Against Virtuosity:

A Political Framework for Music Education as Care, Possibility, and Curiosity

Maria Penrice

Spring 2022

Department of Anthropology, Haverford College
Abstract:

This thesis pays close attention to the insights provided by affective responses and emotional states to interrogate the overinvestment in classical music education in the United States. Through autoethnographic reflection and conversations with a small group of interview participants, I trace how identifying emotional disconnects in music education settings is a crucial source of information for disrupting severely imbalanced power dynamics and analyzing the alliance between white supremacy and heteropatriarchal powers. In synthesizing my personal reflection and interviewees’ insights alongside the work of a diverse set of theorists, I hope to articulate a vision of music education that is based on critical wellness, genuine emotional connection and caring relationships, curiosity, and the building of political solidarity. Focusing on questions of race, power, and capitalism in my research process, I was led to artists, movements, and traditions that have long enacted a radical vision of music education. Throughout the paper, I undertake a process-focused methodology that seeks to leave the reader with a set of ongoing, unanswered inquiries that I will continue to grapple with far into the future.

Acknowledgements:

First, I would like to thank the entire Haverford Anthropology Department for creating such a caring academic home at a time when I thought I couldn’t succeed here academically. Professor Zolani Ngwane, thank you for modeling true care, compassion, and trust as my major advisor. To my thesis advisor, Nadja Eisenberg-Guyot, thank you for supporting and encouraging me throughout this entire process. I left each one of our conversations energized, reminded of why I wanted to do this project, and having learned something that made me think deeply about my role and practice as a learner. I would like to thank my writing partner Nuria Inez Benitez for consistently and skillfully meeting me where I was and helping move this project forward. Thank you to my advising group, Ella Asiedu, Julie Post, and Taryn Barrett for sharing your processes and helping me move through the hardest parts of mine. A special thank you to Taryn for your caring feedback on my drafts. To my interviewees and collaborators, thank you all for sharing your time, energy, experiences, and analysis with me: this project was shaped by your words and would not be the same without each and every one of your perspectives. I have endeavored to treat them with nuance and care. To Lizy Szanton, thank you for believing in me always, for your off-the-clock writing tutor expertise, and for being my favorite person to talk about music with. To my parents, thank you for starting me on my musical journey and supporting me through the ups and downs. My love for music began at home, during road trips and dance parties.
Introduction

As the Covid-19 pandemic has made ever-stark, there is a deep-rooted, widespread crisis of education in the United States. Over decades, educators have been pushed closer and closer to the brink of their mental, emotional, and bodily capacities. Severe inequities in school system resources, overgrown bureaucracies, and unsustainable salaries all contribute. There is a complete lack of support for educators in their monumental task of nurturing and guiding the youth of a broken society through a wildly mismanaged pandemic, the trauma of racialized violence in all its forms, and a distinctly American ideology that seeks to convince us that when all is said and done, we are alone and must learn to fend for ourselves. Over the past two years, teachers have left the profession in droves, far too often because it is a matter of choosing life over death.¹

America’s broken education system is a reflection of the ideologies, values, and priorities that keep white supremacy and heteropatriarchal domination alive and thriving in U.S. society. In a special section on the anthropology of white supremacy in American Anthropologist, authors Aisha Beliso-De Jesús and Jemima Pierre conceptualize white supremacy as a global power system, manifested in the “current forms of transnational processes that were initiated by European expansion [and settler colonialism] and that are continued through Euro-American cultural and political domination globally.”² White supremacy undergirds modern power relations and with them the very guiding principles of modernity, i.e. liberalism, democracy, progress, rationality, multiculturalism, etc. White supremacy is maintained most insidiously through covert forms: race-neutral language, respectability politics, DEI initiatives without

---

institutional interrogation, the small section at the end of the music history textbook reserved for summarizing “other” kinds of music, the commoditization and fetishization of political struggles for liberation, the list goes on and on. White supremacy and patriarchy strengthen and sustain one another by way of structural marginalization on the basis of historically constructed and contingent racial and gender categories.

Along with the U.S education system broadly, music education is also constrained by the persistence of traditional pedagogies and curriculums undergirded by subtle yet clear traces of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal hegemony. Music has been relegated to the nonessential periphery of education, as resources for arts programs in strained public school systems are continuously slashed and their value sidelined. Furthermore, the driving goals and traditional teaching practices of classical musical education are the default theoretical and pedagogical foundation of general music education in the United States. These practices are invested in the reproduction of hierarchy at many levels: between teacher and student, among students, and between performer and listener. Furthermore, the obsessive reproduction of past compositions played by traditional types of ensembles (e.g. orchestras) reinforces the use of traditional teaching, conducting, and relationship-structuring practices that rest on a hierarchical dissemination of knowledge and artistic interpretation.

Published in 2019, music professor Loren Kajiwaka’s essay “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music” takes on George Lipsitz’s formation of the “possessive investment in whiteness” to make a number of compelling arguments about classical music’s categorical significance of the most prestigious, aesthetically valuable music in the world. Kajikawa’s synthesis and call to action is foundational to my thesis project, and inspired several areas of further inquiry in my

---

3 Joy in discussion with the author, March 2022.
research process. As an exclusive genre of music long-imbued with cultural superiority, classical music is implicated in the maintenance of whiteness. From nineteenth century European histories of nobles nonchalantly socializing during musical performances so as not to seem provincially enthralled and thereby display refined musical knowledge, classical music has long helped maintain the gateway to membership in cultural, and by extension socioeconomic, elites.\(^4\)

Amidst the crisis of an education system that values hierarchy and discipline over mutual care, connection, and solidarity, a rethinking of music education is needed more than ever. Following the movement for restorative justice in education’s vision for education of social engagement, not social control, I join a chorus of others in proposing that musical education spaces have the potential to facilitate social transformation when they value collective growth and learning over individual virtuosity and narrow definitions of technical and musical excellence. The current overinvestment in the traditional pedagogies and teaching practices of classical music education at best limit music education’s potential and at worst reproduce covert forms of white supremacist and heteropatriarchal domination.

In this thesis, I pay close attention to emotional experiences and affective reactions, asserting the constant presence of an autonomous affective spirit that resists hierarchy in musical and educational settings more broadly. Students’ emotional reactions to practices of music education also reveal what is transformational about musical spaces of teaching and learning. More comprehensive integration of musical education holds significant possibilities for the transformation of the education system as a whole. A politically-engaged, feeling-centered vision for music education necessitates moving away from the focus on virtuosity and individual excellence. It includes a shift in focus towards the opportunities enacted through shared creative processes, the healing properties of music making, the social possibilities and accountabilities

that are rehearsed through musical exchange and performance,\(^5\) and the wide-reaching implications of the restoration of musical activity to its pre capitalist origins, which are grounded in long histories of collective dialogue and care via musical processes.

I feel strongly that the very bodily experiences of emotion I have had while in the presence of music are profound, politically and intellectually relevant, and worthy of inquiry. In her introductory chapter to *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS*, scholar-activist Deborah Gould recounts the wave of overpowering emotion that induced her to write the book. A member of the Chicago chapter of ACT UP until its disbanding in 1995, she found herself floored by overwhelming feelings of grief upon her retroactive reading and viewing of its archives and dozens of other sources about AIDS activism, “experiencing, in a way for the first time, the horrors of a recent past that [she] had lived through but on some affective level had refused.”\(^6\) While Gould’s emotional context is wholly different from my own, the idea of being moved to an intellectual inquiry, especially in the often sterile and unfeeling world of academia, is significant to me. Gould gestures towards the etymological connections between ‘emotion,’ ‘motion’ and ‘movement.’ For those with the privilege of maintaining distance from emotional trauma in their day to day lives, the state of being moved, especially as it relates to artistic expression, is often psychologically cordoned off from the political realm. However, this reorientation, that the experience of being moved emotionally is the precursor to social movement, relocates the emotional right back where it belongs. I often think about music as an energizing companion, something that induces me to move in times of stagnation and paralysis, reconnecting me to my internal rhythm and physiological capacities to move through

---

\(^5\) The rehearsal of social possibilities through music has been theorized by scholars such as Robin D.G. Kelley, George Lipsitz, Josh Kun, and Gaye Theresa Johnson, to name a few cited by Loren Kajikawa in “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music.”

space and time. Insofar as music has a powerful capacity to move people, in both the physical and emotional senses of the word, it is fundamentally political.

Historically, the disciplines of ethnomusicology and musicology have made a clear statement through the apolitical, taxonomic nature of their discourse. As a direct appendage of classical anthropology, ethnomusicology was based upon the characteristically Western, colonial desire to categorize and classify, to rationalize and master, to universalize, and to discover and mark as the ‘authentic.’ In their introduction to *Music and the Racial Imagination*, Rodano and Bohlman contextualize the history of the Western study of music, asserting that “[h]istorical musicology has… remained remarkably committed to the affirmation of what is and is not racial.” The authors name two perceptions that undergird colonial ethno/musicologists’ false sense of security that music transcends the racial and social, despite the fields’ long history of blatantly racialized discourse about the “naturally rhythmic” Other: music as magical and as a harbinger of universal meaning. Rodano and Bohlman call for the hearing of the social and racial in the European canon, as well as the “exploration of a cultural phenomenon that still today can sustain collective dreams of universal language as it serves to demarcate color-bound difference.” Questions about musical access, ownership, healing, and education are so fraught (and easily co-opted by liberal ideologies and historical narratives) precisely because the histories of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and settler-colonialism have shaped the current state of the world into one of injustice and irreducible contradiction. The following pages are my attempt to work within this difficult truth. I will not attempt to resolve any of the tensions my research process brought to the forefront of this project, nor will I provide definitive answers to

---

10 Ibid, 40.
the overarching questions that drove it. These questions remain: Why are we so focused on
virtuosity when we can use musical sites of teaching and learning as a tool for collective
transformation? How can we restore musical practice to its pre-commodified functions? What
are the broader implications of this process?

This paper is comprised of four chapters, with an autoethnographic interlude preceding
each chapter. The interludes progress in chronological order, outlining the broad narrative of my
musical background and path to the present set of questions that I grapple with in this project.
Constituting the ‘problem statement’ of my thesis, the first three chapters each deal with a theme
that emerged from the interview process and my own autoethnographic reflections: 1) varying
accounts of musical-emotional embodiment and their significance, 2) power structures in music
education settings, and 3) the search for the elusive, socially constructed concept of musical
‘authenticity.’ The final chapter gathers the sum tensions of the first three to explore what a
radical vision of music education could look like, taking up the restorative justice in education
movement’s philosophy of education for social engagement, not social control to explore the
possibilities that musical exchange brings into being. Then, I provide examples of people who
reflect and transcend these visions, in theory and in practice.

