

The Perils and Pleasures of “White” Invocations of the “Big Black Lady Inside”

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“The desire to sing someone else’s song is always so hopelessly contaminated in relations of power”
(Razack, personal communication, 1998).

This discussion is situated within my work as a practitioner in the field of community music, informal singing practices among adults, and integrated arts education. The following is an exploration of some of the tensions that arise when Black musicality is invoked by dominant social groups as a way to get people singing together. For example, in my recent study on some of the pedagogical practices that some singing teachers use in order to bring adults who are anxious about singing into singing practices, one practitioner remarked that she sometimes instructs people to call upon the “big Black lady inside.” In this sense, the invocation of Black musicality is assumed to be an attempt to encourage people, most often white people, to go beyond their own anxiety and self-censure.

By invoking the “big Black lady inside” to invite adults to sing, I argue that such a term invokes an “Other” which is ultimately based in stereotypes. These have a historical genealogy in popular cultural images and narratives of the “big Black woman Gospel singer,” the “Mammy,” and so on, which positions the Black body (especially the female body) as innately musical.

Stereotypes are persistent constructions that objectify the “Other,” but they are also always based in actual histories. In the context of a North American society that is built upon the terrible histories of racism, a blurring of discourses about singing becomes highly problematic. It is these histories and socially constituted discourses that have shaped the musical practices of *all* Western music educators, no less strongly than the histories and discourses of Eurocentric musical practices. This complexity makes the practice of invoking the “big Black lady inside” fraught with danger.

Without question, the musical practices of African Americans have proven a powerful and ubiquitous presence and have influenced contemporary musical practices within North America and beyond. American “Black” culture has in many ways become synonymous with “soulful music,” to the point that non-Blacks will often assume that every Black person they meet is musically skilled and musically active. Thus, “Blackness” has become a signifier of innate musicality, especially rhythm and expressivity.¹ In turn, ideas of the innately musical Black body rely upon notions of “soulfulness,” sensuality, sexuality, and emotionality. Set against notions of propriety and respectability, these same qualities can easily be positioned (and often *are* positioned) as lack of restraint and abandon of reason, control, and civility—in short, degenerate.

Marian Anderson’s 1939 Easter concert provides a profound example of the exception that proves this theory.² Her presence as a classical singer posed a dilemma for White supremacists since her form of musicality reflected European elite musical practices—a form that many white Americans associated with “Whiteness,” propriety and bourgeois respectability. I suggest her politically transformative moment would not have occurred if she had excelled as a Blues singer or another genre associated with Blackness. It was her association with “Whiteness” that caused the racial panic among the DAR.

My use of the term “White” here comes from Razack’s theory of “Whiteness” and “White” space that uses “White” as a symbolic “colour of domination” (1998, pp. 11-16).³ While Blackness is almost exclusively about racialization and its effects, “Whiteness,” in its symbolic sense, is not solely based on race, but is also equally about class, sexuality, gender, age and so on. “Whiteness” represents an organizing term signifying an interlocked system of hierarchies and relations of power among categories of people, concepts, sets of beliefs and practices. Each hierarchy requires the participation of all the other hierarchies to prop it up. For instance, sexism (based on a gender hierarchy) could not continue without

homophobia (based on a hierarchy of sexuality) to police gender relations. Similarly, racism (based on a hierarchy of racialization) and class inequities are mutually dependent systems of subordination. While such an interlocking of hierarchies may appear impenetrable, it is in the dependence of each hierarchy to have other systems of hierarchy reinforce and support it that they expose their weakness and vulnerability. Thus lay strategic opportunities for organized resistance and transformation.

The principle of "Whiteness" as a set of interlocking systems of domination is mirrored reflexively by the principle of the "Other" in a set of interlocking systems of oppression. Marginality is socially constituted over and over, and systems of oppression remain interlocked as subordinated groups jockey for respect or a "toehold on respectability," seeking legitimization of their subject position and recognition of their subjectivities in an interlocked system of subordination.

So much of formal music education in the West is steeped in notions of respectability and bourgeois sensibility. This is not surprising since music education is so marginalized in educational hierarchies in our culture, leaving educators to continually bear the burden of justification for the existence of programs in schooling and in society (Morton, 1996) and thus cling to their own toeholds on respectability within their spheres of influence.

Singing is a social activity that is shaped by social relations in which power operates and where practices of domination and subordination can be observed through the musical practices found in spaces of "White" bourgeois respectability. These practices are commonly recognized as those of the classically trained singer and the coteries of teachers and so on, who surround them. The inhibited singer and anyone who has an issue with singing is connected to dominant discourses about singing and the discourse of the bourgeois individual subject who will *always* in some way be inadequate. These discourses produce failure and inadequacy, and the subject who *can't* do it. "Whiteness" has a silencing effect because it is always about domination and boundary keeping.

