty to bring people together for informal musicking of many different kinds: workshops in far-flung Australian villages, large family music picnics, music fiestas, and so much more. At that time, I could never have imagined working in the US, particularly knowing from my teenage years of its systemic brutality, but the job at a research university seemed to call me, and I started working joyfully as the chair of its department of music education just days before the September 11, 2001, attacks. I resisted my instincts to flee the country and stayed, but as a Brown immigrant in the formidable US educational ecosystem, I felt pressured to conform in dress, language, and scholarship. At times, these pressures to conform felt coercive, but I went along with them and continued in academic leadership for more than a decade. In the aftermath of the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020, an unarmed African American man who was murdered by a Minneapolis policeman who knelt on Floyd’s neck, the pressures to assimilate have felt lighter, and my colonized interiority (Fanon 1952) has found a new voice.

The additional guiding questions and issues of my narrative follow. Who am I as a music educator and musician, and where do I belong? How do I make sense of myself in a place where I am classified as an alien by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, an alien of color at that? How secure can I be when I speak out about fascism, racism, and heteropatriarchy? Where have my experiences of racism taken me as a music educator?

## Questions Take Shape

In this article, I contextualize these questions within ecosystemic and societal pressures, describing how these pressures have influenced my work as a music educator. In discussing pressures, I point to the systems of colonialism and racism that are distinct for my lived experience—distinct because my personal history as a non-American is constituted simultaneously by multiple layers of privilege and marginalization. In India, I was at the apex of the caste pyramid, a system that violates basic rights of those consigned to “lower” castes. By contrast, as a Brown person, living for the last four and a half decades in the West, I have had to first understand, then withstand, the subtle and pernicious compulsion to assimilate.

As a South Asian, the opening sentence of the call for papers about anti-racism resonated with me, so aptly calling attention to subalternity. A concept originally developed by Spivak (1988) to call attention to colonial domination in South Asia, subalternity has been transposed more widely (see, for example, Mbembe 2019). The call for papers anchored in Mbembe’s “genus of subaltern humanity” (178) enlarges the conventional concept of subalternity. What is particularly compelling about Mbembe’s work is the manner in which he connects multiple dimensions of race, going further than Fanon (1952) to shine a light on the steady erosion of justice and democracy. In so doing, he connects colonialism, racism, and slavery as intersectionalities. Mbembe feels particularly relevant to me because of the contemporaneity of his work.

Describing systems of oppression as I have done above is not new, but it is particularly pertinent for my work as a professor in the field of music education at a time of increased attention to diversity and inclusion. This attention, at many levels from government to corporate to educational institutions, has had distinct manifestations in practitioner-led music-making. If music educators just change the color of representation, so some of the narrative goes, then we have achieved diversity’s goals. Is it as simple, though, as including more composers, players, and teachers of color, and so forth? Indeed, the reductionist view of choices of repertoire is unlikely to position students and musicians to work for justice. Perhaps music educator colleagues might consider that there may be more to diversity, as Angela Davis points out (Eckert 2015):

I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice. Diversity is a corporate strategy. It’s a strategy designed to ensure that the institution functions in the same way that it functioned before, except now you have some black faces and

brown faces. It's a difference that doesn't make a difference. Diversity without structural transformation simply brings those who were previously excluded into a system as racist, as misogynistic, as it was before. (para. 12)

In similar vein, Christopher Hedges (2023), Pulitzer prize-winning journalist writes,

The brutal murder of Tyre Nichols by five Black Memphis police officers should be enough to implode the fantasy that identity politics and diversity will solve the social, economic, and political decay that besets the United States. Are we better off with Clarence Thomas, who opposes affirmative action, on the Supreme Court? Is our perpetuation of permanent war more palatable because Lloyd Austin, an African American, is the Secretary of Defense? Is the military more humane because it accepts transgender soldiers? (para. 1)

Although the writers I have cited above—Davis, Fanon, Hedges, and Mbembe—lie outside the music education field, it is not as though music educators have been silent on justice and equity. Seventeen years ago, Deborah Bradley (2006) was writing about race in music education, as were others around that time and since, notably Hess (2014, 2018) and Hamilton (2021). Inspiring though their work is, I have felt reluctant for a long while, as an immigrant, to engage in public critique of American practice.

What started to inspire me greatly and slowly released me from the shackles of silence, was my involvement in men's and women's prisons and juvenile detention centers (de Quadros 2016, 2018). Before then, I knew the data, the facts, and figures of racialized mass incarceration, but seeing the human consequences of state-sponsored brutality and injustice, walking past cells where men are screaming out from the torture of solitary confinement, have made it exceedingly difficult to remain silent. Indeed, those experiences made me feel complicit. I started to speak out, to write, and to create performances about what I saw. The early versions of my writing (de Quadros 2015, 2016) were the first steps in this revelatory journey. Other writings that explored forced migration and racial injustice followed (de Quadros et al. 2021, de Quadros and Amrein 2022). Most recently, I co-authored an article with Sean "Truth" Evelyn, while he was in prison, which was published in the *Music Educators Journal* (de Quadros and Evelyn 2023). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first peer-reviewed article in music education to be co-authored across prison walls.