Methodology

I came to this project as the result of a failed attempt to put methodology into practice. I
wanted to write about music because it’s the fabric of my life and constitutes so much of my
identity and epistemology. Music is included in my imagined role in my future and my
responsibility to actively contribute to the healing and foundational transformation of a world
drowning in injustice and capitalist destruction. However, I didn’t think my lived and embodied
experiences as a white, upper middle class musician and a recipient of private classical musical
education could contribute to a thesis that was ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ enough, and so I initially chose a topic that I didn’t have much embodied knowledge about. I was afraid to probe my own memories for fear of what I’d find and what it would say about me. To write directly from my emotional experiences is to expose myself and the many blindspots and limitations that inescapably shape everything I do, say, write, and think. However, I realized that I could not put the values, methodologies, and anthropological approaches that I have faith in into practice without going through this particular process. I am a white, upper middle class queer person, assigned female at birth, and am descended from Irish, English, French-Canadian, and Slovak people who emigrated to the United States several generations ago. I grew up in the small and wealthy but highly economically stratified city of Cambridge, Massachusetts and attended the public schools there before taking a gap year and enrolling at Haverford College, a tiny private liberal arts college in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

My experiences growing up in and feeling alienated from the world of private classical music aren’t culturally invisible or politically neutral. There is plenty to say about big picture questions of power, white supremacy, institutional structures, and social hierarchy within them. As long as politics is the messy work of collectively enacting values and hopes in an environment built on contradiction, this project is political. Musical environments are not just spaces of emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual pleasure, but can facilitate the practice of alternate sociality in ways I can only begin to imagine. I have experienced flashes of what this possibility looks like, feels like, and sounds like, and insist that it is profound. Spaces of musical education can hold enormous transformative power for healing and creating new ways of being, but they also involve vulnerability, and can thus lead to immense harm. These issues are embodied at the individual level, just as they are manifested structurally and ideologically in a global hegemony.
of white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Anthropological methodology grapples with questions of how to think about and act upon this relationship between micro and macro. Especially considering the long and shameful history of power abuse in elite musical education settings, this project presupposes that emotional reactions (and especially the ones we have as children and learn to discount) are critical sources of information for disrupting severely imbalanced power dynamics.

A note from my wonderful thesis advisor, Professor Nadja Eisenberg-Guyot has stuck in my mind ever since they left it in response to an anxious comment I posted on my rough draft about not having anything ‘new’ to say in this project. They wrote, “Don't worry about newness, think instead about connection and solidarity.” As I worked on confronting this desire to produce something original, I came to the central inquiry of my thesis: How can music be taught as a tool for creating connection, care, and solidarity on the interpersonal, community, and political levels? Beyond this one project, I strive to be a respectful student of Black and Chicana feminist theorists, radical ethnomusicologists and public musicologists, performance scholars, affect theorists, queer theorists, and scholars of critical race theory. The work that has been done in all of these fields provided the critical frameworks within which I have begun to process my life experiences and potential future roles, particularly in the context of music teaching, learning, and practices of creation and performance.

**Methods**

Much of the knowledge co-created through this project is informed by autoethnographic material and semi-structured interviews with people from various parts of my musical life, past and present, classical and nonclassical. I’m grateful to have reconnected with the people already
in my orbit, and to this process for bringing new people into it. It’s amazing how nuance, complexity, and cohesion can simultaneously arise from increasing the amount of personal narratives just from one to nine. Because I mainly sought out narratives from the types of environments I have been immersed in throughout my own life, there are so many perspectives that are excluded from this project. Instead of attempting to draw resolute conclusions based on definitive evidence, I instead try to trace my own learning process as a recent student of healing and restorative justice-oriented traditions, theories, and pedagogies. In the introduction to his curious, interdisciplinary book *Just Vibrations*, musicologist William Cheng points to queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick’s idea of *paranoid reading* to highlight how academics often attempt to strategically assert authority over discourse and subject matter through the mechanics of their writing. Cheng proposes “reparative belief, willful vulnerability, and childlike optimism” as antidotes to this rhetorical armor, asking “how can we renegotiate the means and purposes of careful labor, intellectual inquiry, and living soundly?”11 I have tried to integrate this mindset into my thesis process to the best of my ability.

In her chapter “White on White: The Interviewees and the Method,” British sociologist Ruth Frankenberg engages the tensions and contradictions inherent in her attempt to interrogate the whiteness of interviewees as someone socialized to buy into the cultures and norms of whiteness herself. While the focus of the interviews I conducted was not to interrogate whiteness and not all of my interviewees were white, I was interested in how themes of whiteness in classical music education might emerge both explicitly and implicitly. Frankenberg honestly and directly takes up questions that inevitably apply to any interview but are often concealed in the effort to maintain the neutrality and omniscience of the interviewer. In order to put myself in the

same vulnerable position as the interview participants and experience the memory work
Frankenberg says implicates us as “multiply positioned in relation to [our] life narratives,” I wrote responses to the same questions I asked others to reflect on.\textsuperscript{12} I was taken aback by the range of emotions this remembering brought up and the extent to which the process unearthed and destabilized my interpretations of the past. As I relived memories through writing, I became aware of the intensely emotionally charged origins of the insights I will seek to develop and deepen through theory, analysis, historical context, and my conversations with others. At the root of what inevitably becomes complicated and blurred by arguments and rebuttals, contradictions and irresolvable tensions are the visceral emotional reactions that steered me down this path. I tried to be as honest and vulnerable as I could in these reflections, which sometimes took multiple tries.

I am a novice interviewer, and each interview felt very different depending on my pre-existing relationship, or lack thereof, with the person I was speaking with. Each interview complicated and shifted my answer to the question of what this project is about and who it is for. I found myself reading back transcripts and wishing I had asked different follow up questions and at different points in the interview, catching and then berating myself for imagining a hypothetical response based on what I had failed to extract. When I noticed myself sensing discomfort, self-doubt, or defensiveness in the interviewee’s voice or body language, I heard my extreme empathetic tendencies emerge, jumping in to try and make the discomfort go away. I often didn’t succeed in addressing whiteness head on, which I justified for different reasons depending on the situation. In those moments, I was forced to confront the question of whose

comfort I was preserving, considering the possibility that I had run into a very personal shame that I have not yet fully faced.

Although I do not believe I always succeeded in facilitating this environment, I wanted the interviews to feel like spaces in which to explore the significance of emotional experiences for the creation of something better and reflect on the sacred space musical embodiment can create for all kinds of transformation. This proved hard to do in under an hour, as it tended to take about that long for the interviewee to recount and comment on their experiences, but it was one of the ways I attempted to minimize the power imbalance in what can often be an extractive relationship that fails to treat interviewees as analytical thinkers and contributors in their own right. I tried to pose numerous phrased, open-ended inquiries that focused on reconstructing memories of emotional experiences, and was often met with positive feedback. At one point or another in each interview, I to some extent described my thought processes behind the guiding questions I’d presented and my goals for the project, reflected in Frankenberg’s notion of the ever insufficient attempt to live out the “feminist goal of sharing power by sharing information.”

Each person had a different motivation for being there, whether it was an act of friendship and care, sharing pre-existing musical philosophies and experiences, or being intrigued by the possibility of reflecting on questions no one had ever asked them before.

I have conducted nine interviews for this project: five with current Haverford students, two with recent graduates and friendly acquaintances, one with a musical mentor and friend who I met my senior year of high school, and one with a close friend of another interviewee. Every participant has studied music to varying degrees in an institution of higher education, and six of the nine had been students of private musical education since a very young age. Although there are myriad ways to engage with the thoughts, feelings, and memories that participants offered

---

during our conversations, the following paragraphs put these interviews in conversation with each other and with my autoethnographic reflections and interpretations, organized by way of the four chapter themes. The autoethnographic interludes are meant to function as a reflection of my learning process as the author of this project and a chronological account of emotional dissatisfaction with classical music education. I trace my process of returning to emotional experiences and affective reactions in music education settings to explore the ways in which they have guided me in a search for something more fulfilling and affirming. I reflect on my early days of private classical cello instruction and the feelings of fear, anxiety, and pressure that attempted to govern my relationship to music. Then I dive into memories of teenage musical awakening to sift through messy questions of musical belonging, authenticity, and healing.

Throughout the process of writing autoethnographic entries, I used music to unlock memories and bring myself back to particular emotional states. I tend to listen to music in a way that creates strong associations with specific time periods in my life and I found myself transported back to what it felt like to be a sixteen year old having fun with music for the first time, or a nineteen year old spending hours learning how to play something that was so captivating I couldn’t get it out of my head until it was in my fingers. This process demonstrated the intimate link between music and emotional response, as well as music’s role in creating and facilitating the context for a particular state of feeling.

Chapter 1: Musical Embodiment of Emotion

In fourth grade, I started cello lessons with Michael Bonner, the same teacher I’d have for the next nine years. A couple of months after I started, he told my parents that I was beginning late but picking things up fast. I don’t remember all of the details, but he communicated to my parents that with the right level of coaching and commitment, I had shown the promise of cello prodigy. My parents responded with trepidation—they had had the kind of 1950s, picket-fence-like childhoods where they could run out the back
door and play, and they say they wanted me to be able to be a kid too. I’m so grateful for that, but it didn’t protect me from the effects of classical pedagogy, created for the purpose of sculpting virtuosos. My mom was supposed to come to my lessons and coach me while I practiced—reminiscent of the dedication of families of Olympic athletes or something—and that didn’t last long. Practicing felt like a chore that depleted my reserves of willpower.

This and so many other things—parents of other cello students anxiously wringing their hands and filming from the back row during dress rehearsals for recitals, sitting together quietly in the stifling atmosphere of audition waiting rooms—made me feel like a vessel rather than an artist, and also deeply older than my age. I had absolutely no idea what the end goal of all of this was: Michael said I needed to do something, and my parents pretty much complied, I suppose because I had “talent.” The anxiously endemic to this world of extreme privilege makes me feel sick to my stomach. It does as a manner of speech now, and did back then, in the form of nausea, back pain, extreme feelings of nervousness, pressure, and fear. I delve back into these memories, I’m struck by how even after participating in structured music education for over half my life, I didn’t believe that I had much of any creative or artistic capacities until very recently, as a young adult working on healing childhood wounds.