One of the ironies about teaching adults to sing is that the majority of people who come to many "adult learn-to-sing" courses to free up their voices are people who apparently represent the more privileged in North American society. In the early stages of this research I was surprised that people from the dominant culture who I imagine *ought* to feel confident in their collective institutional, cultural and social power, should feel so insecure. But, I have since come to understand how various singing practices reflect the social and cultural discourses and practices that produce subjectivities which promote insecurity and anxiety. Foucault (1984) and Stoler (1995) note that such insecurity and anxiety are features of "White" bourgeois subjectivity. What strikes me here is that, regardless of how much power and privilege they might have, white people are also always vulnerable in "White" bourgeois space. "White" bourgeois subjectivity requires work and worry (one must "keep up appearances" and "not make a spectacle" of one's self).

I wonder at the ways in which (we) white people have been taught and learned to conduct ourselves as "White" and bourgeois—always careful, vigilant, regulated, respectable and never doing something which might cause embarrassment or shame, or taking on something that they/we cannot appear to lack mastery in.

When someone invokes the image of the "big Black lady inside" as part of their practice, they risk demonstrating what Morrison (1992) refers to as the racialized white use of an Africanist presence of Blackness to highlight "Whiteness." Morrison's work suggests that Blackness gives definition to Whiteness. Juxtaposed within literature and other cultural representations, the two come together to signify opposites. Racialization ensures this. Thus, the notion of a "big Black lady inside" reflects the organizing principle of "Whiteness" because the narratives attached to Blackness are *always* present and operating in "White" space (see also Bederman, 1995). Whatever pre-conceived ideas, histories, and feelings that people might have about Blackness, they bring to singing spaces.

Notions of the big Black woman inside also echo the tradition of Blackface minstrelsy. Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) examines the historical pathway of the Black minstrelsy tradition in the United States from the antebellum South through to post-Emancipation. He points to the idea that Blackface has not disappeared but has reincarnated itself in modern forms and with similar effect. He

describes the social, historical and political implications of Blackface as a longstanding popular form of grotesque mimicry and appropriation of Blackness as entertainment. Lott notes that Blackface constitutes both love *and* theft. Blackface was hugely popular with both white and Black audiences and was positioned as a form of working class, low-brow entertainment. While white male performers of Blackface objectified and misrepresented Black Americans, they did so largely in a *sympathetic* and romanticized way, ostensibly as an act of *love* for the “antebellum Negro.” Lott observed that love (desire, affection, infatuation, appreciation, etc.) complicates practices of theft (appropriation, mimicry, misrepresentation, wrongful gain) and complicates relations among people engaged in those practices. This is principally why World Music is so currently popular in the West.

Many practitioners who work in oral traditions of singing are attempting to create an anti-repressive, non-judgmental and creative space in which learners can pursue their vocal play, experimentation, and reclamation of voice. Inviting an *un*-disciplined, playful, “wild” and unbounded use of the voice, is a counter practice to “Whiteness.” There is a danger here in creating a space that explicitly refuses “respectability” or bourgeois sensibility, especially when the majority of participants themselves are from the dominant culture. Specifically, the danger lies in creating a space and practice where they may conceptualize freedom as being free to mimic or play at being the “Other” for a brief time. Like a trip through the jungle, the trailer park, the barrio or some such exotic or degenerate locale, exercises that involve role playing an “Other” can end up re-inscribing the boundaries of respectable and degenerate space: “I am free to be a tourist—to visit degeneracy or the space of the exotic “Other” for a short while and then go back to respectability and respectable space whenever I so choose, and remain untainted or substantially unaltered by the experience.” I see this reliance on, fascination and playing with the “Other” often at New Age type events and workshops. For example, people from the dominant culture can visit a First Nations’ practice like the sweat lodge and have a personal transformative spiritual experience without having to really engage with any First Nations’ communities, their histories or their real and immediate struggles. In fact, they don’t have to engage with a First Nations’ person at all (see also Churchill, 1990).

Inclusion is a term that has gained currency in recent years in the social sciences as one strategy for addressing equity issues. While it is fraught with tensions and problems, inclusion is one of those strategies that cannot *not* be used. The inclusion of marginalized “Others” has been seen as a key strategy in destabilizing and shifting relations of power in every sector of society, and certainly in education. However, inclusion itself does not lead to anti-subordination. Inclusion, may actually perpetuate subordination. It is important to bear in mind that the notion of inclusion assumes that some (dominant) “including body” exists that has the power to include, tolerate, accept, or ascertain value. Thus, practices of subordination can continue unchallenged even while spaces are being made to be “inclusive.”⁴⁴ Where inclusion re-inscribes unequal relations of power, the term “inclusion” takes on the properties of euphemism, becoming a code word for the conditional and contingent permission of the “Other” to enter into “White” space.

