

Musical Moments That Matter: Is a Multicultural Human Subject Possible?

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One of the strongest memories I hold of my musical experiences as an adolescent was during the turbulent 1960s. I was living in Knoxville, Tennessee, at the time. I recall that my high school choral conductor had arranged a medley of protest songs from the Civil Rights movement to honour Dr. Martin Luther King shortly after his assassination. However, after receiving complaints from some parents that the songs were "too political," the school principal prohibited us from performing them in concert. A few of us, however, stood on stage at the end of the concert and sang the medley anyway as an impromptu encore, much to the thrill of the conductor and the chagrin of the principal who had issued the ban. I am curious about why this particular event remains with me: the power I felt in that moment on stage, singing songs of political protest, voicing my own personal protest against the oppressive school administration's attempt to silence our songs of solidarity.

Now, so many years later, as a choral music educator my interests lie in world music and antiracism education. In *Music and Everyday Life*, DeNora (2000) posits that the sense of self is locatable in music, through the ways in which "musical materials are active ingredients in identity work, how respondents 'find themselves' in musical structures (p. 68)." DeNora's words strike a chord within me, and I ask, how is my high school experience linked to who I am today, and to my passion for social justice? Have the members of my choir, the Mississauga Festival Youth Choir (MFYC), experienced particular musical moments that matter for them, moments that are pivotal for the identities they construct for themselves, performative for the kinds of people they are? How might MFYC's world music curriculum contribute to their developing sense of self? Is it possible that a type a self-understanding as "multicultural human subjects" might emerge from their experiences?

A Multicultural Human Subject

So, you ask, what is a multicultural human subject? Over the past decades, we have come to understand the concept of identity as fluid, shifting, and continually emergent. The corollary to theories of identity is theories of the subject, often coupled with the concept *performativity* (Bell, 1999, p. 1). The theoretical construct of multicultural human

Musical Moments That Matter

subject acknowledges all of these qualities, including the prismatic, multidimensional nature of identity as something performed, and of subjectivity as called into being through discourse. A person who might be considered a multicultural human subject therefore questions the value of fixed identity labels of race, nationality, ethnicity, and so forth, particularly when such labels serve to create boundaries that divide and separate. Bell (1999, p. 6), writing about gender and ethnic identities, suggests that we might speak of non-hegemonic identities; my concept for a multicultural human subject is non-hegemonic in that it seeks to disrupt subjectivities created by hegemonic discourse. Griffiths (1995) uses the metaphor of the web in her discussion of identity: it is intricate, entangled, and interlaced; the result of experiences and influences that can never be extricated from the resultant self. Because of the inextricable nature of experience to the sense of self, and the multiple meanings invoked by the term *identity*, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have called for a move beyond identity as a concept for analysis to that of self-understanding. It is in this sense of self-understanding, that I employ the term identity in my research. Bell (1999), in arguing that identity is performative, asks the question this way: "What makes us who we are within a particular social complex? How are we to understand ourselves, our politics, our desires, and our passions as produced within this historical present? (p. 1)."

The social complex for this study is located within Mississauga, one of Canada's most ethnically diverse cities. The membership of the MFYC reflects that diversity. Within the MFYC, our musical focus might be considered cosmopolitan. Brennan (1997) defines cosmopolitanism as an outward-looking, intercultural sensitivity characterized by such phenomena as transculturation and hybridity. Current interest in cosmopolitanism is linked to the economics of globalization. Beck (2002) discusses one impact of cosmopolitanism as "cosmopolitanization," which he describes as *internal* globalization, or globalization *from within* the national societies (italics in original, p. 17) as a force that "transforms everyday consciousness and identities significantly. Issues of global concern are becoming part of the everyday local experiences and the 'moral life-worlds' of the people (p. 17)." Roudometof (2005) links cosmopolitanization to the now more commonly used concept of *glocalization* (Robertson, 1992), but differentiates the two concepts by arguing that cosmopolitanism is "an attitude, or a quality manifested in people's attitudes or orientations," describing this attitude as "a moral and ethical standpoint (p. 116)." For my purposes here, cosmopolitanism is an outward-looking, intercultural sensitive moral and ethical standpoint, arising from glocalization as a condition of society. This moral and ethical standpoint is one from which, I want to argue, a multicultural human subject may emerge.