During the almost ten years I spent taking private classical cello lessons, I played in solo recitals, chamber groups, orchestras, auditioned for Massachusetts state orchestras, tried to avoid competitions at all costs, and attended summer camps. My friends found it strange that I was so adamant I had to go practice every day. Both teacher and parents seemed to always feel like I wasn’t practicing enough. I felt frustrated with all of it.

Socially, playing cello pretty seriously from a young age was something that other kids thought was impressive and snooty, and it exacerbated the messages I was already receiving that I was a mature, serious soul who was above the things that other kids did and enjoyed. This is a somewhat painful feeling to unearth, and it plagued my life until I got to college. Looking back, it’s hard to pinpoint why I continued. I guess there was a core something I was holding onto, but mostly I did it because I was handed the opportunity, and people told me it made me special and that I was really good at it. This felt twisted to me as a kid, and coming from most adults, I did not take it as a compliment. I hated being asked to play for adults: I felt like a wooden box with a precious gem inside that only I could make shine for the enjoyment of other people. As a kid, this sense of obligation felt really strange, even as it has since been reframed. This is such a different relationship to performance than the one I am currently trying to cultivate. I’ve made a conscious decision to leave it in the dust, lingering habits and associations aside. In those formative years, I sensed that my musical world was a huge, almost gross, privilege but I don’t think I felt like it was making my or anyone else’s life better. There was something big missing.
In the following chapter, I will begin by providing background as to why focusing on emotional embodiment is particularly significant in the context of European classical music. Then, I will define the distinction between emotion and affect for the purposes of this project and explain the ways I am thinking about the concept of emotional embodiment in musical settings. Finally, I will turn to my autoethnographic reflections and conversations with interviewees to specify and expand this discussion.

Classical music is a broad and ever-shifting term, but most often used as “an umbrella for the entire span of Western art music.”¹⁴ It is a large category of music created in particular historical circumstances and under particular ideological conditions that, like whiteness, are easily made invisible and neutral. The term “highbrow,” referring to ‘high’ art or culture, comes directly from phrenological theories describing the superior ratios of northern Europeans’ crania.¹⁵ That classical music can somehow be separated from the conditions of its creation and filtered for transcendental aesthetic properties and cerebral innovations is a reflection of the power structures it is part and parcel of.

However well-intentioned, the common assertion that ‘music is the universal language’ is misguided. Music is a tool that humans employ universally to express themselves and connect with one another, but in a global caste system built on racialized oppression, stripping music from its material and historical contexts to claim universal meaning and ownership can have extremely harmful consequences. In the world we live in, to universalize is to deracialize and depoliticize, a process which can be easily co-opted for maintaining the discriminatory, hierarchical status quo. The point is not that every single classical composer was a bigot, that the

---


music itself is contaminated, or that classical music is an entirely white field, which isn’t true. But, the revered canon of classical music overwhelmingly privileges and elevates the experiences, interpretations, goals, and artistic priorities of European men. The sounds of this music are built on a tradition of exclusion, and to focus on emotional embodiment in music is to emphasize this point. Just as the Institute for Jazz and Gender Justice, recently created at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts asks the question “what would jazz sound like in a culture without patriarchy?” I hope to further explore this idea of what music can feel like in an educational system that doesn’t interpersonally, ideologically, and structurally privilege the tradition of Western classical music and theory above other systems of musical knowledge, creation, and function.

Throughout this thesis, I will use the terms emotion and affect to distinguish between different kinds of feeling. Deborah Gould draws on philosopher Brian Massumi’s scholarship to formulate the following definition of affect. She uses the term “to indicate nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body.” Gould’s definition invokes nonverbal reactions and emotional registers of a lower frequency. By contrast, she refers to emotion as “one’s personal expression of what one is feeling at a given moment, an expression that is structured by social convention, or culture.” Thus, descriptions of emotion are incomplete, inexact representations of an affective state, which resists fixed linguistic categorization through space and time. I will broadly take up Gould’s theorization of affect and emotion, as it allows for important connections to musical contexts. Like affect, musical exchange resists and transcends a narrow

linguistic grammar that can only take our imaginations and the potential of feelings states so far. Particularly in the context of classical compositions, which feature the extensive use of emotional directives, Gould’s understanding of emotional descriptions as incomplete is particularly useful.

In the coming paragraphs, I take up the idea of emotional embodiment in a few different ways, through reflecting on my conversations with interviewees. First, emotional embodiment simply refers to the ways in which the mind and body are connected in our experiences of emotional and affective states. Descriptions of emotional states are intimately connected to physiological sensations. For example, feeling happy and relaxed tend to go together, as do feelings of anxiety and tension. In focusing on the toll traumatic and chronic stress take on physical wellbeing, Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* highlights the inextricable relationship between mental-emotional and physical anguish. Second, I will address how music shapes and interacts with the concept of emotional embodiment. Music seems to have an immediate and powerful emotional, embodied effect on listeners and/or participants, a sentiment that was shared across a few of my conversations with interviewees.¹⁹ Music is a powerful site of both physical and emotional movement and persuasion.

Furthermore, the embodiment of emotion is a musical site of power and transformation that can be wielded for discipline or growth. As a recipient of almost a decade of classical music education, I have seen and felt how it disciplines bodies. When I joined a jazz ensemble populated by a group of endearing, chaotic, and passionate musicians who smoked weed together before rehearsal and jammed in each other’s basements towards the end of my first year of high school, I had no idea how to use my body on stage (the irony of being a musician who couldn’t dance). Everybody else seemed to be having fun or at least be relaxed and nonplussed: small

¹⁹Oliver in conversation with the author, February 2022.
moments of joking and bantering on stage was part of the performance. All I knew how to do was sit there quietly, the audience a bald mass of silence, staring and unblinking.

Arlo, an avid singer and pianist attending Haverford College told me they felt musically the happiest and most free when singing in a capella shows, surrounded by friendly faces, creating something joyful together—something belonging to the group to share. This kind of dynamic interaction, that they also experienced while playing shows with Haverford’s now completely student-run jazz band, stood in direct contrast to their experiences with classical piano recitals, “where you’re just supposed to be like a weird statue.”

I appreciated the playfulness in this comment at the same time as this image really resonated with the following queries: what does this say about the values and priorities underpinning the institutions, pedagogies, and histories of classical music? What is the reason for this production of ‘weird statues’? One answer can be found in the aftermath of the French Revolution:

With the aristocracy declining…the bourgeoisie increasingly took control of musical life, imposing a new conception of how concerts should unfold: programs favored composers of the past over those of the present, popular fare was banished, program notes provided orientation to the uninitiated, and the practice of milling about, talking, and applauding during the music subsided...Attending concerts became a kind of performance itself, a dance of decorum.

In thinking within the concept of musical-emotional embodiment, I’m interested in exploring what it means to embody a European canon with frequent historical links to war music. I’ll never forget sitting in a cello lesson, my teacher telling me that one round dot on the page was the note that signified the musical protagonist’s discovery of the faces of dead bodies in a war torn landscape of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich’s Soviet-era consciousness. B, a classically trained, near lifelong pianist, described one experience of playing the Polish pianist

---

20 Arlo in discussion with the author, February 2022.
and composer Frédéric Chopin’s Fantasy in F Minor, a ‘war piece.’ In a lesson, B’s teacher imparted to her that “the rhythm of the left hand, like that dotted rhythm, it's like marching in the woods and you have to sort of embody that.” B described moments like these as a stimulating sensory and technical challenge of playing a character, becoming a particular environment or channeling a feeling you can only imagine. The “emotional indulgence” of classical piano playing was constituted for B by the act of channeling unfamiliar emotions and the catharsis of imbuing a piece with emotions that felt personally authentic. In this sense, emotional indulgence can be thought of as a particular avenue through which to discover one’s own emotional desires and capacities. On the flip side of these pleasurable challenging aspects of embodying characters and emotions outside personal lived experience, there is the history of controlled sculpting through musical embodiment in the nationalist classical tradition. American band leaders and military music composers such as John Phillip Sousa used musical embodiment to bring order to a chaotic world, making music into a market-aware formula eager to please the masses. In his philosophy of musical programming and performance, Sousa “suggested that performance style itself could aid public refinement.”

I spent much of my early musical life feeling more like a vessel than I did a human being engaging in the vulnerable, shared exchange of artistic and creative expression. I felt emotionally lonely in always being a shape-shifter, which is what classical musicians are taught to do. A piece of classical music often includes a wide array of very specific directions about how to play it—although there were some days when I felt I could pour some raw emotional material into what I was playing, for the most part I felt alienated from the emotional orientations emanating from a lot of the classical music I played. Held up as paragons of beauty and human expression,

---

22 B in discussion with the author, February 2022.
23 Ibid.
it was as if these musical works were telling me how I was supposed to experience emotion.

Some of the emotional directives read as an eerie tool of biopower: playing a passage of music in a manner that was stately and majestic (maestoso in Italian) required me to literally transmit the affect of the state and the crown, or majesty, through my body.

This quality of shapeshifting is echoed in Jules Gil Peterson’s theorization of white transgender children as imbued by the medical complex throughout the twentieth century with a kind of “plasticity” that functions as an “abstract form of whiteness.” This plasticity is both what is needed to create fixed conceptions of the gender-sex binary, while it also includes the autonomous potential of the universal that is denied to Black and Brown trans children by medical professionals. Thus, shapeshifting is a privilege that comes with whiteness, just as it reinscribes the racialized and gendered categories white children are allowed to move between.

The emotional disconnect I often felt playing classical music is not only an example of affect as an un governable internal compass, but a possible site of race and gender analysis. The feeling of being raw material for emotional sculpting through the performance of musical compositions can not only be interpreted as an experience of whiteness, but also of patriarchy. In Western philosophical thought, the traits associated with femininity have been constructed as complementary, but ultimately inferior to those associated with masculinity, such as the championing of reason over emotion. In this system, female bodies and minds are available to be molded by the gifts of masculine intellect. Although female classical music performers are not denied virtuosity, I would argue that they are denied genius. I remember my cello teacher telling me several times that my favorite cellist, Jacqueline du Pré was remarkable for her emotional

---


expression, but not the best technically—even she could not live out the mastery that male composers had inked onto the page.

Natasha, my dear friend whom I interviewed about her relationship to singing and brief time attending LaGuardia, a high-profile performing arts public magnet school in New York City, recalls rumors among students about admissions’ preference for voices with “malleability…they look for voices that they can sculpt, you know?” 27 She spoke about how this assignment of malleability was raced and classed, citing a preference for voices that had already experienced a level of refinement in private vocal lessons, the recipients of which were disproportionately white and wealthy. These were voices that could ‘make it’ in a music industry controlled by capital and built on the history of stripping the radical potential of musical creation in favor of palatable aesthetics and messages. Natasha transferred out of LaGuardia after her freshman year, associating her time there with high levels of stress that resulted in part from the school’s philosophy of funneling the competition, individualism, and cutthroat nature of the music industry into students’ embodied, everyday experiences in the classroom.

