

THROUGH FUNK AND FINESSE: AN ENDARKENED FABULATION OF TWO QUEER
BLACK YOUTH'S RESISTANCE, HEALING, AND FUTURITY IN MUSIC EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT

Antiblack racism is endemic to every context youth navigate. Warren and Coles (2020) highlighted that academic spaces can often be the sites of the following antiblack assaults: interpersonal, environmental, and curricular. I focused on the manifestations of antiblack racism and intersecting forms of oppression in the lives of two Black queer femme highschoolers attending a high achieving performing arts high school in Florida. Florida has become an increasingly polarized sociopolitical environment and a predictor of sorts for state contexts.

I utilize Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) to observe how music education participates in the un/intentional harming of Black youth. I further considered how these harms can contribute to a metaphorical death through necropolitics (Mbembe 2003/2019), what I describe as a bifocal lens. I contend that the uncritical operationalizing of social justice is often informed through an approach to multiculturalism and social justice that exists upon a foundation of antiblackness and spirit-murder (Love 2019).

I utilized my lived experience and bifocal lens to construct these research questions:

1. How do Black youth see [their] culture reflected in music education?
2. How do Black youth navigate their place in music education?
3. How do Black youth re/imagine a music education that celebrates and lifts their identities?

These research questions ultimately guided the study and contribute to a new body of scholarship that has not yet been considered in music education. It is my objective that this dissertation provides greater clarity in identifying and combatting antiblackness with greater facility.

I engaged in a methodology that I described as an Endarkened fabulation of the experiences of two young queer Black femmes, using data I collected through kitchen table talks (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015) and ethnographic methods. This methodology consists of the confluence of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (Dillard 2000), Endarkened storywork (Toliver 2021), and critical fabulation (Hartman 2008). I use the collected data and my lived experience to create a composite narrative and philosophical reflection.

The findings of this study showcase the varying degrees of emotional harm the participants face. The participants faced interpersonal assaults with their administrators, directors, and classmates. The environmental assaults often stemmed from the severe isolation both participants felt by being the few people of color in their classes but was exacerbated by the Eurocentric posters and imagery in classroom spaces. The curricular assaults consisted of uncritically selecting “fun” repertoire from diverse composers and a lack of meaningful contextualization of the music. The participants additionally noted a severe lack of freedom in musical spaces, one that prevented them from exploring their own musical interests. What was most powerful, however, was identifying the various ways the participants resisted this violent environment through fugitive moments. These fugitive moments included the making of queer friend spaces, self-guided learning, and exploring music outside of the classroom.

The implications of this inquiry are multi-faceted. The perspectives of these Black queer youth are currently vastly underrepresented and considered in mainstream music education discourse. Their insights provide powerful implications for the shifts that must occur in music teacher education and policy to affirm groups of children that are treated like they are disposable in this current paradigm. This work will serve as a foundation for future work in designing culturally-affirming curriculum and developing racially-informed pedagogies.

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This work is dedicated to Jackii and Ariel. I also dedicate this work to my ancestors and people. I see a reflection of myself in every child, but I am particularly moved by the ways queer Black and Brown youth survive and thrive in a world that is built upon their backs. I join you in dreaming of a future outside of this fuckery and finding joy in the meantime, in between time.

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CHAPTER 1

Meditation

I was hidden from the world as a child. Yolanda, my mom, protected me at all costs. From what, exactly? I saw pain and weariness in my mother's eyes often, but I also saw defiance and strength. What could possibly make the strongest person I knew feel pain? I did not see my mom cry until I was five years old. It was my first day of kindergarten, my mom walked me to my classroom. I can still feel how her arms wrapped around me before I walked into the classroom, like a cloak, shielding me from a storm I was unaware of. I felt her tears soak through the back of my shirt. She told me to try my best. I did not fully comprehend or speak English yet; I learned bits of white Cuban-infused English through my dad and a Black Chicago-Rican English through my mom. I tried to become friends with a white boy, I found out his grandfather was the principal at the school. He pushed me away and said that he did not talk to *fat, Mexican niggers*. My classmates laughed. I was confused and felt a form of shame, an unfamiliar feeling. I told mom what happened over dinner. That was the second time I saw her cry. Her tears were accompanied by a deep anger and pain, but she did not look surprised. My mother's ontological disposition allowed her to see the world for what it is: antiblack. Her unabashedly Black skin marked her, and she wanted to save me from that death. Death? Is death the right word for non-beings?

I grew to know myself in various contexts. In some contexts, I was treated like someone important, usually when I received high marks on an assignment or received a superior rating at an orchestra festival. There were other instances, however, when I felt like a problem. I learned these facets of my identity at school through lessons, interactions, and my environment. This

sense of two-ness was conceptualized by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) as double consciousness which he describes as a

sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8)

I learned what decisions and actions I could make to earn the favor of my teachers, and how I could matter in their eyes. One of my largest achievements as a child was being recognized by my 3rd grade music teacher for being one of nine students in the district to score a perfect score on a musical aptitude test. I felt like I mattered to my parents and teachers in that moment. My double-consciousness was substantially informed by my music education. I learned the proper guidelines with which to appreciate European art music, and I learned that the music of my cultural heritage failed when held to those same expectations. I learned that I was a real musician and that my mom's Saturday morning sing-alongs lacked any artistic merit. My love of classical music created tension I lacked the tools to navigate. I began to question and interrogate these tensions as an adult and began to deeply consider the insidious nature of oppression.

This dissertation is a philosophically-guided qualitative inquiry that explores the insidious nature of antiblackness and how it manifests in seemingly harmless spaces like music classrooms. My own musical journey disconnected me from various facets of my cultural background. Values were imposed on me that informed my perception of my family as being loud, rowdy, and undesirable. This perception of my family was informed by their race, culture, and social class. I specifically consider how antiblackness manifests and intertwines with other forms of oppression. I utilize a novel methodology that I describe as an Endarkened fabulation to create a narrative retelling of the experiences of two queer Black youth attending a high-

achieving performing arts high school. I then reflect on this narrative utilizing a bifocal lens of Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit), and necropolitics.

I begin this chapter by situating schools as the reflection of societal values. I then situate the location and sociopolitical context this dissertation is informed by. I introduce scholarship related to antiblackness and how theorizations of it have manifested in education and music education scholarship. I explicate the research questions that guide this dissertation. I conclude with an overview of the methodology that I use to guide this philosophically-guided qualitative inquiry.

Opening

Schools are the reflection and embodiment of societal values (Halstead 1995) and sites of social reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017). Bhattacharya highlights how societal structures and systems, including schools, perpetuate and reproduce social inequalities. There are various ways these societal values manifest. They were present when a six-year-old Black girl was arrested in Orlando, Florida, for simply having a “temper tantrum” (Zaveri 2020). This young girl was never an immediate threat to her classmates or faculty, but she was seen as a problem. These societal values are present in East Ramapo Central School District in New York, where predominantly Black and Latiné students cannot drink tap water due to high levels of lead (Fadulu 2023). Repairs will cost nearly \$230 million, and only \$91 million has been allocated towards repairs. These societal values are also present in Florida’s new social studies educational standards that discuss “how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit” (Planas 2023). This statement simultaneously ignores the violence of the transatlantic passage and presents a revisionist history that implies there was any benefit to

enslavement. This pattern of disregard and minimization demonstrates the utter contempt society has towards Black bodies¹.

Legal scholars such as, but not limited to, Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado began analyzing these different societal outlooks for people of color through the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) beginning in the 1970s. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate introduced CRT in education in 1995. Interdisciplinary scholars quickly began contributing to the field with various offshoots of CRT that focused on the unique obstacles various marginalized groups face such as TribalCrit (Brayboy 2005), LatCrit (Bernal 2002), DisCrit (Annamma et al. 2018), BlackCrit (Dumas and ross² 2016) and QueerCrit (Aguilar-Hernández 2020).

The instances at the opening of the chapter point to a more specific form of racism that is central to this dissertation, antiblackness. I focus on the thoughts, beliefs, and practices that allow this specific form of racism to manifest insidiously in classroom spaces. Farley (2021) states that antiblackness is constructed through a white over Black hierarchy that is learned. This concept then continues to unfold in everyday life and through systems. Other scholars such as Wilderson (2020) contend that antiblackness creates a society where Black people are outside of the scope of who is recognized as human.

Dumas and ross (2016) theorized Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) to engage with antiblackness with increased specificity. BlackCrit utilizes the same foundations as Critical Race Theory (CRT) but provides three additional framing ideals, discussed further in Chapter 2. A wave of recent scholarship that focuses on the harm Black youth face specifically has utilized the

¹ I refer to Black bodies to emphasize the dehumanization that occurs through antiblack racism.

² kihana ross intentionally resists the capitalization of their name.

foundational work of Dumas and ross (2016). Warren and Coles (2020), for example, utilize BlackCrit to identify various forms of antiblack assault within school contexts.

Other scholars have similarly explored antiblackness in education, but through different analytical means. Bettina Love (2016; 2019) utilizes various theoretical groundings, including CRT, to better analyze the harm Black children navigate in schools. Love (2016) asserts that “race-centered violence kills Black children on a daily basis by either murdering them in the streets—taking their bodies, or murdering their spirits—taking their souls” (2). Love specifically highlights how schools are sites of spirit-murder for Black children. Spirit-murdering, initially theorized by Williams (1987), describes “the personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries to people of color through the fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism, privilege, and power” (Love 2014, 302). These assaults on Black children leads to a slow form of death, beginning with the wearing down of their spirits.

Situating the Dissertation

I have based this project on various observations related to my own experiences as a music student and music educator in Florida. I contextualize the location of the dissertation and share my experience as a high school student and the significant sociopolitical aspect of the time. I then consider the current landscape of Florida and the increasingly volatile sociopolitical landscape the participants of the dissertation navigate. I ultimately contend with the overarching significance of situating this project in Florida.

Contextualizing Location and Experience

This dissertation chronicles the collective experiences of two multiply-marginalized Black youth attending the same performing arts high school in the state of Florida, Stephen

Foster School of the Arts³. Their experiences align with some of my own, having attended a similarly rigorous performing arts high school in Florida. In this following section I contextualize my own experiences with antiblackness in high school. I then situate the current landscape of schooling in Florida. I share my lived experience to embed myself into this project and to juxtapose my high school experiences with the current landscape participants in this study are facing. I believe that their experiences are vitally important and must be shared because the state of Florida has effectively engaged in an assault against multiple facets of their identities through schooling. Further, I assert that the juxtaposition of my experiences just one decade prior points to the acceleration of various oppressive forces within the state, including antiblackness.

Contextualizing my High School Experience

I attended a rigorous performing arts high school from 2007 to 2011. The state of Florida has several performing arts high schools that require strict audition requirements for admittance. These schools often identify the most artistically proficient students across the district and invite them to apply and audition. Districts in the state of Florida are expansive, the one I resided in consisted of over 100,000 students and spans 2,000 square miles. My high school limited each incoming class to 100 students and functioned as a school-within-a-school of 2,000 students. We (the students) only had academic coursework on the main campus. The performing arts high school, however, had its own unique facilities and staff. The participants in this dissertation currently attend a school with a similar structure.

Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States, was elected and inaugurated during my sophomore year of high school. I remember being afraid he would be

³ Pseudonym used.

assassinated on election day, because I kept hearing folks spread those rumors in class. The rumors generally caused tensions to build at school, specifically on the main side of campus.