Where is the potential for multicultural human subjectivity in the MFYC program? Critical educators Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) argue that subjectivity is a "permanently unclosed, always partial, narrative engagement with text and context (p. 301)." In the MFYC program, texts are the repertoire we perform, drawn from a wide range of cultures and musical practices. Our attempts to understand these cultures and musical practices are through the lens of antiracism, which provides the discursive frame for narrative engagements during rehearsals, and through which we locate the global within the local culture of MFYC.

In *Music and the Racial Imagination*, Wong (2000) characterizes the performance of an Asian-American rap group as "corporeally enacting the cultural memory of other racialized representations (p. 59)," the representation here being of a genre of music predominantly associated with African-Americans. This idea resonates deeply for me as a white teacher drawn to world choral music for my community youth choir. Our performances, too, are corporeal enactments of racialized memories and cultural meanings. Contextualized within an antiracism pedagogy, the music brings the global into the local MFYC culture and, I hope, into the moral life-worlds of the choir members. For example, when we sing "freedom songs" from the antiapartheid movement of South Africa, we not only discuss the history of apartheid in South Africa, we also make links to the history of racism in North America, to the ongoing apartheid of Canada's First Nations people, and to racism as it manifests in today's society.

Frith (1996) theorizes that when we perform music, we construct "imaginary cultural narratives" through which we "absorb songs into our lives and rhythm into our bodies (p. 121)." The interviews I conducted with MFYC members in conjunction with my doctoral research confirm Frith's assertion, but I have concerns: although these imaginary cultural narratives may work to soften boundaries constructed through discourse, by the same token, they may just as easily reinforce stereotypes and prejudices. The type of imaginary cultural narrative is in part dependent on what happens in rehearsals before the performance: was the particular music taught within a social or historical context (Bradley, 2003)? What type of narrative engagement with the text and context, if any, took place during those rehearsals? I believe the answers to these and similar questions are critical for opening the spaces to an emerging multicultural human subject.

Musical Moments That Matter

Multiculturalism or Antiracism

Earlier in this paper I described my pedagogy with the MFYC as antiracist. How is antiracism education different from multicultural education? Multiculturalism works with the notion of our basic humanness and downplays inequities of difference by accentuating shared commonalities (Dei, 2000, p. 21). Multicultural approaches to choral music education, which have gained widespread acceptance within the discipline over the past two decades, have brought a wealth of musical diversity to our choirs. However, I have long wondered if multicultural education really fulfills the promise it offers to "develop in students an understanding of the cultural thought and practices of populations across the globe (Campbell, 2002, p. 28)." Multicultural education has been criticized for its failure to interrogate biases and power relations, thus allowing systemic racism to remain unchecked (Hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1998). "The task of antiracism education," therefore, "is to identify, challenge and change the values, structures, and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppressions (Dei, 2000, p. 21)."

One Musical Moment: Opening the Space for a Multicultural Human Subject

With the foregoing in mind, let us look at one particular musical moment the MFYC experienced on August 6, 2003. We had been invited to perform for the Prison Fellowship International (PFI) quadrennial convocation in Toronto, in part because of our reputation for performing global song, but not insignificantly, because we are known locally as being an ethnically diverse choir. To recap the social complex for this event: MFYC members live in an increasingly glocalized society. Our weekly rehearsals interpret this glocalization through an antiracism discursive framework. The pre-performance rehearsals of the South African freedom song, "Haleluya! Pelo Tsa Rona" familiarized choir members with the antiapartheid struggle of South Africa, the significance of this particular song to that struggle, and the importance of that struggle to the world today.

The audience for the PFI event numbered over 900 people from 180+ countries. The audience received us well right from the beginning of our performance, but when we began to sing "Haleluya! Pelo Tsa Rona," the entire South African delegation jumped to their feet, dancing and singing along with us. It was a particularly powerful moment, unlike anything else I have ever experienced in a performance. MFYC members on stage reacted with looks of surprise and ecstasy, and the joyous celebration of the South

African delegation, many of whom had been political prisoners during apartheid, created palpable electricity in the room.