When remembering the musical settings that she associated with love and connectedness, Natasha described the maternal lineage of vocal music in her family and her pastime of singing Yiddish songs with her mother.

Whenever my mom and I sing something in Yiddish for my grandmother who, whose—Yiddish was her first language. And she's like one of, you know, like the last generation to really speak Yiddish. It makes her cry and I don't know, I've always just found it—that there's something really meaningful there that I think as a kid I wasn't able to describe, but I knew that it was there and now I have more words for it.” 28

This casual act of either spontaneous or planned singing opened up a space to access a special state of lineage, cultural affect, and linguistic connection to Yiddish. Over time, singing with her

27 Natasha in discussion with the author, March 2022.
28 Ibid.
mother and at Camp Kinderland (a socialist Jewish summer camp founded in 1923 by union activists in New York) became an important ritual.

[Singing] always felt like the most significant, powerful moments. And like, when I would be singing, I would just have this sort of extreme lucidity where I would be like, this is why I come to this camp. This is why, this is why singing is important to me. This is how I connect with Judaism, which I have no real religious or ritual connection to at all.29

Since knowing Natasha, I have been struck by the love and fascination she brings to vocalizing renditions of mournful songs. As someone who frequently uses music with lighthearted aesthetics as a tool to keep heavy emotional states at bay, I noticed her embrace of devastating music. During our conversation, she connected this to a history of cultural affect grounded in melodic lamentation and musical catharsis in Jewish traditions.

I feel strongly that I listen to music because it makes me feel something deep. And that is usually something that's like melancholy or sad, but it doesn't make me feel sad and melancholy. It just makes me feel…access to something profound.30

In “What Does Spirituality in Education Mean?” author Laura Jones associates spirituality with transcendence, connection, wholeness and compassion.31 She argues that spiritual experiences should be part of educational ones, citing Denise Tolliver’s notion of spirituality in education as a tool to “raise consciousness, stimulate awareness, foster creativity and imagination, connect us with grander issues of purpose and meaning, and facilitate connection with that which animates us.”32 As Natasha described in her musical moments of “extreme lucidity” and “access to something profound,” music can play an important role in facilitating spirituality in education more generally.

29 Natasha in discussion with the author, March 2022.
30 Ibid.
Sadly, the emotional embodiment of anxiety and fear in classical music education settings was such a common theme among interviewees that I could devote an entire section to it. However, I think citing the prevalence of these at best uncomfortable and at worst traumatizing feeling states is enough to make the point. Joy, another graduate of LaGuardia, is a woodwind player specializing in the flute who spoke with me about her evolving relationship to music from when she began learning classical repertoire in a middle school afterschool program to shaping her own path with the flute after graduating from college in the spring of 2021. Joy spoke with me about how she negotiated the New York City public school system’s overinvestment in Western classical repertoire and severe underinvestment in supporting students who did not have the option to receive private music lessons outside of school while retaining her love for playing music and a fond nostalgia for a tradition that no longer serves her musical goals as she enters adulthood. Joking about recurring stress dreams from early days of classical performance and feeling “emotionally damaged,” our conversation asked the following questions: what would it feel like to fall in love with music as a child without the weight of crushing pressure? What would have to change about the look and feel of the environments and expectations?

Chapter 2: Power Structures in Musical Education Settings

Sadly, I reflect on all these memories after I very recently discovered with a simple Google search that Michael, my cello teacher of almost a decade, had been twice arrested for harassment and other abusive behavior in the year after I graduated from high school and stopped taking lessons with him. I have no idea what’s happened since, and it’s unlikely I’ll ever find out.33 I have so many questions. The following reflections are filtered through this on at least some level, processing feelings of shock (as distinct from surprise), betrayal of trust, and bits of shame and confusion about my own musical identity, knowing it was so heavily shaped by someone with such capacity for obsessive, abusive behavior. I’m deeply saddened by the apparent unraveling of his life that I read about in the harsh, flourescent light of local news. He was an unhealthy person, he

33 I would like to thank Claire for helping me process the contradictions that surfaced from this troubling information. The conversation we had about this during our interview was healing for me.
needed help, he did some terrible things, he hurt people beyond what I ever could have imagined or experienced in his presence, and I have no idea where to direct the strange mix of anger and pity I feel. I wish he could’ve been so many things he was not, especially looking back on an adolescence in which I craved mentorship but didn’t know how or where to find it. It feels wrong to write about him in the past tense, but he won’t be present in my life ever again.

Even without this disturbing hindsight, it was clear to me that Michael was a perfectionist and hard to connect with personally. I knew he had an elite history: his online professional biographical profiles are filled with awards he’d received, degrees he’d earned, competitions his students had won, and elite institutions they had attended. I found out early on that he wasn’t performing anymore, arms pinned down by the masterful musician he was terrified he could never become. His investments in displays of eliteness and technical mastery are echoed in Tema Okun’s work to name a list of values that make up white supremacy culture. In Michael’s behavior, I saw deep allegiances to perfectionism, defensiveness, “only one right way,” and individualism. He wasn’t cruel in the stereotypical yelling, character-attacking way, but kept the hierarchical relationship intact: teacher knows best, you’re a lump of clay. He wouldn’t berate me for not practicing enough, but was always ready to yield the more backhanded “if only you’d done x, you could be y” type of criticism. Maybe his teaching was better suited to teaching younger kids the basics of good cello playing, shaping a few into concerto competition-winning virtuosos. He couldn’t grow with me as a teacher or mentor, and I was always aware of how he seemed to be perceiving his other, younger students flying higher and faster than me, but maybe I’m projecting. One of his students switched from cello playing to composing lessons, which he took on because he had knowledge to impart as a classical composer himself. When I brought him my part for jazz ensemble, he declared it easy. Maybe he couldn’t communicate that I was seeking out knowledge he didn’t possess, so he dismissed my interests and along with it a whole tradition of Black music. I wonder why he became a teacher. It certainly seemed, if not subconsciously, like it had something to do with wielding power and control.

In my life and in those of the people I interviewed, emotional experiences in musical education settings were inextricable from how educators wielded their positions of power. Themes of pressure, gaze, ego, hierarchy, and abuse of power resounded. In elite spaces of classical and jazz music education in particular, the instructor wields supreme power and influence. The band leader, the maestro, the conductor, the artistic mentor as gatekeepers of supreme musical knowledge were present in some way or another in most participants’ narratives. Situations where they felt expansive and free versus anxious, fearful, and frustrated

---

had everything to do with these power dynamics. This chapter describes embodied experiences of the unbalanced distribution of power in musical education settings in order to contextualize the foundational change that needs to occur.

Estel, an inspiring musical mentor and beloved friend who worked for years to find her artistic and educational path as a non-classical cellist attending elite music schools, spoke with me about some of the at-best frustrating and at-worst traumatic experiences she’s had in the world of music education. Speaking about her experiences at a college music conservatory in Barcelona, Spain, she re-enacted an infuriatingly comedic scene of her cello instructor already slouched over in his chair as she walked into the lesson, barking commands like “play!” and useless interventions like “intonation!” As a young student in the middle of the intentionally intimidating setting of a classical conservatory, she was able to maintain clear consciousness that his behavior did not constitute teaching, but instead functioned to claim a masterful level of musical knowledge that she was being punished for not having attained yet. In our conversation, she needled him back: “My father also tells me that it's out of tune but, you are my teacher, you know!”

She also recalled her first time auditioning for the conservatory, in which the judges leveled verbal attacks meant to throw off students who were not of the handful of acolytes already slated for acceptance. The judges enacted a false narrative in which the auditioner in question could not play well enough to proceed without sharp interruption and verbal intimidation. This justified giving extremely low scores in performance to talented musicians who had been studying their instrument for years. Once averages were calculated, even those who had done very well in the other parts of the audition process (music theory, sight reading, ear training, etc) would not receive high enough average scores for admittance.

---

35Estel in discussion with the author, March 2022.
Estel: And he said, [yelling] "You have no idea where are the positions in the cello, right? And I'm like, "Uhhh, what?" So I was super scared—because I was like, of course I know, you know, of course I know I've been studying this instrument forever. But yeah and then he said, "Start again!" And of course, I started again and I was super nervous so, that was a very bad experience.

Maria: Very relatable for me as well, there's been so many of those.  

This structural exclusion was waged in large part through emotional intimidation that compromised Estel’s capacity to enter into the feeling state necessary for her music to flow. bell hooks’ theorization of domination via educational structures in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* provides a nuanced understanding of how power abuse in education takes its shape, through a combination of emotional and pedagogical imbalances of expressive and discursive power. Estel also shared with me her experience as a survivor of a toxic, manipulative relationship with a teacher at Berklee College of Music. Without dwelling longer than necessary on a trauma she has worked hard to heal and move forward from, her assertion that students of art, who are typically strongly emotionally invested in their work, are particularly vulnerable to educators’ abuse of power is critical.

We are in a vulnerable place and they are in a power position over you. And they are your mentors and you can admire them because they do what you want to do. And of course you get their advice and it's something that wow, you can be fascinated and then you don't see the reality and they take advantage of that.  

In a patriarchal, hierarchical education setting where the instructor is imbued with the powers of knowledge purveyance, the symbolism of artistic actualization, and institution-supported immunity, musical-emotional embodiment can become a terrifying site of abuse and manipulation. As far as musical-emotional vulnerability is an open, unguarded site for human

---

36 Estel in discussion with the author, March 2022.
37 Ibid.
connection to circulate, there must be adequate structural and pedagogical elements in place to keep students of musical, and more broadly artistic, education safe.

“A History of Sexual Abuse in Venezuela’s Lauded Youth Orchestra System,” published in The Caracas Chronicles in July 2021 details emerging histories of rampant sexual abuse in El Sistema, internationally praised and imitated for its model of social engagement and emphasis on collective social-emotional growth through musical practice and performance. Particularly in the narratives of survivors, published with pseudonyms in this article, it is clear that teachers’ omniscient instructions for entering into a so-called transcendental state of musical artistry were a mechanism of violation and abuse. This abuse of power was masked under the guise of artistic genius or calling, and “sexualized grooming was so ordinary and unchallenged that most girls might not have even perceived it as predatory and abusive in the moment.”