Violence was at an all-time high and it was usually between Black or Latiné students and white students. There is one moment that has stayed with me. A Black and white boy got into a fight that escalated quickly, and a school resource officer (SRO) became involved. The Black student immediately disengaged once the SRO was present and began to run. I *still* recall all the laughter and commotion when the Black student ran from the SRO and was tased *from behind*. It reminded me of a cattle ranch. This event was never mentioned by administrators or news outlets. I typically found myself hiding from all the violence by staying on the performing arts side as much as I could. The antiblackness I experienced was endemic, welcomed, and applauded by the school and community.

The Current Landscape of Schooling in Florida

The current landscape of schooling in Florida is significantly more hostile than what I experienced 15 years ago. The participants in this dissertation are currently subject to various laws and initiatives in schools that make any form of culturally relevant instruction a fugitive act. The Florida State Board of Education banned the use of CRT or mention of Nikole Hannah-Jones' *The 1619 Project* in schools in 2021 (Solochek 2021). This ban was intentionally set in place to suppress counter narratives to white hegemonic history. I contend that the beginning of this onslaught was in response to the nation-wide protests that occurred after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN on May 25, 2020. Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed a law in 2022 that imposed limitations on “topics of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation” (Najarro 2023) in public schools. This initially antiblack assault has shifted into this movement to suppress anything divergent from a white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal norm. This

Parental Rights in Education law, colloquially known as the “don’t say gay” law was further expanded in 2023 to specifically prohibit students from being addressed by their preferred name and pronouns (Lonas 2023). This targeted legal strike against children from marginalized groups has far-reaching implications. Book bans have become commonplace in Florida with various books and materials being removed from shelves that have any ties to racism, gender, or sexuality (Pendharkar 2023). These restrictions and limitations allow a virulent form of white supremacy to manifest. The group *Moms for Liberty* is a right-wing extremist terrorist organization that originated in Florida in 2021 (Altschuler 2023). *Moms for Liberty* and similar groups organize calculated strikes at school boards to ban various books and create vigilante groups to hunt down activist or “woke” educators. The effects of these groups and the current political landscape have even impacted curriculum such as the College Board’s AP African American history and psychology classes, resulting in the ban of the African American history course in Florida (Najarro 2023).

Florida is now being viewed as a political bellwether, or predictor, of sorts (Najarro 2023). Many of the laws being imposed in the state are present across 20 states. The participants in this study currently navigate a landscape that has national implications, and it is vitally important to understand their experiences and how they navigate antiblackness and various other intersecting marginalizing forces.

Antiblackness

Situating Blackness

To better understand how antiblack racism manifests, it is essential to know what blackness is and when this conceptualization began. Race is a social construct that is inextricably linked to the effects caused by racism (Covarrubias & Velez 2013). The salience of racism is

made tangible through the material and psychic oppression that plagues people who are negatively racialized (Crenshaw et al. 1995). Similarly, a link exists between blackness and antiblackness. Mills (2021) states that “blackness is a racial category, not just a physical description, and as such it cannot exist before racial blackness exists, and thus not before race exists” (19). It is worth noting the nuance of Mills’ contention, he differentiates between blackness and being racialized as Black. Mills refers to more than skin tone and considers the ontoepistemological ramifications of what it means to exist as a Black person. This ontoepistemological positioning of blackness is what Mills operationalizes. Mills does not search for the earliest historical instance of antiblack racism to operationalize blackness, he states that “for our purposes, though, the crucially defining features of blackness... do not have this transhistorical character but arise specifically in opposition to racial subordination” (2021, 20). Mills identifies three conditions that must be met to identify the origins of blackness: one, the use of race as a social category; two, blackness as a possible racial category; and three, the subordination of African or Afro-derived populations (Mills 2021, 20). Mills asserts that these conditions first converge during Western modernity, and more specifically, through the transatlantic slave trade. Prejudice and bigotry existed prior to this period, but these instances were bounded interpersonally or geographically, while the transatlantic slave trade was globalized. Mills (2021) states “it is really only with modernity, and the simultaneous developments of the European taxonomizing of the world and the European voyages of discovery of the world (or, less euphemistically, conquest), that racialized categorization and racialized stigmatization begin” (20). The beginning of antiblackness is marked by the forced enslavement of Africans through modern subjugation (Costa Vargas & Jung 2021, Farley 2021, Mills 2021). This mark is cemented globally through the forced relocation of Black people and

their incessant racialization. The ontological racializing of African people into Black bodies shapes “an oppositional Black consciousness, in which this imputed demeaning identity is resisted, and blackness revalorized” (Mills 2021, 23). Blackness is thus sustained through resistance and opposition to antiblackness. Mills (2021) notes that this theorization of blackness regarding race is similar to feminism in regard to gender. Philosophy informed by blackness allows people to see past racist acts and see antiblackness. Similarly, feminist philosophy allows people to see past gendered disputes and to see the insidious manifestation of the patriarchy. It is blackness, and the constant opposition to its existence, that allow people to identify and name antiblackness.

What is Antiblackness?

Antiblackness can best be theorized as the thoughts, beliefs, actions, behaviors, functions, and practices of people and institutions that diminish and marginalize the humanity of those racialized as Black. Anthony Paul Farley (2021) states that antiblackness is constructed through a white over black hierarchy, and that the first instance of slavery in modernity marked the beginning of antiblackness. The author notes that this initial moment is still unfolding, which has similarly been argued by Saidaiya Hartman through the afterlife of slavery, whose work is discussed in further depth later in this chapter. Farley (2021) contends societies are socialized into a binary of white-over-black thinking and that this concept is learned. This concept is then reified through everyday actions, representations, labor, and through systems. These systems are built on white-over-black hierarchies as a result, creating a cycle of antiblack socialization.

Lewis Gordon argues that these systems and sentiments are preserved through Sartrean bad faith⁴ stating:

⁴ Sartre (1943) contends that humans engage in various processes that create the illusion that there is no choice in the roles they and others are assigned to.

From the Sartrean perspective, we seek our identity by way of negating or "freezing" that of others. But in this process we lie to ourselves with the notion of being at one with our various identities. Thus, we often identify ourselves as "full" and others as "empty" or existing in the condition of lack. This condition of lack often takes on group associations, which leads to the dichotomy of fullness and hunger having symbolic form in antiblack societies as lightness and darkness, whiteness and blackness, which in turn eventually takes on racial form as the white and the black. (1999, 6)

The dichotomy of fullness and lack gives credence to deficit-based notions of blackness and shifts the focus away from the oppressive forces that marginalize blackness. This act of bad faith sustains antiblackness.

White-over-black bad faith is preserved through lies and willful ignorance. Mills (1997) similarly theorized this concept through the Racial Contract and white ignorance. The Racial Contract is the understanding that an implicit social contract exists that upholds white supremacy and racial hierarchy. Mills (1997) writes:

The Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. (18)

This epistemology of ignorance, willful or otherwise, creates a veil that protects whiteness and hides the complicity of those who benefit. The only way to remove this veil, it seems, is through a prolonged dismantling of the mechanisms that protect whiteness and investing in the dreams of Black folk. These forms of denial, however, create an endless cycle of the delusion of progress. White ignorance and bad faith create a sense of malaise and hopelessness because “our memories of a before-time, of a time-before-time, seem as unreal as a time before breathing. Our imaginations are compassed by the seeming lack of other possible worlds” (Farley 2021, 89). This bleak realization means that if there is not a way through an antiblack reality then the only options are to survive, or to find a way out.

Antiblackness has become synonymous with Afropessimism, with antiblackness being central to Afropessimism but only a portion of the theory (Dumas 2016). Afropessimism is Frank Wilderson's (2020) philosophical endeavor that positions blackness as being antithetical to humanity, and signals a shift in academic engagement with antiblackness. Spillers states that while Afropessimism echoes the same themes as other theorizations of antiblackness, this conflation is erroneous (Soka 2021). It is perhaps best to explore how antiblackness and Afropessimism converge and diverge through various themes.

Overarching Themes

Themes in antiblackness scholarship and philosophy consist of, but are not confined to, a downgraded (or denied) humanity, adverse health outcomes, and liberatory fantasies. Notions of a downgraded humanity begin with the marking of Black bodies⁵ as chattel, a form of ownable property, and continue through to this day. Adverse health outcomes manifest in psychological, medical, and physical forms of violence on Black bodies. Liberation and resistance compel Black people to dream and imagine a life beyond the color line (Du Bois 2014). It is essential to consider these themes in antiblackness scholarship in this dissertation. The aforementioned adverse effects manifest in classroom spaces in insidious ways. Supporting resistance and liberatory fantasies requires the ability to identify how antiblackness murders the spirits of Black youth (Love 2014).

Downgraded Humanity

From the moment Black people were marked chattel, enslaved Africans were deemed property. Sociologist Orlando Patterson has identified the process of enslavement as a form of social death. Patterson notes that social death is "the permanent, violent domination of natally

⁵ I refer to the body to emphasize how this conceptualization of downgraded humanity can fully negate a Black person's being.

alienated and generally dishonored persons” (1982, 9). Patterson develops this notion of social death through various examples of enslavement in various cultures throughout history. Social death ensures that the enslaved person is not seen as fully human by wider society. There are both external and internal forces that strip any form of community and identity the enslaved had prior. This downgraded humanity has been preserved socially and historically. Antiracism, through social death, has been preserved in the United States through systems and laws, such as the slave codes, for example, that made slavery a permanent condition. Social death is also maintained discursively, as Hortense Spillers highlights through the naming of Black women in the Moynihan report⁶ (Spillers 1987). In *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*, Spillers (1987) highlights how U.S. American grammar marks the flesh of Black women with meanings that (un)gender and complicate Black womanhood. Spillers’ works ultimately highlight how the intersections of blackness and femininity are subjected to misogynoir, a form of anti-black racist misogyny (Bailey & Trudy 2018). This misogynoir is maintained through the assertion of the primacy of race over gender, and discursively, such as being labeled sexually deviant, for both cisgender and transgender Black women. Wilderson (2020) uses this theorization of social death in *Antiracism* and furthers it, saying the Black is not human, it exists outside of the construct of who is human. This antagonistic relationship to humanity is explored in the following section.

Adverse Health Outcomes

This downgraded existence has been conceptualized by Saidiya Hartman as the afterlife of slavery. Hartman (2007) contends that the endemic and seemingly endless antiracism borne out of the transatlantic slave-trade is a manifestation of the afterlife of slavery, "skewed life

⁶ Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a report in 1965 titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* while he was Assistant Secretary of Labor for Lyndon B. Johnson. This report on Black poverty ultimately deemed the matriarchal nature of Black households was the driving force of poverty in the United States.

chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman 2007, 6). Black bodies have been harmed and used for medical advancement, such as the experiments Morton Sims, the founder of gynecology, performed on enslaved Black women without their consent (Hartman 2019; Khabele et al. 2020). This pattern of medical abuse and neglect continues in the form of medical racism, the systemic disparity that occurs in the health sectors through racial biases and disparity in health coverage (Nuriddin et al. 2020). These adverse health outcomes also manifest through literal violence that is regularly committed on Black bodies. Violence occurs in various systems and throughout the lifespan of Black individuals, from interpersonal assaults in schools (Warren & Coles 2020) to the death of unarmed Black people at the hands of police. This emphasis of violence on Black flesh highlights the primacy of race, through an Afropessimist theorization of antiblackness. Wilderson (2020) claims antiblack violence is unique because humanity reaffirms itself through it. This theorization, however, ignores that antiblack racism affects women, queer, and trans folks in unique and intersectional ways that cannot be fully accounted for solely through antiblackness (Spillers 1987; Hartman 2019). Antiblackness is a social construct learned by anyone; thus, it can become internalized in Black people too. I often fear that internalized antiblackness and toxic masculinity among Black men contributes to the worse outcomes for Black women. It is important to constantly reassert that Black women, queer, and trans folks are the least assimilable group in these theorizations and are often forgotten or ignored in analyses, and that they deserve specific care and attention (Spillers 1987).

