**An Open Letter to Minority Music Teachers:**

My name is Deejay Robinson and I write this through the tears in my eyes. I want to scream. I want to throw something; however, I am too tired to. Too tired because I have seen the same scene on the television over and over and over again. It is the scene of Black men being murdered by police officers, and a civilian murdering police officers at a peaceful protest. My eyes welled up with tears and my heart sank while watching MSNBC’s airing of the video of a White police officer holding a gun over Philando Castile while he lay dying. His girlfriend is screaming and her four year-old daughter in an angelic voice says, “It’s ok, I am here with you.”

I thought about the riots in Baltimore and Ferguson. I wept over the brazen murder of nine innocent Black men and women praying at a Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina. I screamed for Alton Sterling, Trayvon Martin and Michael Gray, Eric Gardner, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and a host of other names too numerous to list. I agonized over the 8 cops ambushed and murdered in Dallas and Baton Rouge. Then, I remembered that I had seen a similar scene before. The year was 1963 and the picture was in black and white. Black students were being attacked by White police officers who whipped their backs with the powerful sting of water pressure out of a fire hose and unleashed dogs on them.

The two juxtaposed images of Blacks being dehumanized are equal because, in 2016, there is still racism in the United States of America. Racism in America is so deeply embedded in the fabric of America’s society that even our field of music education is designed to protect and perpetuate White hegemonic privileges and power (Bradley, 2006, 2016; Bradley et al., 2007; Butler et al., 2007; Koza, 2008; McLaren, 2007; McKoy, 2013). I also cried that night because somewhere deep inside, I knew that I too, perpetuated white supremacy by bolstering the music of dead White men as superior. And so, I write for those like me who have been steeped in Western European classical music traditions and have imposed Western European classical music on students, on the assumption that their training deemed classical music superior.

I write for pre-service, novice, and veteran Black and Brown teachers who have combed through music education literature desperately searching for pieces by Black and Brown authors that describe many of our experiences in American music teaching and learning. I write for us who have been and are marginalized, isolated, and feel inferior in music education because of conscious and unconscious biases about our dark skin. I write to give voice to our young Black and Brown music learners who will come into the field with questions about acceptance and legitimacy.

Many teachers like myself become educators because we want to make a difference in our communities (Foster, 1997; Kelly, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005). We want to help raise children who will struggle just a little less than we did. We become teachers in order to ensure that our Black and Brown students “have opportunities to learn from role models whom they can identify with” (Kafele, 2012, p.70). We enroll in music school, pass our classes, learn theory, and pass juries just like our counterparts. Yet, we have also felt our hearts skip a beat when professors and teachers infer that our musics are interesting, exotic, or, not music at all. We have felt competing feelings of tokenization and adulation for being chosen to sing the solo during the multicultural piece or having been told that we are a “natural” at non-Western European genres of music (Hess, 2013, 2015). We have felt awkward as we wore colored sashes and ties and sang African Noels standing in the front of our peers—sometimes the entire choral department and hundreds of audience members. As participants and spectators, we have endured the whitewashing and reducing of gospel music to choreography of step-touch and jazz hands. In an effort to be better teachers, we have turned to literature and research for guidance, and have felt helpless when restructuring curricula because our voices represent a void in the music education literature that fails to address many of our concerns and experiences.

Ken Elpus (2015) put into words what we know and experience everyday: music education has a significant race gap that overwhelmingly privileges Whites and systematically excludes other minorities. In my opinion, Elpus’s research on the demographic profile of pre-service music teachers in the United States exposes how White superiority is intricately woven into America; its principle pillar for maintaining power manifests in the institution of music education. “An aspect of human nature,” wrote Michelle Alexander, “is the tendency to cling tightly to one’s advantages and privileges and to rationalize the suffering and exclusion of others.” (2012, p.146-147). She continued on to echo Fredrick Douglass, who believed that power concedes nothing without a movement from the people (p.147).

On April 26, 2016, Michael Butera, the CEO of the National Association of Music Education (NAfME) said, “Blacks and Latinos lack the keyboard skills needed for this field,” and “music theory is too difficult for them as an area of study.” (McCord, 2016; Rosen, 2016). Butera’s comments angered me so much that I burned my NAfME membership card in protest (Zubrzycki, 2016). I thought that if there were ever going to be a movement in music education, at least in my lifetime, where the collective field rallied around issues of race, power, and privilege in music education, then, the incendiary comments made by the NAfME leader would be the moment. Therefore, I took my anger to social media.