Furthermore, El Sistema’s social-justice-oriented pedagogy and glowing ‘results’ insulated abusers from scrutiny. Although El Sistema really only veers away from traditionally hierarchical teaching practices in small forms, I had put it on a pedestal in relation to other less progressive classical music institutions. This contributed to a feeling of shock followed by sickening guilt when I first read the above article.

An examination of power dynamics in musical education settings and documentation of their harmful effects is a necessary contribution to the problem statement of this thesis. There are too many examples of power abuse, emotional intimidation and subsequent damage, hierarchical teaching practices, and punishments for noncompliance to ignore, even within the tiny sample of people I interviewed. A whole other project could examine the teaching practices at the

---

LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in New York City and how they related to wider pressures of the music industry and a severely underfunded public school system. In this chapter, I have tried to provide a small window into the harm that needs to be repaired. Next, I will move to a discussion of the ideological construction of musical ‘authenticity,’ and how we may move away from this concept in favor of other indicators of musical fulfillment.

Chapter 3: The Search for ‘Authenticity’

In the spring of my freshman year of high school I stumbled into the World Jazz Ensemble, directed by an Argentinian percussionist and composer named Guillermo, having absolutely no idea how the group would change my relationship to music and indirectly open up a little space in which I could start figuring out who I wanted to be. By ‘world,’ he meant Latin and North American jazz. We played standards by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie, bossa nova tunes by Antônio Carlos Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes, arrangements of covers of this music by the likes of modern jazz legends Terence Blanchard, Roy Hargrove and Esperanza Spalding, among more music. Unlike my majority-minority high school, the ensemble was predominantly white, and playing music by predominantly Black and Latinx musicians: the particular racial composition of this band is a micro-manifestation of a white supremacist society built on racial capitalism. Across the country, there are many elite, mostly white high school and college jazz bands, a result of the historical and ongoing white theft, appropriation, and transformation of jazz music into a commodity signifying musical rigor, refinement, and even a lucid political consciousness. Cambridge, Massachusetts, the highly economically stratified city I grew up and went to high school in, has rapidly displaced its middle class and sold its property to developers capitalizing on its adjacent location to elite institutions of higher learning (Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, etc.). Soaring property taxes pay for the high school’s shiny facilities, as droves of former suburbanites move back into Cambridge to send their private school-educated children to the public high school, where many of the students who participated most heavily in music were receiving private lessons outside of school. Black and Brown students make up the disproportionate number of those accessing free and reduced lunch. At the time, I didn’t know that the formation of my musical awakening by way of jazz had historical precedent in previous generations of white youth, following “liberal white Americans’ imagining of African Americans, especially Black male

---

40 I have a distinct memory from my time in the student jazz band my sophomore year at Haverford in which the band was contacted by organizers of Black Love, an annual formal event, about playing during the evening. One of the student leaders responded enthusiastically, until someone pointed out that we should let them know there weren’t any Black students in the band.
musicians, as “a symbol of social conscience, sexual freedom, and resistance to the
dominant order.”

Guillermo had wanted a string player for a particular arrangement of the tune Nica’s Dream, and my orchestra teacher sent me to him—I can’t remember whether I was curious about opportunities to play more kinds of music than just classical, and am fairly certain I didn’t listen to or identify with much music at all. In the first rehearsal I attended, I felt the cold water shock of key signatures that made shapes other than boxy 4/4 and 3/4 time and the color of sevenths and ninths stacked onto triads built on the sonically stable intervals of fifths and thirds, completely out of my element. The instant fondness I felt for the energy of the rehearsals preceded the musical love that would soon grow. They took place from 6 to 9pm at school on Thursday nights where singers and instrumentalists would filter in and out, and Guillermo would reliably disappear to go find or work on something for a long stretch in the middle, leaving the members of the band to sit on the floor in the hallway and shoot the breeze. After that one tune I just stayed, seeing in my bandmates how music could form the fabric of one’s life as a giddy obsession rather than a peculiar skill structured by constant evaluative exhibition.

Upon reflection, my first exposure to playing jazz music catalyzed my own search for musical authenticity. The World Jazz Ensemble was my first time playing music that wasn’t classical. My parents had played jazz records over the years, so the idioms felt vaguely nostalgic and familiar to my ears, but certainly not in my classically-trained fingers. I am now struck by how it is possible to read my feelings of excitement and epiphany at being able to make non-classical sounds with my body in the forms of 1) Toni Morrison’s notion of the white Africanist construction of Blackness as absence, or something whiteness is not and 2) James Baldwin’s naming of white attempts to extract romance from Black bodies and cultural creations without facing the struggles white people are permanently implicated in. Part of the feeling of freedom I had learning to play this new kind of music stemmed from the fact that it was not what

42 As I read this back, I realize that my language to describe this introductory experience to jazz invokes primitivist ideologies. The idea that the harmonic and rhythmic structures of classical music were stable and bland while those of jazz were somehow daring, colorful, and unstable in contrast reveals through my subconscious that music can be and is used as another tool to ascribe racialist ideologies.
I had been doing before. Years later, I don’t feel particularly connected to the jazz music I learned in my high school ensemble in my current day-to-day life and relationships. The nostalgia I feel is strongly linked to the fondness I feel for music that opened up a world of possibility when I was a teenager.

In this chapter, I provide some historical context as to why questions of musical authenticity in the context of colonial dispossession and structural racism are fraught with contradictions. Then, I highlight a shared sense of ‘stuckness’ through which to trace my personal and interviewees’ approaches to these questions. In a music education system where Western classical pedagogy and repertoire is the default, it was a common theme across my conversations with interviewees for people to reach teenage or young adulthood and ask themselves: how did I get here? What are my real investments in and attachments to classical music? Does this music fully serve my vision for the future and the experiences I want to cultivate through musical practice?

I had access to a jazz ensemble in high school in part because of the foundational dynamic in American history of white fascination with and attempts to claim Black art forms. The white appropriation of jazz and its subsequent infusion of jazz ensembles in educational institutions with the values of high art and liberal multiculturalism also played an important role, the latter being the prevalent dynamic in my hometown. I felt my instructor’s and bandmates’ genuine love for music each day, and felt the band coalesce in dynamism when students would bring contemporary, often funk and fusion-influenced arrangements of jazz standards to rehearsal. But, this enthusiasm didn’t exempt us from participation in the decontextualization of jazz music that has occurred since it gained mainstream (read: white) popularity in the U.S. in 1917 with the first “jazz record released to the masses…the self-proclaimed ‘Original Dixieland
Jazz Band,’ a group of five white musicians.”45 “Symphonic jazz” was a product of this whitewashing, a style that claimed to “tame the ‘primitive rhythms’ of original jazz and therein [become] ‘more acceptable to white audiences.’”46 While some might call symphonic jazz and related musical hybrids products of dynamic artistic exchange, the existence of structural racism by way of white supremacy and antiblackness necessitate critical analysis of these processes of musical syncretism. In the 1940s, Black jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, and Charlie Parker were creating modern jazz in Harlem, named bebop only after the music spread to clubs downtown with more racially mixed audiences.47 Characterized by fast tempos and complex harmonic and rhythmic variations, this music was an intentionally anti-assimilationist sound: Black musicians’ reassertion of “musical leadership in jazz by creating something that outsiders had difficulty copying.”48

Ideas about musical authenticity among the American left have been strongly influenced by the quest to identify who exactly ‘the people’ are and what their artistic and cultural creations mean. In his article “Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music,” sociologist William Roy explores how the artistic, aesthetic identities of racialized and socially segregated groups have interacted with the construction of the genre of ‘folk’ and the shifting racial and class-based formations it has been identified with and applied to over time. Roy grounds his argument in the sociology of culture, which takes up the idea that group identities are formed around and tied to particular aesthetic standards and modes of expression (an example of this in music could be the difference in sound between a fiddle and a violin one might hear in an orchestra—same

46Ibid.
48Ibid, 411.
instrument, different aesthetic and technical properties). Roy goes on to argue that the label “folk” has always signified a complex process of Othering, based on the creation and deconstruction of historically-specific social boundaries. One iteration of this history can be traced to nineteenth century English intellectuals’ vision of ‘the nation,’ an imagined community whose collective artistic and cultural products defined a distinct people and could be found in their purest form when traced back to the rural poor, who they believed to be unaffected by the homogenizing and culturally stifling effects of modernity.⁴⁹

Although it’s often used in a way that implies absolute meaning, the concept of authenticity is loaded with the conditions of its historical formation and enactment, particularly within the context of American liberal racism in the post civil-rights era. The phrase describing jazz as “America’s Classical Music” exemplifies the contradictions often tied up in labels of authenticity on multiple levels. First is the act of claiming and displaying a Black art form that has been stolen, appropriated, and commodified for white musicians’ material and artistic gain as collective property. Second is the conditional subsumption into classical music, as it replicates the history of blues and jazz citations in modern orchestral music, which were treated as raw material for classical composers’ project of “‘elevating’ the black vernacular into universal, mythographic art.”⁵⁰ Access and resources that were once denied began to flow as cultural institutions promoted jazz this way, a common reward for proximity to whiteness.⁵¹ Lastly, this label relegated Black classical composers and performers to “a double nonexistence.”⁵²

In “Black Rhythm, White Power,” author Samantha Ainsley synthesizes a number of scholarly voices engaging questions of cultural and artistic exchange in the context of structural

⁵² Alex, Ross, “Black Scholars Confront White Supremacy in Classical Music,” The New Yorker, September 4, 2020,
racism. At the intersection of these voices, she argues that the gift economy analogy of musical exchange (art as continuous borrowing and sharing) does not apply when the “commoditization of black music continues to foster white power by granting financial success to those who control the music industry: whites” and strips Black music of its roots in the expression of struggle and resistance.\(^{33}\) White supremacy is maintained by squashing the potential for solidarity that exists within genuine emotional connection through art and with a culture of emotional repression and respectability politics.

Throughout our conversations, interview participants reflected their thought processes about what musical authenticity might mean and look like in practice in their lives. Given the fraught historical construction of the authentic, some better descriptors might be joy, excitement, emotional and bodily alignment, and fulfillment. Taking a step back to look at interviewees’ reflections as a whole, I noticed several people communicating a sense of stuckness in the process of integrating a classically-based music education into their visions for future musical engagement. Collectively, there seemed to be a sense that classical music education had imbued one with a peculiarly specific skill set—the ability to read European classical music notation, an understanding of music theory born out of this same tradition, and great facility with one instrument. The search for musical authenticity seemed to be an open question.