Liberatory Fantasies

There is a continuum of thoughts, contentions, and assertions regarding liberation in antiblackness scholarship. Many Black feminists will highlight an intersectional form of

liberation that must occur. Civil rights leader and community organizer Fannie Lou Hamer notes that “nobody’s free until we are all free” (Hamer 1971). Scholars also note that liberation can occur in varying magnitudes for brief pockets of time. Aaron Robertson highlights the work of Saidiya Hartman, and how her theorization of resistance consists of “small acts of subversion, turning against Victorian morality... as futile as it was and as little as it would change the Slave/Human paradigm, there was still something attractive about it, something that got them through the day” (Robertson 2021). These local-level acts differ from other conceptualizations of antiblackness. Wilderson critiques these small acts of subversion, questioning the compensatory claims, and states:

What we have is people writing about, in the main, how Black people made little incursions, found happiness, found ways of being among each other, and then they make a move toward shaming Black youth for wanting to burn everything down or saying that we can make it if we just persevere or saying we’ll get to heaven without realizing that all those compensatory statements are also symptoms of a suffering. Symptoms of a mind taking in a suffering that is too big to contemplate. (Robertson 2021)

Afropessimism is a revolutionary theory, not a reformist one. Reform would look to find the instances of harm and seek redress. Instead, Afropessimism is “a revolutionary theory is grounded in the assumptive logic that the world itself is unethical and that no amount of reform will improve life for the subject of redress” (Wilderson 2021, 38). Wilderson (2021) contends that while it may be possible to imagine a world that is absent of patriarchy and an economy void of capitalism, that it is epistemologically impossible to imagine a world absent of humanism, and the relationality it requires (38). This theorization allows scholars to shift their research from a notion of resistance to one that considers what is needed to overthrow this current societal paradigm through whatever means necessary.

Regardless of the conceptualizations of liberation, these theorizations of antiblackness highlight that this current societal paradigm kills Black people physically and psychically. These

theorizations also highlight how the convergence of the transatlantic slave trade and modernity created a new global paradigm. Various scholars have used antiblackness to guide their work in various directions, each one beckons readers to invite change. In the following section of this chapter, I explore scholarship in education that focuses on antiblackness to consider the various approaches scholars have taken to discuss these manifestations.

Antiblackness Scholarship in Education

Michael Dumas' foundational paper (2016) conceptualizes how theorizations of antiblackness can be applied in education. Dumas highlights the work of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Orlando Patterson, and Frank Wilderson to operationalize antiblackness in educational critical race scholarship. He asserts that scholars must grapple with the cultural disregard and disgust towards blackness in policy and discourse. Dancy, Edwards, and Davis (2018) heed Dumas' call and critique historically white universities. Their work highlights multiple forms of antiblackness in academia.

Dancy et al. contend that antiblackness is reproduced in academia through two institutional arrangements "the extraction of labor from the Black body without engaging the body as a laborer, but as property, and the mechanisms (e.g., stereotypical narratives) that institutions use to police, control, imprison, and kill" (2018, 180). They write that the Black body has been used for labor without any attempt to humanize it throughout history. This process begins with Black bodies building the institutions they will never attend and continues through extreme labor expectation on Black faculty. Further, the authors believe that "Black male bodies on college campuses are seen as primarily generators of income and properties of entertainment ... The testimonies of Black male non-student-athletes attest to the academy's rejection of Black men as intellectual and unwelcome in the classroom" (Dancy et al. 2018, 184). The mechanisms

used to police, imprison, and kill are more endemic. The scholars note that various forms of physical (through police violence and hazing) and psychic (in the form of microaggressions) violence regularly occur on historically white campuses. Further, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) continue to face defunding, limiting options for Black people.

Warren and Coles (2020) similarly reflect on the role antiblackness plays in K-12 schooling. Warren and Coles identify three forms of antiblack assault that regularly occur within school settings. They first identify interpersonal assaults that occur when Black children interact with their peers, teachers, and staff. Interpersonal assaults can range from microaggressive comments to violent physical altercations. The second form of assault they highlight is environmental, through lower-quality facilities with outdated materials and unsafe learning environments. The final manifestation mentioned is curricular assault, which occurs through materials that erase the contributions and achievements of Black people while, instead, focusing on negative depictions of Black life. The work of these scholars, and others, provide an essential look into the systemic nature of antiblackness that would otherwise go unnoticed.

As mentioned earlier, Michael Dumas and kihana ross (2016) provide three framing ideals for BlackCrit. There is a wave of recent scholarship that focuses on their third framing of Black liberatory fantasy. The Warren and Coles (2020) paper mentioned earlier begins with a focus on antiblackness but shifts to the possibility of Black Education Spaces (BES). They imagine BES as an intersection between physical locations that are safe for Black children (counterspaces), and unbound moments in time that foster possibility and resistance (fugitivity). BES have three elements: self-determination, self-actualization, and self-efficacy. These elements are needed to allow space for healing and imagining a way out of antiblackness. Coles (2021) continues to engage in scholarship that focuses on possibility and Black liberatory

fantasies. He states that “[his] aim in moving past damage, is to uncover how the joy of Black youth boldly exists in the face of antiblackness; antiblackness is not an extinguisher to joy and other forms of Black liberatory existences” (Coles 2021, 4). He contends that a pointed critique of antiblackness allowed his participants to explore Black desire and participate in *youthtopias* that raise critical consciousness in alternative ways and encourages students to challenge antiblackness and other intersecting forms of oppression. In the following section I review music education scholarship that considers antiblackness. I also consider my experiences and positionality in the research as a queer Afro-Latiné person.

Antiblackness in Music Education

There is limited scholarship that specifically focuses on antiblackness in music education. The scholarship of Joyce McCall (2021) is foundational in capturing slights and assaults Black folks must navigate in music education spaces. I specifically consider McCall’s focus on CRT (2021) and position it as a precursor to work such as Hamilton’s (2021) and Regus’ (2022). Their scholarship uses Dumas’ (2016) theorizations of antiblackness and BlackCrit (Dumas & ross 2016). I specifically engage in their scholarship to highlight what I identify as the most salient aspects of antiblackness scholarship in music education research. Further, I consider my own experiences as an Afro-Latiné person throughout to situate myself in the dissertation.

Antiblackness has been predominately utilized to analyze collegiate music education spaces, but the implications are far-reaching. McCall (2021) highlights the “peculiar sensation” of being Black in a predominately white institution (PWI). Specifically, she chronicles the experiences of four Black men that navigate a transition from a historically Black college or university (HBCU) into PWIs. McCall uses Du Bois’ (1903/2003) conceptualization of double-consciousness to reflect on their experiences. She shares their experiences through storytelling,

which is emblematic of CRT and a counterhegemonic approach to sharing generally unheard narratives. This study ultimately reveals that “when compared to their HBCU experiences, African Americans negotiate a starkly different campus terrain and climate at PWIs. Some experiences include but are not limited to racism, microaggressions, exploitation, and isolation” (McCall 2021, 9). McCall similarly speculates “that most African Americans begin negotiating ‘a peculiar sensation’ in their childhood” (2021, 26). I personally experienced many of these slights in music classrooms in my youth, specifically this sense of exploitation and isolation.

Music education curriculum has also been considered through an antiblack perspective. Darren Hamilton’s (2021) work uses Dumas’ (2016) theorizations on antiblackness and CRT to make the case for culturally responsive pedagogy. But first, he identifies areas where antiblackness can manifest in curriculum without intervention. Hamilton (2021) focuses on a lack of Black culture and history, a lack of Black educators, and the impact of the socio-economic status of racialized groups. I have similarly argued that music education curricula serve as a site of antiblack assault on Black children (Sánchez-Gatt 2023). Hamilton ultimately demonstrates how music education curricula reflect a disregard for Black students by ignoring relevant ways of consuming and engaging in culturally relevant music making and, instead, forces Black students to assimilate whiteness to belong.

The use of BlackCrit in music education scholarship is particularly limited. Regus’ (2022) work specifically points to a complexity of antiblackness that is important to consider. Her dissertation focuses on the racialized experiences of Afro-Latiné high school students. Her work points to a triple consciousness and how “one ever feels his three-ness, -- a Latin@, a Negro, an American...” (Román & Flores 2010, 15 as cited in Regus 2022). Regus simultaneously demonstrates the robustness of BlackCrit and its limitations. Her dissertation

notes that it is important to consider how race and culture are distinct and that “scholars continuously fail to miss that AfroLatinas/os/xs belong to both ethnoracial groups. For example, Haywood (2017) finds AfroLatina/o/x college students experience intragroup marginalization due to colorism within the Latina/o/x community” (2022, 7). These absences are easier to identify because BlackCrit allows for a deeper look at antiblackness. All is laid bare, and the realization is that antiblackness is not just a white supremacy issue, it comes from all non-Black groups. Inversely, Regus highlights that BlackCrit is an insufficient framework for Afro-Latiné students and their cultural upbringing.

Regus’ (2022) scholarship functions as a critique and extension of BlackCrit. She discusses instances where Afro-Latiné students may feel compelled to align with one group or the other, instead of living in both spaces. This is an experience I can empathize with. I now feel that my music education was predatory in nature. I was a child that had difficulty aligning with Black, white, and Latiné culture. I had no real representation of my Afro-Boricua⁷ identity in school, but I was praised when I upheld a classical Eurocentric form of whiteness in my music classes. I felt no other form of affirmation, which compelled me to align to whiteness in my youth. My experiences and those shared in Regus’ dissertation demonstrate the need for further scholarship into antiblackness that is sufficiently nuanced to consider the intersections of blackness with culture, gender, sexuality, ability, and socioeconomic standing. A nuanced and intersectional analysis that utilizes BlackCrit will further allow me to consider the experiences of the multiply-minoritized participants in this dissertation. This analysis will ultimately be more robust as a result of its specificity.

⁷ Now called Puerto Rico, the Indigenous Taíno called the island Borikén. Term Boricua refers to people that are descendants or were born on the island.

Research Questions and Goals

My assertion that music education participates in the un/intentional harming of Black children is guided by the aforementioned scholarship in antiblackness. I further contend that the uncritical operationalizing of social justice is often informed through an approach to multiculturalism that exists upon a foundation of antiblackness. Further, this scholarship compels me to believe that antiblackness in music education is so insidious that it infiltrates the curriculum, instruction, and interpersonal interactions in music rooms. Thus, the following research questions guide this dissertation:

4. How do Black youth see [their] culture reflected in music education?
5. How do Black youth navigate their place in music education?
6. How do Black youth re/imagine a music education that celebrates and lifts their identities?