My transgressive pedagogy and engaged scholarship provoked me to consider my personal subjectivity and to interrogate whether my musicking in prisons

offered a deep space in which I can be in communion with others whose social suffering (see, for example, Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997) was unimaginable. I shared nothing of the profound racial disadvantage of African American prisoners, but when I saw the racialized world through anti-colonial eyes and listened to the voices of incarcerated persons, it helped me as a music educator to work to co-create a gentle, subversive, hopeful space in prisons.

## My Writing as Contested Practice

My first published autoethnographic account (de Quadros 2020) positioned me as a displaced person and as someone who, in search of direction, found expression not just in music-making but in contested terrains of my chosen fields. When I started to write my music-making and music education story, I sensed that standard conventions of writing were inhospitable to the kind of authenticity and vulnerability I desired. I adopted, therefore, an approach to narrative writing that departs from some of the accepted norms of academe, norms that can be experience-remote and systematic.

In the field of music education, there is, clearly, an abundance of vulnerable writing, personal stories written from the heart. Niknafs's (2017) deeply moving article positioning herself as central to the subject matter was inspirational for me. She wrote with emotional wisdom and clarity, modeling courage; the subaltern spoke. In her narrative, Niknafs engaged in "wording the world" (Chatterji 2015), co-constituting past events in both the everyday and the present.

In the process of self-identifying and indicating positionality, I am also engaged in wording my world. However, describing myself using Eurocentric labels reveals the relative impossibility of creating an alternative decolonized language; this trap of coloniality is entirely consistent with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) seminal postcolonial essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she deconstructs the language of coloniality, drawing attention to how those who inhabit the periphery are rendered invisible. She censures Foucault (1991) and others for being complicit, in part, for creating hierarchies of Euro-based knowledge. Beyond that, and by extension, I observe that writing practices including White Language Supremacy (CCCC 2021), theoretical framing, editing, and publishing are all part of an integrated global system that is dominated by the academic culture of the United States. We can see these hierarchies alive and well in music education academia. This

privileging of a Eurocentric academic culture erases even an awareness of Indigenous knowledges, thereby contributing to epistemic violence. Smith (2021) clarifies this point:

To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things... Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past are all strategies, which are commonly employed by Indigenous peoples struggling for justice. (34)

The epistemic violence that is enlarged every day by systemic exclusion exemplifies the cultural violence about which Galtung (1969) speaks, the kind of violence that could be even more pernicious than both direct and structural violence. In a 2011 article on decolonization, Ramón Grosfoguel names this epistemic violence as a concealed form of coloniality and racism in the “modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric worldsystem” (27).

In 2023, I am in the process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing a fragile interiority. In this struggle for sense-making, I return to my narrative, which connects the professional and the personal. Colonization left such a heavy imprint in my family that we became a classic example of what Fanon (1952) describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, perpetuating colonial narratives that became deeply embedded in my consciousness alongside my anticolonial disposition. Dabashi’s (2011) *Brown Skin, White Masks* speaks to me with his consideration of continuing colonial practices by Brown people, frequently resulting in Brown immigrant scholars participating in colonial and racist practices.

When I started my writing in India, it was completely different from what it must be here and now; Indian English, another colonial legacy, is dissimilar in grammar, syntax, punctuation, and referencing style from the British standard. There were hardly any style guides in the 1970s; we wrote in longhand, and there was no defined form of academic writing. After more than four decades of living in the West, my writing and therefore my thinking and wording of the world have become colonized, first by Australian and then by American academic culture. Progressively since the 1990s, my metamorphosis into an academic writer for Western readers has accompanied my adoption of Eurocentric writing conventions.

## Music Education and My Decolonial Self



Finally, what does all this mean for me as a music educator? How will my soul-print and mind-print be received in peer-reviewed articles such as this one? I raised similar questions earlier in this article, questions that continue to unsettle and provoke. They are not questions that have settled responses; rather, these questions of identity, vulnerability, and belonging animate my teaching and writing. These questions are partly connected to the unexpected international uprising after the George Floyd murder in 2020. As a result of this, I feel, definitively, that the gap between the music education profession's epistemic view and mine is narrowing, and my own capacity to locate myself in the power matrix is more articulate. I have had the privilege of working in the prison classroom, where I could interrogate my musicking pedagogy and understand systemic oppression more deeply. There is, after all, possibly no place as stark for understanding racism and poverty than the prison environment. For me as a music educator, proximity to marginalized settings such as prisons has given me uniquely firsthand insight, allowing me to see the carceral logics that have penetrated much of American society, including the higher education institutions in which many of us work (Castro and Magana 2020). In their seminal work drawing on critical literature in settler colonialism, Indigenous studies, and incarceration, Sophie Rudolph (2023) sees "raced" carceral logics embedded in education, "through relations of 1) crisis, safety, and security; 2) containment and control; 3) policing and surveillance" (1). The frequently punitive, rigid, and controlling atmosphere prevalent in much of American education is redolent of these carceral logics.