In my Facebook post (Robinson, 2016), I wanted to make racism real for my friends, specifically my music education colleagues who engage in the work of anti-racist music education, and those who believe music education is colorblind. I sought to expose the erroneousness of such comments while the world was still in shock from two unexpected music entertainment breaking news events about two African-American artists: (1) the death of music icon and legend Prince on April 21, 2016, and (2) the April 23, 2016 surprise release of Beyoncè’s *Lemonde*, a political and apropos album, arguably created by the most iconic music celebrity of this decade. Furthermore, Butera’s comments directly contradict the statistical data: (a) seven of ten top Billboard artists from 2000-2010 were Black (Beyoncè was number four); (b) Prince’s album *Purple Rain*, for 24 consecutive weeks was the longest-running album to be number one on the Billboard Charts, and (c) Prince is the only artist, and first African American musician, to perform 21 sold-out concerts in London (Morris, 2014). I do not know Mr. Butera and cannot comment on his character or intentions; however, as a Black man, I cannot separate his bigoted comments from American history—recent and old—or from statistical data, and especially not from my personal lived experiences.

There was also a hidden message for my music education friends as well. I wanted in-service music teachers to know that learning opportunities will be missed when our students are having conversations about Prince and Beyoncè while we are lecturing about Poulenc and Beethoven. I wanted music education professors to be inspired to leave the ivory towers of their academic institutions and engage in conversations with their communities about the state of music education in America. However, my innocence gave way to fear as the 2015-2016 school year closed with no action taken; hundreds of future teachers and musicians received their diplomas, professors left for conferences and summer vacations, and secondary teachers conducted the last beats of the end of year concerts and little if anything has changed. I knew many of us would go on about our lives acknowledging the moment, but too tired to do anything about it. But, “the very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off.” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 21).

You see, during difficult times my grandmother always said, “Baby, in order to understand the future, you must know your past.” I have been wrestling with trying to conceptualize the present by becoming a student of history and examining the racial upheaval and unrest of 1960s American society. I poured through writings and documentaries about racism in America and racism in U.S. music education. I was often told to root my thinking and writing in more music education scholarly literature as I submitted final papers and manuscripts for publication. I did. I read deeply and widely. Focusing on race, I read Bradley (2006, 2007, 2016), Koza (2008), and Hess (2013, 2015). These scholars among many others have made profound contributions to our field and have paved the way for us to understand how racial biases are woven into our institution. Yet, while their writings provide context and theoretical frameworks to view issues of access and racial inequality in music education, they lack the personal lived experiences of racial marginalization that only one who has endured them can tell. Therefore, I had to step outside of music education literature and find resonance and reference with Black scholars who wrote about what it is like to be Black in America.

The annals of Black history revealed to me the writings of James Baldwin (1963), Ta-Nehisi Coates (2008, 2013, 2015), W.E.B. Du Bois (1903, 1935), and Carter G. Woodson (1933). I learned how African Americans such as Paul Robeson, Nina Simone, and Roland Hayes were ostracized from American music education (Gates & Higginbotham, 20014; Goodman, 2013; Hayden, 1989; Simone et al., 2015). I read about the intersections of race, music, culture, and politics (Abrahams, 1992; Kitwana, 2002; Radano, 2003). Think about this, if we know that civilization began in Africa, could it not also be that music likely began there as well? If so, why do our music history classes begin with European polyphony? Perhaps this thought also led Cater G. Woodson in 1933, the author of *The Mis-Education of the Negro* to write, “in their own as in their mixed schools, Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin . . . and to despise the African.” (p.1). These writings, coupled with music education literature, became my source of strength and reminded me what I already knew, but too often forget: I am not alone, and you too, are not alone.

Let me be very clear, for the heart of the matter is here. Deborah Bradley, Connie McKoy, Julia Eklund Koza, Juliet Hess, Elizabeth Gould, Louis Bergonzi, Roberta Lamb, Brent C. Talbot, and my mentors Karin S. Hendricks, Andrè de Quadros, and Kinh. T. Vu, have laid a strong foundation and continue to build the framework. It is now our responsibility to adorn the walls with personal and heartfelt experiences, just as others have done before us.

Though this letter is addressed to minority music teachers and students, it is essential that all who read this understands that the onus is on each and everyone one of us to work together to ensure that future generations of musicers do not live in a world where one’s musical worth and talent is measured by their ability to re-create whiteness. It is my hope that the following rationale for a new way of teaching music will serve to guide as a teaching model for others to eliminate the race gap in American music education (Robinson, submitted). It was Vincent C. Bates who wrote that music education must “grow from the ground up” (2013, p. 86). So let us transform music education by telling our stories and creating music classrooms that challenge and interrogate hegemony. Let us join together in building a field where each and every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender, are able to freely realize their own artistic abilities independent of the color of their skin, where they were born, the person they love, or the sex assigned at birth. My name is Deejay Robinson. I see you. I hear you. I, too, am with you. Join me!

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