These research questions ultimately guide my Endarkened fabulation and may serve as the foundation for a body of new scholarship. My first research question was inspired by Dumas and ross' (2016) first framing of BlackCrit, that antiblackness is endemic. Dumas and ross (2016) assert that BlackCrit is needed to understand "how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained" (417). The focus on antiblack racism is currently under-theorized. This lack of theorizing allows space for antiblackness to manifest, even in social justice efforts. The Combahee River collective, a Black feminist lesbian organization, asserts that:

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men. There is also undeniably a personal genesis

for Black Feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. (Khanmalek 2020)

I want to expose harm and metaphorical and epistemological deaths that occur through formalized music instruction. It is my goal that this dissertation provide greater clarity to allow myself and future scholars to identify antiblackness with greater facility.

I choose to focus on the various ways Black children resist antiblackness in schools and music classrooms to highlight their finesse and brilliance. Black people have always exhibited a quick wit and tenacity to resist oppressive structures; youth are no different. Bernal (2002) has noted how children are holders and creators of knowledge. Another goal of this dissertation is to create a platform for Black children to share the support they need in navigating these antiblack environments. Most of the solutions and interventions that occur in music education research come from the perspectives of white middle-class academics. I believe that listening to, and trusting, the experiences of Black children can provide valuable insight regarding how to best support them currently.

Bettina Love (2016) encourages Black and Brown folks to engage in freedom dreaming. Freedom dreaming is a radical act where people in oppressed communities focus on more than just resisting oppression and imagine a future of endless possibility. This act encourages children in educational spaces to dream and work towards positive change in their realities. A third goal of this dissertation is to allow portions of these freedom dreams to inform a re/imagining of the music classroom. This re/imagining will have the potential to shape future music classrooms and research. My own journey as a scholar-activist has opened my eyes to a world of possibility in music education. My theorizations of antiblackness and reflections of Eurocentric music practices will highlight the harm music education has inadvertently perpetuated. Further, engaging in this philosophically-guided qualitative inquiry will help me develop a foundation of

scholarship that explores the curricular and pedagogical implications of centering and affirming racially and culturally marginalized students.

Methodological Summary

I will provide a comprehensive overview of the design of this inquiry in Chapter 3 but will briefly overview elements of this design. I utilize a methodology I describe as Endarkened fabulation to explore the themes and stories I explore with the participants of this study. I engage in Kitchen table talks (Wynter-Hoyte et al. 2020), to better understand the lives of the participants. Endarkened fabulation is situated in an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (Dillard 2000) and has similar methodological underpinnings as Endarkened Storywork (Toliver 2021) and Critical Fabulation (Hartman 2008). Endarkened storywork was coined by S.R. Toliver “as a new possibility for qualitative research, one that hinges on Black storytelling traditions and honors alternative ways of thinking about, doing, and writing scholarship” (2023, xv). I utilize my methodology because I will be able to engage data collection and representation methods that “honor the storied traditions of Black people” (Toliver 2021, xv). I grew up hearing my aunts and uncles regularly take the stage during family holidays to share their stories, each more ridiculous than the one preceding it. These stories served as opportunities for bonding, laughter, and learning. Toliver (2021) similarly focuses on the opportunities that exist within stories and developed this methodology through “the confluence of Endarkened feminist epistemologies (Dillard, 2000), Indigenous storywork (ISW) (Archibald, 2008), and Afrofuturism (Womack, 2013), [Endarkened storytelling] allows space for storytelling through fiction, honoring the ways of “griots who were the scholars of their African nations” (2021, xv). Hartman’s (2008) work illuminates the violence that occurs in archival methods, something that I argue occurs through empirical research methods. This methodology will allow me to share aspects of participants’

and my own experiences in music education in a manner that honors and protects their identities and stories. Further, I contend that the narratives produced through Endarkened fabulation will serve as a valuable foundation for considering the future of music education philosophically.

Chapter Summary and Dissertation Overview

I have utilized this opening chapter to briefly contextualize my positionality, relevant scholarship, philosophical groundings, research questions, and methodology. I began by situating my positionality and lived experience into the dissertation. I connected my experiences to an insidious and endemic antiblackness that various scholars have contended with through race-based theoretical frameworks. I then situated the location of the dissertation and the current political landscape. I explored scholarship that contends with manifestations of antiblackness before sharing the research questions and goals of this dissertation. I then concluded with a brief methodological summary of philosophical Endarkened fabulation.

I provide a comprehensive review of literature that explores the philosophical groundings of this study and overarching concepts in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 consists of a review of the methodology and data collection methods utilized for the study. In Chapters 4 through 7, I construct a narrative exploration of antiblackness in music classrooms, how antiblackness is navigated, and a re/imagining of music classrooms. I provide an analysis of the narrative and offer possible implications and concluding remarks in chapter 8.

CHAPTER 2

Overview

In this chapter I introduce various theoretical frameworks and their origins. I begin with an introduction to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its origins in legal scholarship. I trace these origins to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of this scholarship and its longstanding presence. I then briefly overview the use of CRT in education research and the various offshoots that developed from it, including Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). BlackCrit originated as an extension of CRT, focusing on the analysis of antiblackness. I later provide an overview of necropolitics. I consider the role necropolitics can have in identifying epistemological forms of death in classroom spaces. I consider this aspect of necropolitics vital in developing how the field of education explores harm in schooling. I then review extant literature related to whiteness and racism in music education research to showcase the current lack and need for theories that contend with antiblackness and harm specifically. I then outline the defining features and potential uses for BlackCrit and necropolitics before considering the interplay between them. I argue for the implementation of BlackCrit and necropolitics as a bifocal lens that allows me to provide a clearer reflection of the experiences of the participants in this study. Their multiply-marginalized identities are often subsumed into one group or another, and I aim to resist this potential. I ultimately argue that a bifocal approach to this dissertation will provide a robust intersectional analysis that would not be otherwise possible.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory originated in the legal field in the late 1970s. The scholars that founded CRT were the first people of color at predominately white law schools, during the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and feminist movements (Crenshaw et al. 1995). The CLS

movement was comprised of white neo-Marxist intellectuals (Brown & Jackson 2013). CLS scholars questioned the neutrality of law, and the role power plays in its creation and enforcement. Brown and Jackson note that “The first meeting of CRT emerged out of a sense that, while CLS had developed some very significant insights about how the legal process worked, the movement did not adequately address the struggles of people of color, particularly blacks” (2013, 13). CRT scholars aimed to center race as an overarching factor in these proceedings. Scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw further pointed out a need for an intersectional analysis because the racial and gendered ontologies of women of color were multiply marginalized (Crenshaw 2019). To say it differently, Crenshaw highlighted that women of color were in the margins in feminist movements, and that the needs of women were in the margins of racial equality movements. CRT is interdisciplinary in nature, using influences from the CLS and feminist movements, with literary elements as well.

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate introduced CRT in education in 1995. Educational scholars quickly began contributing to the field and expanding CRT. The following tenets mark the groundings of CRT in education: a) racism as normal and not aberrant, b) interest convergence (progress for people of color only occurs when the white hegemony benefits), c) race as a social construct, d) the need for intersectional analyses, and e) the need for voice or counternarrative (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). In the following paragraphs I consider how CRT converges with antiblackness scholarship, and how the divergences led to the formation of Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit).

Relationship with Antiracism

Convergences

CRT and antiracism scholarship converge on several axioms. Both groups align in acknowledging the role race has played in the life outcomes of Black people (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Dumas & ross 2016). Both areas of scholarship highlight the role race has in determining other outcomes, such as health, safety, and educational attainment. Similarly, CRT and antiracism scholarship provide critiques of liberalism. Derrick Bell highlights how various systems and structures can be used to weaponize liberalism against Black people in his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (2018). Bell highlights another theory through this book and other works: racial realism. He states that “in spite of dramatic civil rights movements and periodic victories in the legislatures, black Americans by no means are equal to whites. Racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal” (Bell 1992, 363). This view of the permanence of racism aligns with Afropessimism and other schools of thought that consider antiracism (Wilderson 2020; Farley 2021; Mills 2021).

Divergences

Ultimately, CRT diverges from antiracism scholarship on several points. CRT is best conceptualized as a reformist approach (Wilderson 2020), because it aims to critique and subvert current systems, but does not actively work towards a way out of these. As such, CRT highlights the inequality of systems, but is only able to ameliorate disparity, not end it (Wilderson 2020). This approach provides a reprieve, but ultimately does not eradicate oppression. Antiracism scholars focus on liberation, with the ultimate goal of revolution (Dumas 2016; Dumas & ross 2016; Wilderson 2020). CRT also differs from antiracism scholarship because it lacks racial specificity. This lack of specificity makes CRT a versatile tool, but it also weakens its ability to

capture specific forms of marginalization and suffering. Various educational scholars have developed and nuanced CRT to remedy this lack through LatCrit (Latiné) (Bernal 2002), DisCrit (Disabilities) (Annamma et al. 2018), TribalCrit (Indigenous) (Brayboy 2005), and BlackCrit among others.

Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit)

Dumas and ross (2016) theorized Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) as an offshoot of CRT that engages with antiblackness with increased specificity. BlackCrit utilizes the same tenets as CRT but provides three additional framing ideals. First, BlackCrit highlights the endemic nature of antiblackness. Dumas and ross (2016) use the work of Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Orlando Patterson to highlight the aspects of Black suffering that are unique from what non-Black groups experience. Second, BlackCrit provides a critique of the neoliberal-multicultural imagination. The authors are specific that while they are not opposed to coalitions and do not condone racial separatism, they “want to recognize that the trouble with (liberal and neoliberal) multiculturalism and diversity, both in ideology and practice, is that they are often positioned against the lives of Black people” (Dumas & ross 2016, 340). The final framing of BlackCrit allows and invites space for Black liberatory fantasy and a resistance to revisionist history. This final framing is a brilliant synthesis of antiblackness scholarship, and the tensions they hold regarding liberation. As mentioned earlier, some Antiblackness scholars imagine liberation at various scales, while others, such as Wilderson (2020), believe that liberation cannot happen within this paradigm. Dumas and ross (2016) invite the fantasy of this paradigm shift by saying “BlackCrit should also make space for the notion of chants becoming battle cries, tears becoming stones in clenched fists, and the hand-written signs machine guns—for the idea that the blood of whiteness must flow in the streets” (431). It is important to

highlight the nuance in their words. The authors specifically contend with whiteness, and not white people. Whiteness is constructed and maintained through a process of exclusion and negation. To see the blood of whiteness flow would be to see the dismantling of the very systems that enforce antiblackness. These fantasies allow people to imagine what a new episteme could be in a fantastic new world of possibility. In the following section I introduce necropolitics, a framework I use to better situate harm and its significance.

Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe (2003) theorized necropolitics to account for how societies utilize power to control and manage life, and the seemingly disposable nature of certain people. Necropolitics is an extension of Foucault's theorization of biopolitics. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* Foucault (1984) notes that traditional sovereign power maintained its authority through the threat of death. In other words, a king could sentence one of his subjects to death. Foucault (1984) then notes a biopolitical turn where "now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its domination; death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most 'private'" (261). Biopolitics refers to the way States use power to determine who lives "or disallow [life] to the point of death" (Foucault 1984, 261). These powers manifest through access to healthcare, food access, housing, and other systems and structures. While biopower focuses on who must live and who may die, a necropolitical analysis focuses on who may live and who must die (Gržinić 2012). Mbembe interrogates biopolitics:

But under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer? Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of

resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? (2003, 12)

These questions compelled Mbembe to develop necropolitics. Mbembe's theorization is, in a sense, a synthesis and extension of the works of Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault.