One tactic of inclusion is the teaching of, what has come to be termed “multicultural music.” This is a term that again assumes that there is some central music that is not very particularly cultural. The term multicultural has also become a euphemism for music and practices of the subordinated (and especially the racialized) “Other.” Yet, in the name of inclusion it is possible to use multicultural music to challenge centrist notions of dominant musical forms. But combined with the teaching of these songs must be some attention to *critical reflection*.

Songs are far from neutral. Rather, they are loaded with meanings and, therefore, both pedagogically volatile and valuable. As one adult who is very anxious about singing remarked in our interview about the teaching of songs (and stories, dance, etc.) of various cultures, all cultural productions have a history and pedagogy that should be included, but under certain conditions. Simone states:

The problem is the exoticizing. The problem is the assumption as well, that this is not something that one has to think about. That these things don’t come from

terrible histories that must be taken into account. You can't go and sing a Native song...just because you feel like it. You ought to know something about those histories. Because they are too terrible and they have influenced us whether we like it or not. And it's interesting pedagogically, how do we do this? How do we bring in the "Other"? The best of the "Other"? And it has to be by confronting those histories, if only to ask, "How am I going to enter this picture?" (Interview, 1999, as cited in Joyce, 2003)

As the authors in *Race, Space, and the Law* illustrate in several examinations of how hierarchies work in Canadian society (Razack, 2002), the subjectivity of the "Other" and their history is always denied and purposefully "forgotten" or erased in "White" spaces. It is this erasure and denial that partly defines "White" space and cultural practice. Therefore, in any social space where people are positioned as "Other" for whatever reason, hierarchies are being reproduced. This suggests that singing practices of exclusion signal that hierarchies of some form are being reproduced. And conversely, in social spaces where hierarchies are being reproduced, singing practices will be exclusive and subordinating of *somebody*.

Simone speaks as someone who continually sees her own culture exoticized and her working class subjectivity and cultural history erased from social discourse. Thus she continually experiences herself being marginalized in "White," bourgeois social spaces where she is positioned as "Other." She emphasizes that you cannot sing a song of the "Other" without taking into account the terrible histories that are behind it. Her statement indicates that what is required then are practices of *critical reflection* in any pedagogical context in which songs are being taught that reflect a worldview that is different from the dominant culture in any given space. We need to see how the music we make is implicated in the formation and maintenance of hierarchies and practices of subordination.

Critical Reflection Practices

One of the strategies that will assist in teaching songs of "Others" with integrity is the use of what Edward Said (1993) refers to as contrapuntal readings. This ensures that the songs which are taught that reflect cultural hegemony have a better chance of being understood as not universal but partial and particular when taught alongside songs that reflect parallel cultural phenomena. To do this, familiarized, culturally dominant pieces can be introduced beside works of culturally marginalized peoples in both a contrapuntal *and* affiliated way. Practices such as these assist us in making visible the ways in which we are implicated in the relations of power that shape each cultural expression, and affect how these expressions are represented and produced. All music can then more readily be seen and discussed as socially and culturally produced.

In his efforts to reflect on his practice as a white English teacher teaching primarily Black students from the Caribbean in a poorer London U.K. neighbourhood, Chris Searle (1972) illustrates the practice of contrapuntal reading by describing his experience of viewing Mozart's *Magic Flute* while simultaneously reading Frantz Fanon's "Black Skins, White Mask." He stumbles upon the tensions but also the efficaciousness and power of contrapuntal reading:

The same day that I was reading *Black Skins, White Masks* I went in the evening to see *The Magic Flute* by Mozart. I knew very little about the opera, and nothing about the story. I think that I was still thinking about Fanon. Then the overture and the first scene: the flowing beauty, the order of the sounds—the artifice of genius. "But what is this now? A black man on the stage? What is he doing here?" Ah, "Monostatos, a negro in the service of Sarastro." But look how he moves like a clown. Look how the white man who plays him gives him all his ridicule. Look how he makes his eyes roll. Look how he ogles the white, pure heroine and now tries to rape her. Look how the fool in feathers calls him the devil. Look how he is pulled off the stage to be whipped by some white men. Look how he grovels

at the feet of his white master, the epitome of wisdom, enlightenment and truth. Listen how his master tells him, “Your soul is as black as your face.” Look how he falls down into darkness and punishment like the other evil characters at the end of the play. All in Mozart, all within the forms and moulds of art and beauty, all inside the same time and same day as Fanon’s open soul.