Estel voiced tensions within the concept of musical authenticity in her discussion of the stress she feels around the artistic label that promotes one’s livelihood:

Maria: Yeah. And no I've definitely been thinking about the, sort of like a lot of people that I've talked to have kind of brought up the, like, I didn't really feel at home in classical so then what else? Like, and I think what you said about kind of turning to jazz and then being like, wait, like, you know, I don't have to be, I also don't have to be like Michael Brecker or whatever. Like I can, I can find the right kind of mix.

Estel: Yeah, and it's still difficult too. Because I don't consider myself a jazz cellist and some people consider me a jazz cellist like, oh! That puts pressure on you and then it's like, no, but what do I do? It's not jazz, but what it is? And maybe I should be, and maybe it's not enough. And the ego thing, you know, again, there in the "Hey!" annoying you, but, yeah.

More than feeling constricted by the implications of the 'jazz' label, Estel emphasized the masculinist pressures and assumptions that accompany it. The idea of her musical interests, affinities, and undertakings as being “not enough” in comparison hits home as much as it clashes with my admiration for her approach to being a professional musician. From what I know of her, Estel’s vision of musical fulfillment is rooted in her family, particularly in her relationships with her grandfather and brother, who also makes a living as a musician. She values the power of momentary presence and emotional exchange, the sharing of music for a wide variety of purposes, and teaching with kindness and open mindedness. In my time spent learning with her, I saw how she enacts the belief that there is no hierarchy of musical expression—at a time in my life when I really needed it, she modeled that musically there are many ways to be.

On reflecting on her years at LaGuardia, Joy communicated the frustrations that arose from being immersed in a music education system that is built to funnel ‘successful’ students along a very narrow path to conservatories and orchestras.

I just felt like really stuck for a really long time. And it was just like not, I mean, it's interesting and it's fun to play that classical music, but it's different when you're forced to learn it. Like technically, for like the majority of your life. Like the technical aspects of everything is like... kinda just boring as hell.54

I felt cathartic laughter filling my body as she said this. This description of boredom not only demonstrated the autonomous and background quality of affective response to “stimuli impinging on the body,” but also pushed back against the typical elitist trope that if you don’t

---

54 Joy in discussion with the author March 2022.
like classical music or find it boring, you just don’t know enough to understand and appreciate it. I resonated with Joy’s sentiment as I’ve been struggling to regain the motivation to dive back into the repertoire I’m playing in a chamber group at Haverford my final semester of college. What I thought would be a triumphant return to cello performance has landed a little flat: do I want to devote myself to the intricacies of classically-influenced tone, technique, and elegant phrasing? What do I do when I often enter and leave rehearsal feeling emotionally detached?

In the face of being forced to learn musical technique through Western classical pedagogy, Joy’s reaction of boredom also reminds me of the problem statement hooks frames in *Teaching to Transgress*. For hooks, boredom as the prevailing mood of a classroom was a reliable signal that obedience to authority, rather than critical thinking, was being taught. She writes, “*excitement* in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process.” Critical pedagogy guided by this idea of nurturing excitement goes hand in hand with breaking down hierarchy in the classroom and moving from education as an enactment of domination to a practice of freedom.

Joy also described her current process of moving down her own musical path, especially in her new life as a college graduate without current attachments to the music curriculum of an educational institution.

[T]hrough the different kinds of, I guess, like different subsections of music experiences that I've had, I dunno, it's something to just like, it's something fun to just jam with like, make music with your friends or, put together like impromptu music. Like that's kind of what I'm tapping into kind of like, how do I use the flute in contemporary music. So I've had friends who record me for like a sample and then they would use it to like sample and make a beat or something like that is such a modern way of making music now...And so,

---

you know, there's still so many things for me to learn. And I can make it fun throughout the way… it's up to me how I want to shape my, my education from now on.  

Joy invokes the ongoing search for musical fulfillment in her open-minded and curious attitude towards the future. In her discussion of tapping into new ways of making music, I heard Joy articulate the nonlinear process of building a new relationship to musical activity. In a pedagogical sense, this can be thought of as acquiring a new musical skill set organized around different values. Comfort with embracing the impromptu and the improvisatory are skills that are not prioritized in past and present classical music pedagogy. Kajikawa asserts that reorganizing curriculum and core requirements around “more inclusive notions of musical beauty and excellence” could meaningfully diversify music departments in U.S. institutions of higher education. He cites a 2014 publication from the College Music Society titled Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations, in which the authors suggest the “three pillars” of creativity, diversity, and integration as antidote to the incessant reproduction of century-old compositions. Ultimately, this pedagogical overemphasis on reproduction “prevent[s] imagining alternative ways of coming together as musicians and as people.”

Chapter 4: What is a Radical Vision of Music Education?

By January of my junior year, the World Jazz Ensemble was miraculously (and as a result of Guillermo’s personal connections to Berklee College of Music and the relative affluence of the group) en route to the Panama Jazz Festival. The festival was founded in 2003 by Panamanian jazz pianist Danilo Pérez and his spouse Patricia Zarate, a Chilean saxophonist, as a fundraiser for Pérez’s foundation that provides musical education to local Panamanian youth. They are both musicians and educators working in service of social justice and cultural restoration of musical histories, with Zarate having particular expertise in the field of music therapy. As I brought both vibrant and blurry memories of the festival back to the surface of my mind, I realized that the ethos of the Panama Jazz

---

56 Joy in discussion with the author, March 2022.
Festival, as created by the life’s love and work of these two incredible musicians and their many collaborators had already informed what I bring to and hope to find in this thesis project more than I knew. As I revisited promotional videos with images and soundscapes that remind me of the experience of attending the festival, I realized how much of the transformational feelings I attributed to sparkly international travel, the sense of a once-in-a-lifetime-experience at age sixteen, and missing a week of gray high school to escape to warmth, music and vital energy were also a reaction to Pérez’s theorizing—his vision of jazz as the embodiment of possibility. He locates this possibility in the centrality of improvisation to jazz, and how it facilitates a lifelong childlike curiosity about music.

Delving back into the history of the Panama Jazz Festival and the Canal Zone, I stumbled upon another instance of musical performance as the enactment of a differently articulated but parallel kind of political and diplomatic possibility. This liberal artist-diplomacy was waged by impresario, “newspaperman, diplomat, and intellectual leader of first-generation Panamanians of West Indian descent” George Westerman, in the context of mid-twentieth century antiblackness in Panama and escalating unrest around the existence and policies of the U.S. military-occupied Canal Zone. By the 1950s, authorities had built a wall between Panama City and the Canal Zone border, which only amplified protest. In 1951, Conciertos Westerman sponsored a performance by African-American contralto Marian Anderson, whose artistry and good-willed demeanor elicited the following response from Panamanian president Alcibiades Arosemena: “I would that I could do for Panama politically what you are doing for the world spiritually.” In the chapter “Beyond Sovereignty: Black Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Diplomacy in Concert,” from Sovereign Acts: Performing Race, Space, and Belonging in Panama and the Canal Zone, Katherine Ziel reads Westerman’s activism via careful curation of musical performances by Black artists from abroad as a political strategy underpinned by ideological investments in cosmopolitanism, cultural diplomacy, the sovereign nation-state, and the power of public displays of undeniable individual excellence. In doing so, he endeavored to expose the “fault lines and cracks in the twin façades of Panama and the Canal Zone, entities whose discourses of liberalism, pro-democracy, and antiracism were contradicted by the materialities of deeply entrenched racial and social inequality, prejudice, and exclusion of Panama-born people of West Indian descent.”

Westerman partly waged his intervention in unsegregated public spaces by leveraging classical music’s label as a non-threatening and apolitical expressive culture. “Westerman’s artists,” mostly African-American women, were to perform


gendered and racialized displays of respectability and manage “high/low” aesthetics in their renditions of art song, European classical repertoire and African-American spirituals. However, many Panamanians who attended these concerts drew on their own understandings of racism in the U.S. to interpret these performances as vocalizations of ongoing Black struggle, subverting Westerman’s goal of promoting an individualistic narrative of racial progress and national inclusion.

By establishing the current day tradition of the Panama Jazz Festival in a former U.S. military base, Danilo Pérez endeavors to “turn an instrument of war into an instrument of peace.” In his past role as Goodwill Ambassador to UNICEF, and present roles as a UNESCO Artist for Peace and Cultural Ambassador to the Republic of Panama, Pérez’s strategizing for social change through music echoes that of George Westerman. As artist-diplomat, Pérez also mirrors Westerman’s positioning of himself as a well-respected figure who uses liberalist discourse to create a public space for music to do its more subversive, radical work.

Although it was punctuated by the loneliness of my then-current state of social withdrawal, I remember the week I spent at the Panama Jazz Festival as pure elation. I floated from class to class and felt magic fill each room, scribbling down albums to listen to and exercises to try. I wasn’t plugged into the jazz world enough to get as excited as my bandmates about the big names who were teaching and so was focused on absorbing wonder in a blissful ignorance of status and lack of professional musical ambitions. The days were so heavily saturated with music: workshops by day, concerts by night, laying outside on the balcony of my dorm room before bed meditatively listening to songs in the dark probably for some of the first times in my life. Simple clapping and singing exercises during workshops became electric, resonant moments of shared vibration that made me grateful to be alive and with a body through which to experience sound. These vibrations are the tools that shamans across a variety of Indigenous groups in the Americas (and in other regions of the world) have used for millennia to enact musical healing. In the violent aftermath of colonial erasure of Indigenous political, economic, spiritual, education, and medical systems, musical healing practices become re-legitimated insofar as they can be corroborated by neuroscientific methods of analysis and integrated into the biomedical model of healing.

Throughout the week, I was constantly anchored by the reverential energy that filled every historically violent and exclusionary space on the campus of Ciudad del Saber, formerly Fort Clayton, the epicenter of U.S. imperial control in the Panama Canal Zone and site of the Inter-American Geodetic Survey Cartographic School, “a central pillar of the [IAGS] program’s intent to educate local Latin American students (often military

personnel in training) in surveying, cartography, and map reproduction. The former military operations base is now operated by the Panamanian government as a site for ‘knowledge exchange,’ through which it enacts a project for “knowledge management” and Panama’s induction into a technocratic, neoliberal modernity. At the time, I didn’t come close to grasping the complex, ironic, painful, but importantly in Pérez’s mind still hope worthy implications of this. In a promotional video for the 2016 festival, Patricia Zarate speaks about musical practice and colonial dispossession in strategically coded language, translated from Spanish to English subtitles: “Music started to take on other functions with the onset of individualism and materialism, which form the basis of modern society today. It’s that we placed the healing function of music aside, away from the forefront where we held it for so many centuries, for millennia.” In similar language, Colombian music therapist Juan Pablo Ruiz Arango speaks into the camera, “The Western concept of health and the Western concept of education always place art and music in the very lowest positions within the pyramid of knowledge and society...Music was a part of rituals, of celebrations and we are slowly coming back to acknowledging that fact.” While the sense of musical healing I experienced in this environment was personally profound, it was a byproduct of this fraught reclamation from colonial erasure, imperial exclusion, and neoliberal appropriation.