Agamben's (1998) *Homo Sacer* interrogates the notion of sovereignty and State, something he states Foucault does not adequately interrogate, and explores the notions of bare life and the State's ability to determine which lives are expendable. Agamben's (1998) analysis of Nazi concentration camps, through bare life, offered an insight into the way people can be divested of political State and be stripped of humanity and reduced to bare life, or "zoē, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings" (Agamben 1998, 9). These theorizations were extended in necropolitics to analyze the way biopolitics not only allows death *but necessitates and operationalizes it* (Mbembe 2003). Necropolitics continue to manifest and can be outlined through the following distinctive features: State sovereignty over life and death, states of exception, spatialized and socialized segregation, necropower, dehumanizing processes, and targeted violence (Mbembe 2003; Mbembe 2019; Varga et al. 2023). The following section briefly explores these features and the influence of the works of Foucault and Agamben.

Distinguishing Features

Necropolitics first identifies the State's sovereign power over life and death (Mbembe 2003). Foucault (1984) traces the roots of sovereignty, claiming that "it derived no doubt from the ancient patria potestas that granted the father of the Roman family the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away" (258). Sovereign rulers had the right to sentence their subjects to death, for example. This power became something that was reserved for the defense of the sovereign and their survival. Western modernity, however, led to a shift in what this defense would look like. Single monarchs became

States, and wars and conquests would be waged to defend the State. States were then tasked with sustaining their subjects who would, in turn, benefit and protect the State. Foucault (1984) offers that “as soon as power gave itself the function of administering life, its reason for being and the logic of its exercise-and not the awakening of humanitarian feelings-made it more and more difficult to apply the death penalty” (260). This turn is biopolitical, however, Mbembe (2003) reminds us that “the calculus of life passes through the death of the Other” (18). Giroux highlights the shift towards necropolitics in *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* and asserts:

As states no longer rely on such domestic populations for many forms of labor, a new politics of disposability now governs American domestic and foreign policy. Within this discourse, those citizens and residents deemed unproductive (the poor, weak, and racially marginalized) are regarded as useless and therefore expendable. This is a politics in which entire populations are considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and as such are consigned to fend for themselves. (2008, 159)

Agamben (1998) highlights how sovereign powers have the right to invoke a state of exception, a reinterpretation of what is legal and ethical. This reinterpretation of the ethical and legal can manifest through the suspension of laws or the imposition of states of emergency. Agamben (1998) describes how the atrocities of the Holocaust were carried out within a state of exception that transcends the mere suspension of judicial law; millions of Jewish people in concentration camps existed outside of the law, forced to expose their bare life, to be executed at will. These concentration camps were, however, deemed legal under this state of exception. Agamben used Carl Schmitt’s theorization of the state of exception and demonstrated how it can be normalized by State powers. Police-enforced curfews following the protests over George Floyd’s murder is just one example that provides insight into how normalized states of exception are in contemporary society (Aleem 2020). While discussions of the state of exception are aligned with biopolitics it is important to note that the necropolitical focus looks at the infliction of death and violence specifically.

The Normalization of Violence and Death

Violence is normalized within a state of exception, including violence to the point of death. In *Between the World and the Urban Classroom*, Venus Evans-Winters (2017) discusses the normalization of violence upon Black bodies stating “the viewing of the dead body over and over again across various mediums and time serves to (a) desensitize the populous to the killing of Black bodies, (b) cause fear of the oppressed to those wielding the power, and (c) decrease the fears of the white populous of the threatening Black man or woman” (27).

This normalization occurs on local and global scales, with the death of countless Black and Brown people in the Middle East being considered “collateral damage” (Verghese 2021) such as the ongoing genocide of Palestinian people in Gaza. The instrumentalization of death can be best described as necropower “[that] account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons” (Mbembe 2019, 92). These forms of violence lead to death, though not immediately. Berlant (2007) uses the term slow death to describe “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (754). Nixon (2011) also invites the consideration of slow violence, caused by climate change or unlivable environments.

Necropolitics functions through various methods of segregation that occur spatially and socially. Mbembe (2019) offers insight through colonial occupation, and the various mechanisms that prevented Indigenous and Black people from escaping their realities. This segregation may be overt and sustained through prisons, concentration camps, or ghettos. Segregation may be more insidious, however, and manifest through social exclusion based on various identity markers. Mbembe (2019) goes into further detail:

I have put forward the notion of necropolitics, or necropower, to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead. (92)

Here, we are introduced to two new terms to consider, death-worlds and living dead. I learned these concepts through my parents' experiences navigating life as a Cuban immigrant and an Afro-Latina. My dad, as a Cuban immigrant, never acquired the means to get a job with a steady income and healthcare. His prior work experience did not carry the same impact in the United States. Further, the only work available regularly exposed him to dangerous chemicals and harm; harm that contributed to his early-onset dementia. Similarly, my mother's identity as a Black woman meant that she was born into the afterlife of slavery, a term coined by Saidiya Hartman (2008) to describe "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6). This afterlife is akin to Mbembe's (2019) living dead, existing as something disposable. I saw her be treated as an inconvenience in several doctor's offices.

Disposability of the Other

Ultimately, necropolitics highlights the dehumanization of some groups, and their disposability. Wozolek (2023) offers that "Mbembe's argument for what he calls necropolitics speaks to an absence in Foucault's understandings about how everyday biopolitics can whittle away at what it means to be human" (10). Mbembe's (2009) notion of the living dead also serves us here to explore the precarious existence of marginalized groups. Further, this concept of the living dead is being explored within queer studies. Quinan (2018) highlights how the work of Jasbir K. Puar "made significant inroads into this now-growing field of queer necropolitics, interrogating which queer lives can reproduce life and which are left to die or are actively

targeted for killing” (272). Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco have further explored queer necropolitics in their eponymous book. Their work is valuable because “thinking through necropolitics on the terrain of queer critique brings into view everyday death worlds, from the perhaps more expected sites of death making (such as war, torture or imperial invasion) to the ordinary and completely normalized violence of the market” (Haritaworn et al. 2014, 2). These contemporary extensions of necropolitics are promising because they provide new analytical lenses to view the everyday experiences of subaltern populations and the normalized terror and death they navigate daily, such as in classroom spaces. This shift in focus is crucial for this dissertation because music classrooms often incorporate music from other cultures without proper contextualization. I contend that this lack of contextualization leads to an epistemological death that requires a necropolitical framing to truly understand.

Extant and Relevant Music Education Literature

There is a dearth of scholarship in music education that utilizes BlackCrit or necropolitical framings. I navigate this lacuna through the review of scholarship that considers racism and white supremacy in music education. I focus on both university and K-12 contexts because they are inextricably linked, with the majority of music educators receiving their training and certifications through university programs. I begin by exploring scholarship related to various aspects of music teaching in university and K-12 contexts, with focus given to the relationship between the two. I ultimately consider the additional benefit of utilizing BlackCrit and necropolitical framings.

The Eurocentricity of (University) Music Education

Kajikawa (2019) has argued that university music programs often rely on music from other cultures to uphold hegemonic music practices. He describes how university music

programs require a large amount of resources to support classical music. Many music contexts utilize extractive methods that include musics from other cultures as a means to preserve classical music, a sort of possessive investment. He goes on to clarify that he engages with the word “classical” to describe the various ensembles, courses, and structures that uphold white Eurocentric art music. Kajikawa (2019) notes that world music classes and ethnomusicology courses often have high enrollments and serve to subsidize the numerous chamber ensembles and private lessons needed to maintain a music program.

This possessive investment not only incurs high monetary costs, but its cost includes the marginalization or assimilation of music from other cultures (Baraka 2010). Many university jazz programs serve as such an example, where emphasis is placed on music literacy and sightreading (Kajikawa 2019), with the aurally dominant idiom of jazz being minimized, a pattern that echoes the overarching white-washing of jazz in contemporary contexts (Baraka 2010). This extractive nature not only serves as a form of colonialism, it upholds white supremacy. K-12 music classrooms engage in a similar investment of classical music by using culturally diverse music as an enticing entry into “serious” classical music, a form of “bait and switch” (Hess 2015a). This hierarchical relationship continues into university spaces and is further enforced by the optional nature of world music ensembles at many universities while classical ensembles are still required (Kajikawa 2019). This forced compliance then creates an environment that is difficult for racially-marginalized people to navigate if they have no experience in the modality and lack support (Draves & Vargas 2021).

In the following section I explore literature that explicates how racism and, specifically, white supremacy manifests in music programs through auditions, music theory, and musical ensembles. There are other structures that uphold white supremacy, but I focus on the following

because they represent structures that all music students and music educators navigate both in university and K-12 contexts.

Auditions and Admissions

Scholars have noted the ways white supremacy infiltrates audition and admission policies. Koza (2008) argues that university music auditions exclude people through a construction of musical difference. Music auditions tend to be more successful when performers choose musics codified as white describing the phenomenon as “listening for whiteness.” Kajikawa (2019) similarly asserts that “the legacy of white supremacy plays a role in restricting access to colleges and universities by determining who is qualified to be there, both as students and as teachers. In this way, specialization in classical music weds schools to the service of elite interests and limits its potential to serve an antiracist agenda.” (157). Koza (2008) further highlights that this form of exclusion does not need to be explicitly expressed to occur. She notes that whiteness manifests through audition repertoire requirements such as “two art songs to be sung by memory. (Do not audition with jazz, pop, rock, folk or other musical theatre repertoire.)” (Koza 2008 148). These requirements, she further argues, are not taught in K-12 classrooms meaning that the responsibility is on the caregiver to seek that instruction. Koza (2008) clarifies that “only one musical language” (148), or epistemology, is permitted. These epistemologies favor a high caliber of classical music that is nearly impossible to achieve without private instruction, further marginalizing students that are not trained in these styles. Koza (2008) notes that the limited number of studio placements and competitive scholarship programs have pushed youth to perform at exceedingly high levels. These levels can rarely be attained without the resources to receive individual instruction. Koza (2008) additionally highlights how these disparities harm racially marginalized students and ultimately suggests that adjudicating faculty

needs to learn to actively listen for whiteness, as opposed to the passive listening that occurs, to be able to intervene.

K-12 music education is affected by the audition and admissions process of university programs. Elpus (2015) found that over 86% of teacher licensure candidates were white in a sample of over 20,000 participants from 2007 through 2012. DeLorenzo (2012) has noted that Black and Brown students are more likely to develop interest in music classes if there are people who look like them. Thornton (2018) further illuminates the experiences Black university students may have if they are able to navigate the audition requirements and are accepted into the program. He considers how the barriers present in the audition process and subsequent oppressive environments dissuade Black educators from matriculating. Thornton (2018) ultimately argues that these barriers along with low expectations for Black students deter them from continuing.

Music Theory and Literacy

Scholars identified an inextricable link between music theory and Eurocentrism (Ewell 2020). The foundations of music theory are tied to modernity and share a link to the colonial project. Attas (2019) claims that “classical music remains at its centre [music theory]. Furthermore, the epistemological and methodological orientation of the discipline, its ‘ways of knowing and doing,’ are firmly rooted in a European orientation” (129). Walker (2020) asserts that the tonal harmonic principles that define Western music were defined within the contexts of modernity. They further contend that “the binary of home and away, or in tonal harmony, the binary of tonic and dominant, maps onto the equivalent and arguably more powerful binary of ‘self’ and ‘other’” (Walker 2020, 9). This statement does not denote a strict cause and effect narrative; however, it must be acknowledged that the rationales behind global conquest did not

exist in a vacuum. Further, it is important to highlight that this narrative of “self” and “other” ultimately functions as a discursive practice that, when paired with Western notions of racial hierarchies (Mills 1997), reifies white supremacy.