The anger I have felt against the state and its tentacular systems, akin to Cherry's (2021) concept of Audre Lorde's rage as the fuel for antiracist struggle, accompanies my resonance with the call of two African Americans: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1866) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1957). Harper's call, as a Black suffragist for shared humanity, was echoed by Martin Luther King's message almost a century later. She said, in 1866, "We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul" (84). King (1957) dreamed of a different world when he declared, "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness" (120).

In this article, I could have talked about the concerts, courses, papers, repertoires, and media in which I have expressed myself as a music educator in the topic

area of race and coloniality. For me, though, a personal account of my struggles as a decolonizing music educator, still struggling for the subaltern voice, is most meaningful. Autoethnography has provided a powerful process of interrogation and vulnerability; it is the first time that I have publicly claimed my refugee history. There is much to be gained and lost through autoethnographic scholarship, and I recommend it for the consideration of my colleagues. I have reconstructed myself as a music educator in American prisons, refugee shelters, and other dark spaces, and it feels like my life is on an exploratory path, a journey in search of a justice-based pedagogy. Yet, I remain deeply troubled by whether any meaningful change is possible without systemic overhaul, engaging in a struggle towards what Grosfoguel (2008) calls “different decolonial epistemic/ethical responses of subaltern groups in diverse locations of the world-system” (32).

An integral dimension of my pedagogical reconstruction is my music education approach, which has come to be known as Empowering Song—a subversive, trans-disciplinary, transgressive, and narrative approach. The pedagogy was theorized in de Quadros and Amrein (2022), the foreword of which was written by formerly incarcerated African American scholar Bryonn Bain (2022), who describes the approach as follows:

Empowering Song uses music to reclaim our humanity in inhumane places. It smuggles imagination into dungeons; turns creativity from contraband into commissary. Under the envious eye of armed guards, it unlocks more knowledge on the prison yard than most scholars on Harvard Yard; runs rivers of refuge through deserts of despair; and liberates the spirit of community by any melody necessary... Empowering Song is to music what *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is to education, and *Theater of the Oppressed* is to drama ... they subvert the status quo by democratizing the school, the stage, and the studio. (ix)

Empowering Song is challenging to describe in a couple of paragraphs; it is, at once, epistemology and pedagogy. In our book (2022), Emilie Amrein and I theorize and explain the Empowering Song approach in terms of its seven anchor points: people, practice, song, bodies, selves, stories, and dreams. We recommend centering the people in the wholeness of their figured worlds. As Bain (2022) implies above, it is a subversive and resistant musicking pedagogy. Empowering Song honors the wisdom of the body; indeed, it is an embodied pedagogy through which we come to a deeper consciousness of self. In a performance I led at the 2020 Eastern conference of the American Choral Directors Association, VOICES 21C, a Boston-based ensemble, collaborated with Halim Flowers—an African American

wrongfully convicted as a young man—in a performance of *Ezekiel Saw The Wheel* (de Quadros 2020a). On stage, we told the story of a brutal 1942 police lynching. This is an example of the power of storytelling that is central to the Empowering Song approach, which, above all, fosters freedom dreaming.

Earlier in this article, I raised questions about my points of intersection with the music education field, which I have sought to address by describing my pedagogy and activism. By addressing these questions, I have not arrived at answers, but the process of interrogation has at least provided more clarity for further questioning. Importantly, the act of writing the pedagogy (de Quadros and Amrein 2022) and of autoethnographing has been a journey of self-criticality, one that continues indefinitely. Ethnographing myself in this article has been a fragility-provoking exercise. When I reflect on the data—my lived experience—and write about it publicly, I am engaging in material and meaningful connectedness to the readership of this journal.

I conclude by reflecting on the exilic condition that Dabashi (2020) so eloquently describes: the condition of an immigrant scholar who, belonging nowhere, “has left the colonial site of his upbringing for the presumed center of capital to dismantle its ideological edifice” (125). Perhaps this humble set of narratives may encourage readers to consider their own connections to the ways in which our systems are racially and systemically coded. For me, as I hope for readers, the decoding of our systems is part of Freire’s three phases of critical consciousness: critical analysis, sense of agency, and critical action. The decoding process is deeply unsettling because I understand how I am constrained by power asymmetries, and how I wish for more than I can achieve through my work.

## About the Author

André de Quadros is a professor of music at Boston University, with affiliations in African, African American & Black Diaspora, Asian, Jewish, Muslim studies, prison education, Forced Displacement, and Antiracist Research. As a scholar, artist, and human rights activist, he has worked in over 40 countries in diverse settings including professional ensembles, projects with prisons, psychosocial rehabilitation, refugees, and victims of torture, sexual violence, and trauma. His work crosses race and mass incarceration, peacebuilding, forced migration, LGBTQ+, public health, and Islamic culture. He directs choirs and choral projects in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the United States, Israel and the Arab world, and the Mexico-US border. In 2019, he held a visiting faculty appointment at the University of Cambridge.

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