The final day culminated in a vast, free outdoor concert packed with performers and tens of thousands of listeners. Late afternoon dripped into evening which faded into dusk and twinkling darkness, and I remember that the horn section of one particular act was the sweetest and brassiest I had ever heard in my life, floral and metallic. I returned home a forever changed teenager, having felt a sense of peace and connectedness I never before had. Upon stepping back into my life at home, I was infatuated. Before this, I had only been taught to experience music with my brain, willing my body to sit still in endless cavernous concert halls and sedentary practice sessions. I felt convinced that these kinds of musical spaces, so much more expansive than the ones I grew up with, were the balm and the answer. Reflecting on my giddy fascination with the Panama Jazz Festival six years later, Zarate’s words invoking the work of reclaiming millennium-long Indigenous healing practices in a neoliberal order ring loudly in my ears: “During the music clinics, the improvisation sessions turn into a ceremony. A ceremony in which we become connected in the most human way. We connect with one another, and come to a common conclusion, one which does no harm. On the contrary, it helps us to put our hands together and move forward in communion through a ceremony that is about enjoying life, enjoying what brings us together, not what sets us apart.” This is the healing, fortifying, yet decontextualized process that I experienced as a sixteen year-old.

---

70 Zarate, “Panama Jazz Festival 2016.”
After working with a set of open and ever-shifting questions for months, I’m struggling with where and how to leave this thesis project. Excerpts from *Just Vibrations* really resonated with me in the final stages of my research and writing process. Cheng’s thought-experiment type approach reveals so many of the things I want to communicate about musical possibility—how ideas of childlike joy and curiosity, living to care and be cared for, and imagining ways to live more wholly by way of musical practice, all undergirded by critical structural analysis, is so much of why I wanted to do this project in the first place. Especially given my lack of connection to an ancestral artistic tradition, the desire to repair childhood wounds in adulthood, which are so often intensely emotional, can be a gateway to imagination about how the world can look, feel, and sound different.

Cheng’s theorizing in *Just Vibrations* aided in thinking through the concept of virtuosity: it’s about resisting sounding ‘bad’ in whatever way possible, and only brilliant, prodigal, dexterous minds and bodies are capable of it. The ultimate goal of a virtuosic performance is to impress and to dazzle, to enable others to live vicariously through you. To dazzle someone else is a one way process—it is not to share or exchange joy or learn something together. However, to dazzle each other simultaneously, in an act of complementary and generous give and take is nothing short of magic. Without this relational quality, I would argue that much of the magic is lost. In her book *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles*, musician, activist, and scholar Martha Gonzalez synthesizes research on the social relations of music, referring to this concept as “the value systems concerning music knowledge, reception, and practices upheld by social institutions.”

---

music and dance practices are rare in capitalist societies due to the fact that capital markets as social institutions have arranged the way we think, interact, and therefore engage with music more generally.\textsuperscript{72} This is a crucial intervention for interrogating the impact of the overinvestment in classical music education.

Artistic-educational spaces facilitated in a healthy, intentional way are so often spaces of healing and genuine emotional connection. Transformations of all kinds are engendered by a shared creative process. We are interconnected, inherently social beings, and despite the egotistical modern vision of the predetermined, fully actualized artist, no creative process is an individual undertaking. In contexts of teaching and learning, so many important dynamics can be extrapolated from musical creativity, sharing, and performance. The acts of looking, listening, hearing, creating sound, and using voice differently take practice doing. But when we do this, we can envision ways of being and relating to each other not yet fully possible in the dominant political and social realm and begin to heal all kinds of physical, psychological, and spiritual pain.

In the final chapter, I will reiterate the values-based nature of education and the problems caused by the ‘possessive investment’ in classical music, reflect on interviewees’ visions for the future based on their experiences in music education settings, and outline three musical case studies of people practicing an expansive vision of politically engaged, feeling-centered music education. These artists and educators show us how music is so much more than an escape from the social world.

Educational climates, from broad policies to teaching practices, are built out from a particular set of values—a belief system about what and who matters most. Under capitalism, education becomes a means to prepare young people to contribute production to a market-based

\textsuperscript{72}Martha Gonzalez, \textit{Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles}, 5.
society and comply with the authorities that govern it. Educational environments fueled by capitalist values favor industrializing, punitive, and inequitable policies and practices. These often include “zero tolerance; economic defunding of public education and inequitable distribution of resources; standardized grade levels, curriculum, and testing; and rewards-based learning.”

Restorative justice in education operates from the core belief that “all human beings are worthy and interconnected” and identifies creating just and equitable learning environments, nurturing healthy relationships, and repairing harm and transforming conflict as crucial components of a culture that facilitates social engagement rather than social control. In this model, educators nurture, guide, and support rather than manage, control, and mold.

In All Students Must Thrive, education professor Tyrone Howard addresses the multidimensional, deeply historical issue of inequity in a nationwide school system that consistently abandons low-income Black and Brown students. He highlights the nonnegotiable need to attend to the toxic stressors that disproportionately impede marginalized students’ wellbeing and capacity to thrive, particularly in environments of teaching and learning. Howard defines critical wellness in education as “a concept that addresses the role of race, culture, trauma, mental health, social emotional well-being, bias, identity, and adverse circumstances that inhibit students' ability to be whole in the pursuit of education.” In order to interrogate its overinvestments in hierarchical pedagogy and overrepresentation of the aesthetics, values, and practices embedded within the European classical tradition, music education as it predominantly stands is in need of Howard’s critical perspective on socioemotional wellbeing and thriving in educational settings. A vision of politically-engaged, feeling-centered music education holds so

---

74 Ibid, 9-10.
much potential in helping create the types of educational environments that are centered around
critical wellness, excitement, genuine emotional connection and fulfillment, caring relationships,
and solidarity. hooks encourages us to grapple with the practical steps that can be taken to
transform educational spaces into ones of liberation for all, rather than a constraining
environment of success for a few.

This project does not intend to disparage the form of classical music itself, but rather to
critique the broader power structures of white supremacy that have wielded it as a tool for
exclusion and cultural superiority over centuries. I wish to reassert Loren Kajiwaka’s simple and
elegant call to action to the field of music education: “[w]e can no longer tolerate a discipline
that prioritizes aesthetic objects over the people who create, perform, and listen to them.”76 I do
not argue for ‘the canon’ to be stricken from the record, but rather emphasize that the aesthetics,
pedagogies, and histories in which it is entangled are severely limiting. And, the impact of this
structural privilege is actively harmful when it comes at the cost of multitudes of other musical
traditions, especially those that have historical and cultural relevance to hooks’ project of
education as the practice of freedom and the creation of a just, equitable, and thrivable world for
all. That being said, I do want to highlight the sentiments of a number of interviewees who
expressed the positive and emotionally fulfilling dimensions of their relationships to classical
music repertoire, and are even enacting a radical vision within the genre.

Alex, who identifies as an East Asian nonbinary student and is a longtime classical
pianist, works within varying areas of the genre to disrupt, break down hierarchies, and change
how classical music can be experienced by performers and listeners. I learned so much from
them during our interview and deeply admire their creativity, focus on facilitating mutual care

and co-creation through music, and willingness to form intense emotional connections to and narratives alongside pieces of classical piano repertoire. They have composed a video score that provides a visual improvisatory stimulus for a performing instrumentalist to respond to, organized a virtual piano concert with interactive, improvisatory interludes and spaces for processing of grief related to the climate crisis, and envision creating a classical music performance in the future that disrupts the atmosphere of high decorum and encourages people to move, stand up, interact with each other, and feel the music in their bodies.77

Two interviewees, classical pianist and dancer B and vocalist and LaGuardia graduate Kat both emphasized the aesthetic and intellectual challenges and pleasures that come with learning and performing densely-layered music in the Western classical idiom. In her vision for the future, B spoke about continuing to practice sharing the classical music she loves with people she loves for this purpose only and continuing to indulge in the intricacies of piano playing for the purpose of enriching her experiences as a human being moving through the ups and downs of life. Kat expressed that she missed the challenge of learning and performing harmonically complex pieces of choral music and the thrill of bringing contemporary composers’ works to life for the first time. While expressing this nostalgia, she also cited college as a time that opened up some space to explore modes of vocal expression outside the classical tradition.

Estel continues to model the kinds of teaching for her students she wished she’d had more of throughout her life. She told me that the most important thing for her as a teacher is “to welcome new paths and new ways to do things” and to be sensitive to the specific needs and goals of her individual students, especially when they come from varied socioeconomic

77 Alex in discussion with the author, March 2022.
backgrounds, deal with different stressors, and thus relate to music education in different ways.\textsuperscript{78}

She said,

I think accepting and listening to the needs or the intentions or the, I don’t know, the desires of everyone is—it’s important. And then you do whatever you can, maybe you cannot do anything, but at least to listen to it. And if you can make room for that then, and support that and accompany that.\textsuperscript{79}

In this sentiment, I hear Estel advocating for a model of musical teaching and learning where everyone involved is given the space to arrive with their whole selves to a site of relationally determined exchange and growth. This educational vision of musical process over product is articulated clearly in the musical group Quetzal’s lives and work as artist-activists.

\textit{Quetzal}

Having referenced Dr. Martha Gonzalez’s incredible scholarship earlier in this paper, I will turn to a wider discussion of the band and musical collective Quetzal, of which her partner and fellow artivista Quetzal Flores is also a part. Quetzal is a rock group firmly rooted in a soundscape of the lives and struggles of people living in East L.A. The band coalesced in the 1990s Chican@ art community, which Gonzalez describes as a moment in time informed by radical histories but “precisely distinct by the ways in which members have utilized their artistic and creative abilities to develop participatory, process-based community art practices.”\textsuperscript{80}

Quetzal’s approach to music runs counter in every way to the music industry’s project of commodification and decontextualization. In the 2013 conference “Crossing Borders: Immigration and Gender in the Americas” at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Flores emphasized the importance of well-articulated ideas and political frameworks in the collective’s

\textsuperscript{78} Estel in discussion with the author, March 2022.
\textsuperscript{79}Estel in discussion with the author, March 2022.
\textsuperscript{80} Martha Gonzalez, \textit{Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles}, 2-3.
day-to-day endeavors to enact their belief in the “radical potential in expressive culture.” For example, Gonzalez’s songwriting is inspired and informed by her focused study of Chicana feminist theory and the group has worked to form a set of what Flores describes as “covening methodologies.” Their musical practices are closely informed by the notion of *convivencia*, “[b]eing present and engaging together in mind, body, and spirit via participatory music and art practice.” *Convivencia* is a key part of the group’s vision for more fully integrating artists, especially those who practice traditional and/or Indigenous art forms, into social justice organizing. By being trained in the philosophies of participatory music, artists are better able to adapt their craft to fit their communities’ contemporary needs and struggles without losing the historical and cultural significance of their art form.