Ewell (2020) engages with whiteness directly and argues that music theory has a white racial framing. He states that this white racial framing is a system of ill-conceived rationalizations and justifications that are meant to preserve and obfuscate the centrality of white supremacy. This white racial framing, it is worth noting, is emblematic of the Sartrean (1943) bad faith mentioned in Chapter 1. Ewell (2020) analyzes his assertion through the legacy of Heinrich Schenker and his foundational presence in music theory. Ewell (2020) uses Schenker’s own writings to demonstrate how Schenker believed in white, and specifically, German supremacy. Schenker’s writings denigrates non-white racial groups while asserting the genius of Germanic composers. Ewell (2020) then juxtaposes the conceptualization of a white racial frame, and how other theorists have tried to decouple Schenker’s perceptions of a racialized hierarchy and music theory, something Ewell argues Schenker himself would not want done. This framing is present in all aspects of music theory, from the endemic whiteness of the composers and professors, to the inclusion in blackface minstrel songs from Stephen Foster in nearly every music theory textbook.⁸ This racial framing, Ewell contends, ultimately makes the social justice efforts the music theory field has initiated ineffective. He states that “‘diversity’ is often far removed from the problems of the white racial frame—in fact, diversity obfuscates the issues, in either a subconscious or, frankly, a conscious fashion, such that the white frame survives and thrives” (Ewell 2020, 5.2). Ewell ultimately contends that music theory will not improve or

⁸ The inclusion of minstrel songs in textbooks is present in K-12 music education as well. Please refer to Gustafson (2009) for further insight.

move away from its white supremacist underpinnings unless there is a deframing of whiteness and a reframing of antiracist practices.

Discourse and analysis surrounding music made by Black people has historically been framed by deficit-thinking, affecting the analysis and reception of the music (Ewell 2020). Robinson and Hendricks (2018) highlight how music with African influences has been described as simple, primitive, violent, and even animalistic in classroom contexts. Their chapter specifically chronicles the experiences of a Black man needing to navigate various music education contexts and the treatment he receives. The discourse surrounding hip-hop and rap music serves as another example of these practices (Crenshaw 1991). Crenshaw (1991) highlights how Black rap artists, specifically Black women, are accused of being overtly sexual and violent to a higher degree than white artists whose music covers similar themes. Furthermore, when Black artforms like hip-hop and jazz are introduced in classrooms the curriculum is largely void of the historical and political implications that shaped it in the first place (Hess 2018).

The supremacy of Western musical notation

Music classrooms largely favor musical Western notational literacy (Hess 2021b) and scholars have critiqued this supremacy. Black cultural and musical traditions in the United States have largely been maintained through oral transmission throughout history (Hamlet 2011). While the oral transmission of music can create opportunities for complex rhythms and unique timbres, translating these musics into notated forms removes aspects of its complexity. Hess (2021b) writes that “the use of Western standard notation and the emphasis on notational literacy in music education further delimits the musics studied to musics that can be notated readily or restricts the expression of musics to what can be easily notated. Music, for example, that would require

double dots or 32nd notes in notation may be omitted or simplified, reducing its complexity” (27). The lack of criticality in dissemination and consumption of non-hegemonic musics in classrooms functions as a colonial mechanism in the form of musical tourism that does not fully comprehend what it consumes.

Music History

Scholars have clarified the implicit focus on white Eurocentric music in music history. Margaret Walker (2020) highlights several unexamined facets of collegiate music history. Walker notes that music historians rarely explore the impact colonialism played on the rapid growth and development of Western music⁹. As mentioned earlier in this paper, classical music “is framed by early modernity and colonialism on one end (c. 1600) and the institutionalization of a teleological narrative assuming European musical superiority on the other (c. 1900)” (Walker 2020, 13). This framing is important because power dynamics inform and are reinforced through discourse and socialization. Narratives of home and away, tonic and dominant, and simple and complex dominate the language used in music history classrooms. Walker (2020) asserts:

As long as the message that the legacy of Europe and thus Western Art Music remains comparatively “great” and “distinctive” is not examined and unpacked from its colonial baggage, its barely concealed message that European people are probably superior to other peoples will continue. (14)

It is also worth noting that general titles such as “music history” give primacy to the music of white composers and makes the contributions of people of color secondary, if they are even considered. The use of these terms to refer to white classical music gives sole valorization to that artform. Similarly, Walker (2020) interrogates the term “American music” as a revisionist one that does not account for the music of Indigenous people. Similarly, many of the origins of

⁹ It is worth noting that one of the many structures that are inextricably linked to colonialism is racism, antiblackness specifically. The enslavement of Black people was foundational to the creation of the United States and present-day capitalism (Mills 2021).

popular music in the United States is derivative of the contributions of Diasporic Africans and emblematic of Black culture (Maultsby 2016). But that these origins are regularly dismissed.

Ensembles

Researchers have identified the primacy of Eurocentric ensembles in university and secondary contexts (Hess 2023; Kajikawa 2019). This supremacy is also mirrored by the predominately white student demographic that begins in secondary contexts when music becomes an elective. Elpus and Abril (2011) state that “significantly overrepresented among music students, as were students from higher SES backgrounds, native English speakers, students in the highest standardized test score quartiles, children of parents holding advanced postsecondary degrees, and students with GPAs ranging from 3.01 to 4.0” (128). This form of whiteness has been reported to be consistent over time (Elpus & Abril 2019). These spaces also have various opportunities for epistemological harm (Hess 2023). A focus on classical performance standards prevents an institution from fully recognizing the humanity and artistry of other cultures. This approach towards centering European performance paradigms can be considered an approach towards maintaining whiteness because it excludes other groups without having to name them (Kajikawa 2019). This process serves to provide a spectrum of examples of white Eurocentric culture, while music from other cultures are situated to the margins. Kajikawa (2019) further highlights how racially coded language is used to describe Black music in a matter that devalues it:

Powell’s 1918 composition *Rhapsodie Nègre* was a symphonic piece that titillated audiences with its depictions of “primal sensuality.” Describing the work as his attempt to portray black characteristics (“Negro” in his terms), he explained that his composition reflected the Negro’s fundamental lack of impulse control. In his words, “Beneath pretenses to culture, no matter how thoroughly they are put on, the Negro remains a genuine primitive.” (159)

These sentiments still manifest through more covert racially coded language that describes Black music in reductive terms.

Contemporary shifts in ensemble variety and class offerings may be promising at first, but Kajikawa (2019) asserts that:

Just as a number of European ethnic groups were initially regarded as inferior and unassimilable but eventually worked their way into the American mainstream, an assemblage of composers and unruly musical styles have become accepted as legitimate in music schools. Over the years, classical music has absorbed a number of foreign elements, such as the twelve-tone music of Arnold Schoenberg and the antiestablishment provocations of John Cage, all the while maintaining a strict boundary separating *serious* art music from allegedly nonserious forms. (166, emphasis added)

This process of absorption solely benefits this ever-changing conceptualization of classical music. University music programs were not designed to teach anything other than white classical music (Kajikawa 2019). There are, however, always exceptions to the rule such as jazz. “[B]ut even jazz has been included on the condition that yet other forms of black music be kept at arm’s length” (Kajikawa 2019, 167). Kajikawa (2019) further notes that the inclusion of these other styles, and expansion of what is considered classical, is often in place to subsidize classical music and keep it alive.

K-12 music classrooms, with specific attention to secondary instrumental ensembles, further reify these dynamics. Mantie (2012) argues that contemporary band pedagogy reconfigures band as a form of music education. This framing centers the primacy of the Eurocentric ensemble paradigm and any facet of music education must be interpreted through a band conceptualization. Hess (2023) considers how this “band-as-music-education” paradigm (Mantie 2012) rewards a focus on Eurocentric epistemologies while simultaneously smothering other musical epistemologies.

Hess (2023) centers the epistemological ramifications of Western large ensemble paradigms. She argues that large ensemble paradigms can manifest a type of cognitive

imperialism that devalues other musical traditions and ways of knowing. Conversely, Hoffman and Carter 's (2013) multiple case study explores the experiences of three Black middle school students enrolled in a composition-based band class. Participants noted feeling seen and included in their composition-based band class, a contrast to their experiences in a traditional large ensemble where the “band director controlled everything” (Hoffman & Carter 2013, 143). The Black youth ultimately felt that they could contribute to the classroom and also receive positive recognition, which differed from their experiences in a traditional ensemble.

Considering the Musical Landscape for Black Youth

Music classrooms overwhelmingly adhere to Eurocentric art ideals in content and instruction. Eurocentric music practices are preserved through repertoire chosen, instrumentation, and pedagogy (Koza 2008; Hess 2021a; Lind & McKoy 2023). Musical ensembles largely focus on white Western music while adhering to Eurocentric art ideals. This focus is further compounded in instrumental ensembles that tend to solely use instruments with European origins. In the early part of the 1970s, the music education field embraced calls for increased diversity in music classrooms (Walter 2018). Much of the discourse surrounding this movement failed to address racism and racial inequality and instead situated European art music as the highest form of music (Bradley 2006). This reality is supported through racially coded language and avoidance to discuss racism in the field (Bradley 2007). These same calls and mission statements are still in place, as music classrooms continue to be whiter than the schools they are situated in (Elpus & Abril 2019).

Limited Musical Futures for Black Youth

Scholars have also made clear that Black youth have limited musical futures. In music classrooms socioeconomic and cultural factors play a role in the environmental assaults Black

children face. Black students in urban schools regularly receive less opportunities to be in music classes and are presented with lower quality education than suburban schools that serve predominantly white populations (Salvador & Allegood 2014). Schools in Black-serving urban communities receive less financial support per student than schools in more affluent suburban communities (DeLorenzo 2012; Elpus & Gris  2019). Policies such as local school control in Chicago public schools allow principals to allocate school funding as they see fit, further exacerbating socioeconomic factors when music classrooms go unfunded (Fitzpatrick 2012). Schools with higher non-white racial demographics are the schools that are most likely to suffer from decreased access to music education or will completely lack a music program altogether (Salvador & Allegood 2014). The inability to access and afford lessons and participate in extracurricular activities also contributes to the lack of equitable access faced by Black students in schools (DeLorenzo 2012). While attempts can be made to make music programs equitable by fundraising or creating booster programs the revenue of such projects still reflects the socioeconomic status of the community (Elpus & Gris  2019). A lack of financial support in high non-White low SES communities implies that Black students in low SES environments do not deserve a quality music program, disenfranchising students from continuing music and becoming music educators (DeLorenzo & Silverman 2016). This pattern contributes to the types of students that choose to pursue music education. Elpus (2015) notes that only seven percent of music teacher licensure candidates are Black, highlighting a lack of representation in the field. This overwhelming whiteness has been experienced and noted by various scholars (Elpus 2015, Thornton 2018). Moreover, the vast majority of professional classical ensembles are predominately white and East Asian (DeLorenzo 2012), leading to a space that is virtually void of Black people. McCall (2018) further highlights how the limited number of Black teachers in

the field are often silenced or told their career could be negatively affected by focusing on racism. These environmental factors create a hostile climate for Black children that either denies access or provides lower-quality instruction.