A year and a half later, many MFYC members commented during their interviews with me on the impact of this moment: some choristers understood for the very first time that "Haleluya! Pelo Tsa Rona" was a real song that held deep meaning for the South African delegates to the PFI convocation. Yet had we not in rehearsals contextualized the song, had we not discussed apartheid, racism, and the ongoing fight for social justice, this moment may have been experienced as just another fun performance. But by having an understanding of the social and historical context of the song, we shared a profound experience with the South African delegates, and other members of the audience. In that moment, I believe a space was opened for a multicultural human subjectivity, as the following choir members described in their interviews:

Kate: Yes! And all the Africans started dancing as we sang—because I think they hadn't heard it ("Haleluya! Pelo Tsa Rona") since they left...And they were SO happy...it was amazing to see their faces just light up—and even the people around them—they didn't know what was going on but they were happy to see these people happy—and I think—well, myself and another girl, we were both talking about it for days afterwards, how they were just...

Debbie: Yes, I think that was a pretty special moment, I think, for all of us.

Kate: It was a really big moment. I think we weren't expecting that— we were definitely not expecting that (personal communication, February 8, 2004).

Amber's description suggests that her understanding of this moment was profound:

Debbie: Any particular experiences you have had with MFYC that you feel are especially meaningful for you?

Amber: The Prison Fellowship—I always go back to that. I loved that—I loved seeing people who knew it (the song)—that was so

Musical Moments That Matter

cool. Now I want to go to like Ghana and do Bobobo and everyone will know it—that would be so cool...And they just started cheering and they got up dancing, and it felt very powerful, because they knew what it was, and we knew what it was. Like we're so used to our parents going, "oh, that was an interesting, fun piece" but they don't understand—but this was like—they are dancing and we know the dance! It was so cool! I can't really describe it but it was like that barrier was just gone (personal communication, March 29, 2004).

Amber's exclamation, "they knew what it was and we knew what it was!" suggests to me that this was a moment of recognition that transcended race, ethnicity, and nationality. Gilroy (1993) argues in *The Black Atlantic* that such moments of recognition, "produced in the intimate interaction of performer and crowd (p. 102)" are actually signifying practices mediated through the body. Gilroy suggests that in black music as a cultural practice, this musical recognition produces "the imaginary effect of an internal racial core of essence (p. 102)." I would like to co-opt Gilroy's argument for my purposes here. Although I, too, reject notions of essential internal cores, racial or otherwise, is it not possible that in Amber's moment of recognition, she realized a possibility for humanity that exists beyond boundaries imposed by discourses of race, ethnicity, and nation?

Dissonant Discourses and a Multicultural Human Subject

The preceding examples suggest the impact of this single musical moment on the lives of these two MFYC members. I believe it was an event that will forever be a part of the selves they construct. I could end here and we might all go on celebrating diversity and feeling good about it. However, discourses of nationalism, official multicultural discourse, racial and ethnic discourses, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, and religious discourses are also a part of my choir members' educational experiences and their everyday lives. Can one, two-minute and twenty-second musical moment compete with all that? Is a multicultural human subject possible?

Canadian multiculturalism as dominant discourse has been criticized for reinforcing and perpetuating myths of monolithic cultures and singular ethnic identities possessing uniform, discernible traits (Bedard, 2000, p. 52). In music education, multiculturalism often reifies traditional cultures that are presented as static or in need of preservation,

without consideration for their dynamic reality amidst transnationality and globalization. Diana's response to my question, "Has learning African music in any way influenced your opinions or beliefs about the culture?" illustrates:

Diana: Ummm, no, not really, although the rush of the music, the tempo stuff—I could tell that Africans were a more primal society than a sophisticated society like Victorian, because I can hear that in the music. Like when I hear the Bobobo stuff – it's the kind of thing that makes everyone in the audience want to sing right along, even if they don't know the words. But in a sophisticated society, like with Mozart and stuff, people in the audience will just go quiet and listen to it. I personally think music from a sophisticated society is like—it's more the music you listen to, you don't sing to. Whereas societies like West Africa, Ghana, that kind of thing, the songs they make up—they are meant to be sung by everyone. They're meant to be shared by the whole gathering (personal communication, April 6, 2004).