In the late ‘90s, Quetzal was introduced to El Movimiento Jaranero, a group of musicians from Veracruz, Mexico working to recover the near lost art of the *son jarocho* fandango. *Son jarocho* is a blend of music, poetry, and dance emerging from a mixture of African, Indigenous, and Andalusian influences and the history of colonial exploitation and resistance. The practice of fandango emphasizes community ritual, as opposed to performance for the purpose of entertainment, and “redemocratized music” in 1970s Veracruz. In a short video describing Quetzal’s Seattle Fandango Project, Gonzalez says

> I think fandango really challenges every aspect of how we live in this society. You know, how we interact with each other, what we think about music, where music comes from, who gets to do music, who is good at it, who isn’t. We’ve sort of been alienated from music practice…we don’t play with each other but we need each other…Even the more and more advanced we get in society, it doesn’t mean we don’t need each other in the same ways that we’ve always needed each other.

---

83 Martha Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles*, 3
84 Ibid, 73.
85 Ibid, 78.
In stripping the emotional connections to the origin of a particular piece, tradition, or practice of music, the contemporary U.S. mainstream music industry functions to maintain white supremacy through eliminating the political solidarities that are implicated in genuine emotional connection. When music is recontextualized and used in service of convening, educational practices, political possibilities multiply.

In 1997, about one hundred Chican@ artivistas traveled to the Zapatista Mayan community of Oventic to engage in collective, dialogical artistic practices. As Flores recounts, over a period of five days hundreds of people participated in “dialogue, art workshop[s] and celebration around themes essential to thriving in our communities.”86 Gonzalez names the profound impact Zapatista pedagogy and this communal encounter continues to have on Chican@ artivistas, particularly in the form of the collective songwriting method. This method was developed by Zapatista artivista Rosa Marta Zarate and has been translated to the context of East L.A. by the artivistas present at the 1997 Encuentro Cultural Por La Humanidad y En Contra del Neoliberalismo. The band Quetzal and other artivistas have used this method in numerous contexts since, citing the ways in which it consistently facilitates engaged communal dialogues about needs, desires and how to acquire them. Through the process of developing a collective song, a collective vision forms what is all of a sudden tangible via a strategy of collective action.

Quetzal uses music, and the genuine care and love that accompanies it, as an intentional antineoliberal, antiracist social and political tool. Gonzalez makes it clear that musical practice isn’t only a tool of alternate historical narration and hidden transcripts, which is extremely important work analyzed and theorized by scholars such as James Scott and Tricia Rose. Through her scholarship, Gonzalez highlights the “various ways in which Chicano/a, Latino/a

and other communities of color (in the U.S and transnationally) utilize music and other forms of creative expression not solely as politically charged commentary and/or community building projects, but as necessary dialectic tools toward various social justice ends.”

hooks’ notion of excitement in education and the radical potential in participatory musical practice are both ungovernable, and thus pose a significant challenge to the status quo.

**Esperanza Spalding**

Esperanza Spalding is an artist with astonishing musical gifts who has chosen to forego traditional displays of virtuosity (i.e. standard album releases and touring) for a career of curiosity, inquiry, improvisation, experimentation, and thoughtful engagement with music’s magical and healing properties. Spalding gracefully wears many musical hats: bassist, vocalist, composer, educator, performance artist, and lyricist, to name the ones I am aware of. I have been in awe of her projects over the years, beginning with *Exposure* in September of 2017. Over the course of 77 hours, Spalding and a team of collaborators went into the studio to write and record an album from scratch and streamed the whole process on Facebook Live. I remember staying up all night glued to the livestream, feeling pure awe flowing through me. In this act of ‘exposure,’ Spalding and her fellow musicians were able to experience the impact of creative and musical-emotional immediacy without the option to stop and judge whether something was good or right. The magic, ecstasy and giddy exhaustion of the creative process was beamed into thousands of homes and people responded with the same giddiness, love and gratitude.

Most recently, she embarked on an ongoing project with music therapists, medicinal practitioners, and neuroscientists to explore how songwriters can integrate therapeutic musical

---

properties into their work. At the beginning of the pandemic, Spalding and ten other artists of color convened at a nature-surrounded home in Portland, Oregon and began creating music rooted in the sounds of Sufism and South Indian Carnatic and Black American traditions. The use of particular tones, vibrations and tools such as chanting and looping were intended to elicit calming or otherwise therapeutic responses from the listener.\textsuperscript{88} Another dimension of this project was experimentation with songwriting pop up labs on the streets of New York City, in which passersby could request what they needed from a musical offering that day. Spalding, who “has grown to recognize love in the abstract and aspirational” is clear on her role in making more experimental projects legible to those her music reaches, always with the goal of “developing creative practices that serve the restoration of people and land.”\textsuperscript{89}

\textit{Philadelphia Public Orchestra}

I serendipitously stumbled upon the Philadelphia Public Orchestra during the final stretch of my thesis process, which felt like a blessing. I am excited to follow its trajectory in the coming months. The project aims to rethink the orchestra by creating a horizontal power structure and honoring the sonic diversity of the city of Philadelphia. In a September 2021 article in the Philadelphia Magazine, bassist and musical director Anthony Tidd put it succinctly: “[t]he bottom line is, this is a public orchestra, where people can come together and participate from their own comfort zone and within their own traditions…People who read music represent a very small percentage of the music happening in the world, including in America.”\textsuperscript{90} The Philadelphia Public Orchestra’s manifesto and set of values clearly communicate the conceptualization of the

undertaking in language that indicates a vision aligned with the one in this project. I have selected a list pulled from these two group materials that represents many of the possibilities I point towards in this thesis. I have matched items from the manifesto with value statements, which are italicized.

- A sonically diverse orchestra is a diverse orchestra. *We value the full humanity of every artist and citizen that we encounter through the project.*
- Membership into the orchestra is not based on skill but rather enthusiasm and commitment. Diversity across all demographics and heterogeneity representative of the host city are the guiding principles for the makeup and instrumentation of the orchestra.
- Non genre-specific music education and expanding access to all instruments is a future and ongoing goal of The Public Orchestra. *We value the opportunity to challenge the hierarchies that exist within society and the world of music, through challenging ourselves, others, and institutions of power.*
- Rehearsing takes priority over performing. *We value rehearsal, iteration, and imperfection and see these as a natural part of the creative process.*
- Besides rehearsing musical works, the rehearsals are also forums for conversation, discussion, and exchange. A joint meal is served at the rehearsal. *We value collaborative conversation, a collective approach to decision making and actively seeking the voices of those who are not always represented in the room. We aim to move as a team, not a group of individuals representing institutions.*
- The Public Orchestra is not beholden to any repertoire or perceived standards of perfection. No pre-existing genre or tradition is ascribed to it but The Public Orchestra is indebted to the multitude of existing genres and traditions that exist in any one area. *We value the universal power of music and the various ways in which it brings people together. We are open to the people and partnerships our work attracts; and open to remaining reflective and flexible as we work with those who come our way.*

I hope this project remains open to growth and change, staying true to its commitment to honor and uplift the musical traditions that members bring with them to the group and engage in the hard but transformative work of improvisatory growth and participatory decision-making.

---

Conclusion

At its core, this thesis project is an exercise in the messy trajectory of processing my individual experiences and contextualizing them within a broader history of power relations and social dynamics, with the aid of theory developed by a diverse set of scholars and disciplines. I began with a strong feeling that musical exchange has significant power and a clear sense that there was something missing from my early emotional experiences in music education. In reflecting on emotional experiences and memories through writing, conversing with others and centering questions of race, power, and capitalism in my research process, I was led to traditions, movements, and artists who have long enacted a radical vision of music education. Following Takacs’ claim that one’s positionality biases their epistemology, the process of writing my thesis was a point of entry into awareness of artist-activist worlds that I don’t have ancestral or directly social connections to.92 In synthesizing the perspectives that make up this paper, I have learned so much about the intersections of race, gender, emotion, pedagogy, and history in the politics of music and music education in the United States.

In this thesis, I have traced my own experiences in musical education settings by paying close attention to the insights provided by affective reactions and emotional states. My personal narrative moved from emotional discontent in the world of private classical music education to relating to jazz as an instrument of musical freedom and authenticity in my teenage years, to the current set of questions I grapple with as a young adult. I found commonality and divergence across emotional experiences in musical education settings in my conversations with interviewees. Their insights and analysis, which I put in conversation with scholarly texts,

informed my evolving understanding of what needs to change and where there is transformative possibility in the realm of music education. Some of the key insights I take away from this project are: the close relationship between aesthetic standards, judgements of worth, and pedagogical practices, musical shapeshifting as a site of race and gender analysis of the alliance between white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, the necessary replacement of ‘authenticity’ with gauges of emotional and bodily alignment, and the antithetical nature of capitalist social relations and democratized musical practices.

As I set this project down in the formal sense, I am left with a set of unanswered questions. They hinge on the central tension I identified in the framing of this project, which is that in the world’s current state of injustice, severely imbalanced distribution of power and resources, and widespread allegiance to capitalist social relations, there isn’t a clear line between musical decontextualization and musical syncretism. This is a particularly important issue for the development of pedagogy meant for the mainstream educational system in the U.S. (and also where the delicate balance of realism and optimism come into play). How can groups of people committed to a music education that centers care, curiosity, and genuine emotional connection as a tool for social and political change honor the histories of radical musical traditions while also adapting them to combat current articulations of white supremacist heteropatriarchal power? The Philadelphia Public Orchestra provides a promising answer, as it endeavors to create an open site for exchange within which a small group of committed individuals tied to a wide range of musical traditions can proceed based on a common set of process-focused values. Through this project, I’ve seen how musical processes can facilitate a collective dialogue that honors and creates emotional safety and fulfillment. This dialogue is essential to nonhierarchical education
settings that validate the inherent worth of all human beings. Where can our internal affective compasses lead us next?
Bibliography


http://claremontchicanolatinostudies.org/team/martha-gonzalez/.