Critiquing Uncritical Multiculturalism

Scholarship has also addressed and challenged uncritical multiculturalism. Hess (2018) argues that music classrooms often do not engage with multicultural music on its own terms and that this process is a form of epistemological colonization. Hess (2021b) provides additional insight on how uncritical multicultural music exploration and culturally responsive teaching can be inherently cartographic. This form of mapping prevents thoughtful explorations of other cultures because music educators do not deeply engage with the cultural implications, focusing more on the acquisition of as many cultures as possible, and epistemologies that led to the construction of that music. Music educators will attempt to expose students to various musics in a manner that prevents a deep look into the complex nature of a musical tradition. Hess (2021b) further outlines that teachers seeking culturally responsive teaching resources may haphazardly consume the culture and language from groups with the sole goal of classroom implementation. This process often eschews research and caution and does not mirror the culturally responsive (Lind & McKoy 2016/2023), decolonial (Bradley 2012; Rosabal-Coto 2014; Hess 2015), and antiracist (Bradley 2006; Hess 2015b; Tsui et al. 2023) recommendations other music education scholars have made. This cartographic process is similar to a model of musical tourism that has been criticized by prior scholars (Wasiak 2009; Hess 2015).

Hess (2021a) contends that educators may be able to resist the colonial and racist pitfalls of musical tourism and cartography by reorienting from a stance of cultural competence to one of cultural humility. Cultural competence carries an assumption of mastery of the music of several

cultures, which is unrealistic for most educators. Hess (2021a) connects cartographic practices to cultural competence, highlighting the way music educators often reify a self-other binary that lacks a thorough reflection of power constructs and oppression. She then offers cultural humility as an intervention that centers equity and power through fostering critical awareness. She continues to suggest that racialized cartographic practices may be resisted by connecting with communities and inviting students to share their lived experience. This shift allows educators to accept a level of uncertainty and to trust their students. Hess (2021a) ultimately suggests new ways of engaging in mapping that resist a fixed majoritarian narrative through sonic cartography and community mapping. These processes allow students to share their own views of their communities and lives in a way that is not fixed.

Progress Only When it Benefits the Hegemony

Some music education literature also engages with the CRT tenet of interest convergence. This tenet clarifies that progress for racially-minoritized groups only occurs when it benefits the white hegemony (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). Music education has never had a secure space within the United States. Music educators and music organizations often focus on advocacy to solidify music into the curriculum (Elpus 2007). This lack of stability leads to a subject that is always in peril. Hess (2022) noted that in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020 that various programs and organizations engaged in diversity work, but that it was largely performative. This performative "wokeness" was likely an act of interest convergence, the notion that white people will only further the agenda of Black people when it is in their own self-interest (Hess 2022). I contend that many of the diversity efforts music education engages in exist through an act of interest convergence. To say this differently, any diversity efforts that have been made in music education have only occurred because white people benefit from it.

Music educator licensure in the United States continues to be an overwhelmingly white field (Elpus 2015) that primarily upholds a Eurocentric musical canon (Hess 2021b). It is hard to deny that the field of music education is steeped in white supremacy

CRT in Music Education

There is a dearth of scholarship in music education that utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT). Deborah Bradley (2007) asserted the explicit need of CRT in music education to identify the systemic whiteness when discussing the field's inability to discuss racism directly. Similar calls have been made for the use of race theories as a guiding star in classroom practices (Hess 2022a). Hess has also utilized CRT in conceptual work to illuminate how the increased focus on "diversity" after the murder of George Floyd is an act of interest convergence that manifests as performative "wokeness" (2022b). Hess (2018) has also used the CRT tenet of counterstorytelling to share the experiences of a predominately Black group of youth in a community-based songwriting program to resist deficit-based notions many Black youth in Detroit navigate.

The direct application of race theories in music education scholarship can largely be attributed to the groundbreaking work of Black women (McCall 2018; McCall 2021; McCall et al. 2023; Lewis 2021; Regus 2022). McCall's (2018; 2021) solo and collaborative (McCall et al. 20223) work is heavily situated in the CRT tenet of counternarratives. These counternarratives explore the various harms and microaggressions Black people navigate at every level of music instruction from K-12 to university contexts. Her scholarship considers the psychological toll (McCall 2021) Black people are subjected to in music classrooms, and the various ways work on racism is policed (McCall 2018). Regus (2023) engages in counterstorytelling and utilizes CRT offshoots including BlackCrit to analyze antiblack and LatCrit to consider the unique aspects of

Latinidad. This work, discussed previously in Chapter 1, extends both theories while also exploring the unique epistemological insights of Afro-Latiné individuals. Lewis' (2021) work showcases the versatility of CRT through its introduction and use in a professional learning community (PLC) to help music educators have a significant shift in their understanding of race and racism.

BlackCrit and necropolitical framings allow for an additional form of insight into harm, specifically (Regus 2022; Niknafs 2021). Regus' (2022) work, discussed earlier in Chapter 1, is an example of engaging with blackness with specificity. Her focus on blackness reveals the various ways racialized markers are insufficient, such as for Afro-Latiné folks. These markers are insufficient because they fail to represent the varied and various needs and strengths of folks with diverse racial backgrounds. Niknafs (2021) engages with invisibilizing logics differently, focusing on how a metaphorical form of death is needed to support democratic practices in music classrooms. She notes how democratic practices can only be maintained when the group agrees to the practices, and how this agreement is usually reached through discourse that marginalizes those that resist. Niknafs (2021) ultimately notes that “the results reveal who indeed this democratic music education discourse serves: not the ones who have been the target of such discursive practices but the ones who already benefit from the democratic order” (182). Her contention, in light of the overwhelming whiteness of the field, is indicative of a large-scale death of Black ontoepistemologies in the field.

Endemic Whiteness

Previous scholarship reveals that Eurocentric values are still largely held in music classrooms. Kajikawa (2019) and Hess (2021) highlight how this hegemonic focus on white Eurocentric music excludes or consumes non-Western musics and epistemologies, reinforcing a

possessive investment in whiteness. University music programs disregard the aurally dominant traditions of jazz in favor of literacy-based instruction (Kajikawa 2019; Baraka 2010), while K-12 classrooms treat culturally diverse music as merely a steppingstone to more “serious” classical music (Hess 2015a). This hierarchical relationship is further reified through ensemble structures that dominate both K-12 and university settings, where classical ensembles are required while world music ensembles are often optional (Kajikawa 2019). Scholars argue that this system disadvantages racially marginalized students, creating barriers to access, especially in admission processes that favor students trained in classical traditions (Koza 2008; Kajikawa 2019).

In addition to the supremacy of Western classical music, music education additionally preserves white supremacy through curricular means such as music theory (Attas 2019) and history (Walker 2020). The theoretical underpinnings used in most music theory and history classes are rooted in Eurocentric epistemologies, which Attas (2019) and Walker (2020) point out are inextricably linked to modernity and colonialism. Ewell (2020) further clarifies that music theory has a white racial framing problem that prevents any meaningful change from occurring and that true antiracist progress will not occur until the field reframes its underlying beliefs. These frameworks reinforce binaries of “self” and “Other,” reifying racial hierarchies. Moreover, music created by Black people is often presented through a deficit-based framing, affecting its reception and inclusion in classrooms (Robinson & Hendricks 2018). These practices contribute to a system that privileges whiteness and perpetuates the marginalization of non-Western musical traditions. Ewell (2020) ultimately contends that the same white racial framing that protects Schenker’s centrality to music theory is the reason diversity efforts in music theory have been largely void of progress. It is worth noting in this section that the

confluence of music education scholarship I have reviewed thus far is, largely, the work of white scholars. The exception is with CRT scholarship. I believe that this is emblematic of the whiteness of the field and largely indicative of a white racial framing (Ewell 2020) in music education. There is a need for additional critical race scholarship to analyze the whiteness and, specifically, antiblackness that manifests in the field the ontoepistemological groundings of scholar of color.

Considering the Use of BlackCrit and Necropolitics in (Music) Educational Literature

BlackCrit

A study on certified music educators highlighted that only four percent of music educators in a particular set of years were Black (Elpus 2016). This percentage is significantly lower than 14 percent of Black people in the United States. This statistic is indicative of a problem. Moreover, scholars have engaged with whiteness and the manner it infiltrates every aspect of education, auditions, and licensure, yet these discrepancies continue. I assert that an interrogation of antiblackness is necessary to adequately assess the relationship the music education field has towards blackness.

In prior work, I have used BlackCrit to highlight how music classrooms may enact antiblack curricular, environmental, and interpersonal assaults (Sánchez-Gatt 2023). Further analysis in this area would be beneficial for highlighting the different ways classrooms and universities harm Black people. An analysis of antiblackness will also allow researchers to identify symbolic, or performative, attempts towards antiracist practice. Dumas (2016) notes that unexamined antiracist movements may create hindrances towards any sort of improvement and that multiculturalism “thrives largely at the expense of, and firmly against, blackness” (15). A

critique, based in antiblackness, of antiracist and multicultural approaches in music education will likely reveal various intersections of conflation of identity, invisibility, and harm.

There is limited scholarship in music education that specifically uses BlackCrit. The work of Regus (2022) and my own (Sánchez-Gatt 2023) are foundational in this area of music education scholarship. Regus (2022) uses BlackCrit and LatCrit in her dissertation to highlight instances of microaggressions, assumptions, biases, and invisibility that occur in school music programs. Her work in this area is monumental because it simultaneously highlights inadequacies within music programs and within BlackCrit itself. Regus found that Afro-Latiné students struggled with intergroup and intragroup cultural invalidations. This work highlights the need for further scholarship in antiblackness that accounts for cultural and ethnic difference. Further, this work highlights a unique opportunity for music education researchers. The highly syncretic nature of music from the African diaspora provides an opportunity for research on the role of antiblackness in transcultural music learning. Research could allow researchers to identify moments of harm in these practices, but also to find the forms of resistance that compelled Black people to preserve elements of their music.

Music education could also function as a site of Black liberatory fantasy and fugitivity. The centering of blackness in K-12 classrooms and universities can provide students with space to reflect on antiblackness and explore their own identity. Regus (2022) states that “the visibility of this music in the academy may encourage first- and second- generation students to reconnect with their culture and encourage musical codeswitching across genres during their collegiate music degree programs” (160). Research investigating the various ways Black students reclaim and preserve their identities through music may create space for new practices in classroom. I further contend that music spaces can center Black futurity to allow students to develop a critical

conscious that compels them to imagine a new episteme that is free of antiblackness and other forms of marginalization.

Necropolitics

The field of music education would benefit greatly from increased necropolitical research. Niknafs' (2021) necropolitical analysis of classroom democratic practices is foundational. Her use of the framework allows her to reconsider taken-for-granted practices with new insights. A necropolitical analysis would complement current research on neoliberalism and anti-oppressive research. Further, the inclusion of new theory would aid philosophical researchers in critiquing unexamined notions that are widely accepted as good in the field. I contend that utilizing necropolitics may provide insight on forms of resistance to oppressive structures.

I have previously argued that music education would benefit from an interrogation of antiblackness in the field (Sánchez-Gatt 2023). I rationalized this argument through Dumas and Ross' (2016) theorization of BlackCrit. Their work highlights how focusing on the specificity of harm would provide different insights than the mere use of CRT. Currently, I contend that the use of necropolitics and queer necropolitics (Haritaworn et al. 2014) would provide additional insight to the various forms of harm that occur in music classroom spaces.