Then there is more to be said. The thing must be said again, and again. We take school parties of our children to see *The Magic Flute*, and Fanon is still almost an unknown name, just a vague scare of blackness. We laugh at the grotesque Monostatos, the black bogey man, and applaud the white world of art that his distorted shape fits into. It still suits us to remember him that way. We do not want to know the black man. We turn our back on real men, real existence, real blackness. We do not want to read and experience Fanon:

I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theatre are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim. (Searle, pp. 20-21 [citing Fanon, in italics, 1970: 99])

It is through his reading of Fanon as a contrapuntal text to Mozart’s “text” that Searle can reflect critically on his own taken for granted assumptions about representations of Blackness in “White” Western art culture. In the face of the tensions such readings create he learns that, as an educator “the thing”—the exposure of simplistic, false and grotesque representations of real people, and the lived costs of such representations as revealed through the texts of marginalized writers like Fanon, “must be said again, and again.”

I have found Said’s concept of “contrapuntal readings” a feasible and effective approach to modifying my own practice. For example, in a context of leading informal singing with adults I might teach a spiritual that speaks to the early African American experience of struggling under the system of slavery, such as “Wade in the Water,” alongside a song like the “Skye Boat Song.” Both songs speak to the experience of exile and the struggle for freedom under extreme conditions of subjugation. While most participants from the dominant culture would readily identify a song like “Wade in the Water” as a song of struggle, they may very well overlook the history of the Scots who were defeated at Culloden field by the English and thereafter exiled to coastal regions, starved, subjugated, disenfranchised, and where they thereafter found their language and culture banned. This helps to bridge that “Othering” practice of avoiding examination of a dominant culture’s musical and cultural roots of struggle. It reminds us that we are all implicated in various ways in the subjugation of others, both in the historical past and the global present.

Frankie Armstrong (as cited in Joyce, 2003) notes that it took her learning the historical songs of her own people in the U.K. before she could truly appreciate the songs of people from cultures beyond her own, and in so doing, she could understand in a much more nuanced and integral way the role that singing plays in the formation of a people, their cultures and societies. It was also by learning (and teaching) songs that dealt with the historical struggles within her own culture that Armstrong found she was able to open up discussions of power and its abuses in current situations, both locally and globally.

Armstrong is noted for her work revitalizing historical songs which illustrated early feminist and class struggles in the U.K. In these songs and the songs of subjugated people everywhere, coded language exists. It is in discussions of such strategic language that we can begin to learn the deeper meanings and social/historical significance of songs in the lives of the people who produce them. To miss the opportunity to take up these discussions is to reduce these songs to exotic novelties or anthropological artifacts, when they are potentially living works that can inspire people towards deeper understanding, and inspire organized efforts of social transformation at every level of society, so that we might avoid repeating the terrible histories that produced these works in the first place.

In conclusion, songs and the singing of them are powerful pedagogical (and political) tools that teach us much more than music. Even in their most mundane and seemingly benign use, they each us about who we are and our manner of being in the world. Given

that, it is up to us to be accountable for our decisions about what we sing and where, why we sing and to what ends, and to use our gift of singing to enhance the social relations of all our relationships and systems in our communities and societies. Returning to Razack's opening words, we may never be free of our implications in the relations of power that are embedded in the songs we sing, but we have every opportunity to challenge and disrupt them through the use of critical reflection and our informed strategic choices.

References

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Endnotes

1. This essentializing of Black soulfulness is much more complicated than a mere sign. It is situated in the subjectivities of peoples' lives and histories and shaped through discourses and socially mediated relations of power. The musical practice of "soul" is as richly multiplicitous, conflictual, and contingent as any social practice.
2. Marian Anderson's Easter concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial occurred after much publicity and controversy because she was denied the use of Constitutional Hall as a venue for performing due to the institution's all-white policy. This racist policy was upheld by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and one of its illustrious members, Eleanor Roosevelt, resigned over the incident and made her decision to do so public. This, and other factors that were highlighted by the media, made Anderson's eventual performance a huge political event. Approximately 75,000 people came—a staggering number of people. The significance of the event reverberated for generations to come. Interestingly, Anderson refused to be positioned as a political or social activist or to have this moment framed as an anti-racist action. Instead, she claimed to be *merely* an artist wishing only to have access to performances spaces and framed her action as one in support of American *democracy*.
3. To distinguish the difference between using the word *white* to represent racialized white skin and "*White*" as a symbolic term for interlocked systems of domination I use lower case letters for the former and capital letters and quotation marks for the latter.
4. This is the "invisible centre" to which R. Ferguson (1990) refers—and which is possible to characterize as "White space."