Diana's words are like cold water thrown in my face, a strong example of the alchemy of school knowledge (Popkewitz, 1998) (or in this case, choir knowledge). Although she has some of the concepts right, what she has wrong is frighteningly so: primal versus sophisticated societies. I know she did not hear that from me; nonetheless, it is part of the way she thinks about performing African music, the vestiges of a racist, colonial discourse singing strongly in her head while she performs the music of West Africa.

Kate is a Canadian citizen, born in Sri Lanka, who self-identifies as Singhalese. Her words reiterate the discourse of multiculturalism as implicated in her own self-understanding:

Kate: Well, in Canada it's not really—you don't really need to say you are Canadian—it's not really an issue. Your close friends, you can say "Oh, I'm Canadian now," and they'll be really happy for you. But yes, I sort of a get a little mad if people say, "Oh look—that Indian girl," or "You're Indian" and I'm like, "No, no I'm not. I don't know—maybe because for me it's the way I grew up. There is a difference: although we are so close to India as a country,

Musical Moments That Matter

physically, I don't know what it is. I just don't like it when people call me Indian. I don't like being called Tamil, even though it's still my country. I don't want to be called Hindu, or Pakistani. It's sort of like calling the Polish, I mean Portuguese uh-

Debbie: Spanish?

Kate: Yes, Spanish or like calling Canadians...

Debbie: Like calling Canadians Americans (Kate nods in agreement) (personal communication, February 8, 2004).

There is a tension here in my own discursive framework that bears unpacking: what are the implications for me as a white middle-class, female academic, speaking from an undeniably privileged position, when I call upon the concept of cosmopolitanism for theoretical support? Although current sociological thinking seeks to reposition the term, cosmopolitanism has been "critically associated with those elite Western individuals who were the fullest expression of European bourgeois capitalism and colonial empires (Beck, 2002, p. 16)." As Beck argues, cosmopolitanization implies that people all over the world are reflecting on a shared collective future, while antiracism pedagogy relies upon the collective memory of oppressed peoples as a vehicle for interrogating power¹ (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). Thus I must ask, is a multicultural human subject, as a product of cosmopolitanism and dependent upon the economy of globalization, anything more than a veiled form of imperialist thinking or ongoing colonialism? How might an antiracism pedagogy combine with a curriculum of world choral music to open the space for a truly non-hegemonic, multicultural human subject?

On Constituting a Multicultural Human Subject

Those of us who teach music know its potential for profound impact on our students. My research is an inquiry into the possibilities for world choral music to influence an emergent, non-hegemonic identity within an antiracism pedagogy. Events such as the PFI concert, call into being a multicultural human subjectivity as a form of agency: a fleeting, but momentary reality. Yet meaning can never be secured by pedagogical practice (Simon, 1992, p. 68), as Diana's comment, presented earlier in this paper, demonstrates. Discourses of race, ethnicity, nation, gender, ability, sexism, and

heterosexism, to which our students are exposed daily through media, schooling, family, and peers, however, also influence their self-understanding. The competition from these discourses is fierce, and in comparison, the effect of one musical moment may seem inadequate to foster substantive social change. Or is it? I recall my own high school experiences, and I hear Amber's words:

Amber: And then you just sort of feel like you know more about the people—you can't really specify something because it is just a song, right? But it's like just something that they know and you know. And it's like a common bridge...

As DeNora (2000) reminds us, music is a powerful tool through which individuals construct themselves. How do we, then, as teachers, use that tool; what kinds of people are we helping our students to be? Do our multicultural music education practices provide a new lens through which we can imagine what it means to be human, and if so, what kind of human do we imagine? Is a multicultural human subject somewhere in that imaginable future?

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Musical Moments That Matter

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Endnote

1. Ladson-Billings discusses how erasure of memory may occur within "...the colorblind perspective, evident in the way the curriculum presents people of color, that presumes a homogenized 'we' in a celebration of diversity. This perspective embraces a so-called multicultural perspective by 'mis-equating the middle passage with Ellis Island.' Thus, students are taught erroneously that 'we are all immigrants' (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.18)."