One potential site for the inclusion of a necropolitical framing is in interrogations of neoliberalism. As stated earlier, Giroux (2008) argues that individuals that are considered unproductive ultimately become expendable in the politics of disposability. Approaching with such a focus towards the terror of neoliberalism would provide additional insight into unexamined sites of harm, particularly in Eurocentric music ensembles that require a specific level of musical ability. This same consideration could be made in anti-oppressive research.

Niknafs' (2021) foundational work in necropolitics highlights the “nocturnal body” of democracy in music education through necropolitics, and how it is sustained through an insidious form of exclusion. She further illuminates that music education discourse is losing its “effectiveness in creating any actual societal transformation” (Niknafs 2021, 183). It is important to highlight when the field needs to move in a new direction. Thoughtfully considering necropolitics would not only compel researchers to consider and ask new questions, but there is also potential to consider necropolitics throughout the research process and to explore more ethical practices. Niknafs (2021) sought “to unravel the violence inherent in the notion of democracy in the field of music education” (177). I am compelled to wonder what violence is inherent to classroom practices, and what a necropolitical framework would make more readily visible.

A Bifocal Theoretical Approach

There are various commonalities between BlackCrit and necropolitics. I utilize these theories together because they each approach different aspects of power and oppression from unique standpoints. In this section I consider how each framework considers power and the systems that maintain it. I then explore the action-oriented counterhegemonic potential of the frameworks. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate how these frameworks work together and provide a well-rounded bifocal analysis that would not be otherwise possible in this dissertation.

I utilize these frameworks because of their nuanced explorations of power. BlackCrit explores the insidious nature of antiblackness, and how it manifests in all systems and social structures. Further, BlackCrit explores the tension between antiblackness and the neoliberal-multicultural imagination (Dumas & ross 2016) and how moves towards diversity can still be situated in antiblackness. Necropolitics engages with power differently, with a focus on how

literal and metaphorical death maintains power structures. This shift in considering power from the standpoint of whose death is allowed provides an entirely new entry point for considering epistemological death and power in educational spaces. Niknaf's (2021) use of necropolitics is powerful because she exposes what forms of freedom die in classrooms to maintain democratic practices. These frameworks, when used together, provide a vantage point to see the potential harm inherent to reactionary or uncritical social justice. This bifocal approach will provide me with additional tools for understanding the experiences the participants in this study face when navigating power structures.

BlackCrit allows space for counterhegemonic work and considers the various structures and systems in place that suppress blackness and promote antiblackness. Dumas and ross (2016) center the importance of a Black liberatory fantasy that defunds whiteness and allows for an expansive conceptualization of blackness to take place. I position these fantasies as epistemologies of resistance and freedom. I believe that a necropolitical framing here would provide a nuance into how various epistemologies are suppressed in many music classrooms to uphold the field's investment in classical music. These facets of music teaching must first be identified before any fantasies of liberation or action-oriented steps can take place.

I ultimately believe that my bifocal lens compels engagement in an intersectional analysis that is more robust than any one theory could account for. In this dissertation, I mainly focus on the experiences of Black youth, and I aim to privilege their experiences. Specifically, I want to uplift and share the experiences of young women, trans, and queer Black folks because of how often their narratives are lost. My lived experience as a queer nonbinary Afro-Latiné person is rarely reflected in mainstream media or scholarship. Even so, various aspects of my identity grant me privilege that others do not have. I aim to use this bifocal lens as a point of reflexivity

that compels me to consider the experiences of the participants from various standpoints. Further, utilizing these theories serves as a reminder for me, as the researcher, to not dehumanize the participants of this study with my own priorities and to prioritize their care.

Summary

I introduced various theoretical frameworks and in this chapter. I began with an introduction to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and traced those origins to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of the application of the theory. I then overviewed the application of CRT in education research and the various offshoots that developed from it. I provided an overview of BlackCrit and necropolitics. I then review extant literature related to whiteness and racism in music education research to showcase the lack and need for theories that contend with antiblackness and death specifically. I then outlined the defining features and potential uses for BlackCrit and necropolitics before considering the interplay between them. I argued for the implementation of BlackCrit and necropolitics as a bifocal lens that allows me to provide a clearer reflection of the experiences of the participants in this study. I ultimately argue that a bifocal approach to this dissertation will provide a robust intersectional analysis that would not be otherwise possible. In the following chapter I introduce my Endarkened fabulation methodology and its theoretical underpinnings that focus on ethics, care, and responsibility.

CHAPTER 3

Overview

In this chapter I briefly consider the role of philosophy in the field of music education to situate the role this dissertation plays in extending and critiquing this body of scholarship. I engage in what Miksza et al. (2023) describe as “making trouble” through considering and critiquing Jorgensen’s “symptoms of the philosophical” (2006, 179). This reflection serves to highlight how these symptoms potentially allow unexamined assumptions to constrain what is deemed philosophical. I specifically consider Jorgensen’s scholarship because of her foundational role in philosophy of music education, serving as the editor of *Philosophy in Music Education Review* (PMER) for the past thirty years. PMER is the premier journal of philosophy in music education and therefore plays a substantial role in shaping the philosophical landscape of the music education field. Jorgensen’s reflections, reviews, and publications have been vitally important for the development of philosophy in music education and have likely had the largest impact on philosophical scholarship. I engage in this critique of the nature of philosophy to highlight the need for counterhegemonic work such as my own. I then introduce a novel methodology, Endarkened fabulation, and the various ontological and epistemic groundings of this methodology. I explore how my dissertation introduces new philosophical and methodological considerations into the field. Further, I explore how these influences allow me to create a method that is culturally situated and centered on ethical engagement. I then introduce the kitchen table talk (KTT) methodology that I use to collect and analyze the stories of the two participants in this study. I consider the closely-related nature between reflexive analysis and coding I engaged in. I finally introduce the beginning of the fabulation and suggest aspects readers should look for.

Role of Philosophy

Philosophy plays a significant role in the construction of theoretical and empirical scholarship. Music education philosopher Jorgensen (2009) contends that “philosophy conceptualizes and clarifies the nature of the field and challenges preconceived assumptions about the nature of music education research” (405). Philosophical research, therefore, plays a foundational role in all aspects of scholarship and practice, even if this connection is not always clear or defined. All music education research has philosophical underpinnings, even if they are not explicit. These underpinnings are present in both qualitative and quantitative methods. Research through abstracted empiricism, a term Powell (2021) borrows from Mills “to denote modes of inquiry engaged by positivist researchers who consider their work atheoretical” (197) cannot eschew the philosophical underpinnings within all research paradigms. Thus, one role of philosophy is to guide and inform research, pedagogy, and curriculum.

Philosophers are capable of compelling readers to reconsider the mundane and expose unexamined assumptions. Miksza et al. (2023) equate the role of philosophy to being a troublemaker through examining unquestioned thinking and action. This role of troublemaker, they further clarify, can advance research and practice in schools. Miksza et al. (2023) highlight that “music teachers and students often rely on certain pedagogical practices, types of music making, goals, and values without having contemplated why they do so or considered possible alternatives. Enter philosophical research” (Chapter 5). Philosophy has a unique vantage point in advancing the field of music education because it creates a space to theorize what *could be*. Quantitative and qualitative research explores what *is* while historical research typically explores what once *was* (Miksza et al. 2023).

In this following section I engage in making trouble by critiquing Jorgensen's (2006) symptoms of the philosophical. Jorgensen (2006) states that "the philosopher makes explicit that which otherwise may remain implicit and clarifies aspects that are prior to and deeper than the actions to which they give rise" (179). I aim to situate this dissertation as philosophical despite what I consider to be an epistemic incongruence with Jorgensen's conceptualization of philosophy.

Making Trouble

PMER is the flagship philosophy journal in music education. Editor Estelle Jorgensen has been at the helm of PMER for thirty years. Therefore, she has played an instrumental role in defining what counts as philosophy in the field. I think it is important, with this in mind, to consider that Jorgensen's (2006) work plays a foundational role in music education philosophy and has largely been the singular guide for constructing philosophy in the field until recently (Miksza et al. 2023). I ultimately engage in this critique to demonstrate the need for new and additional philosophical underpinnings that originate from unique and diverse ontoepistemological standpoints.

Critiquing Symptoms of the Philosophical

Jorgensen (2006) contended that certain features or elements are present in philosophical endeavors regardless of variation in style or orientation. She called these common elements "symptoms of the philosophical". She contended that philosophical work engages in: clarifying terms, exposing underlying assumptions, connecting with other systems of thought, and asks questions that are inherently philosophical. I consider how there is substantial room to interpret the first three symptoms and highlight how engaging with these elements deeply exposes underlying assumptions.

Jorgensen asserted that philosophical work clarifies terms stating that “the philosopher is vitally concerned with the meaning of words because words are the vehicles for communicating ideas” (2006, 176). Conciseness is important because the philosopher’s audience will have a variety of lived experience and, as a result, may associate a different meaning to a word than the philosopher originally intended. I agree that clarity and conciseness is important, however, I engage with this notion of conciseness differently. Clarity is important but there needs to be space for interpretation and for readers to reach their own conclusions. Toliver (2021) contends that there is a responsibility for readers to reach conclusions on their own because some truths and knowledges must be kept secret. Toliver’s work (discussed later in greater detail) focuses on how Black girls come to know and exist in the world. These Black girls utilize several tactics for self-preservation in an antiblack world that must be protected. My dissertation will introduce various systems of thought, including the stories of the participants. I therefore need to be intentional with the clarity of my ideas, but I ultimately have an ethical obligation to keep certain terms and concepts fugitive and secret.

A second “symptom” of philosophical work is its ability to expose and evaluate underlying assumptions. Explicit and implicit thinking lead to assumptions in day-to-day actions and in scholarship, as mentioned earlier. Jorgensen stated that “to expose implicit or unclear underlying assumptions, one utilizes critical and analytical thinking in reasoning from effect to cause” (2006, 180). Jorgensen further argued that these assumptions are evaluated through logical and moral rules, stating “logical rules enable consistency within the analysis itself, whereas moral rules provide consistency of the analysis with the mores of the society or social group” (2006, 180). Jorgensen’s foundational work, while vitally important, falls short in this area. There is no interrogation of the epistemological standpoint Jorgensen takes in

operationalizing “logical” and “moral”. Logic and morality are informed by culture (Jia & Krettenauer 2017). It is often through these unexamined terms that hegemonic, oppressive, sensibilities can manifest.

Jorgensen also stated that philosophy relates its parts as a systematized theory that connects with other ideas and systems of thought. Philosophers should try to develop a body of thought that exists as a whole concept yet has structural organization. All the parts that form a theory, or collection of ideas, need to be present to form the whole, and not be superfluous. This philosophy would also need to be able to connect with other systems of thought. Jorgensen (2006) clarifies that “[the systematized theory] connects or corresponds to these other systems, be they ideas or phenomena in the empirical world. The evidence of this correspondence may be of varying kinds, including logical argument, appeals to authority, precedent, example, or analogy” (182). I agree that systems of thought need to be robust and connect to other areas of scholarship. However, entirely new (and deliberately suppressed) systems of thought may not connect with many of the hegemonic systems currently used in music education philosophical research. One example can be found in BlackCrit, which I utilize in my dissertation as an analytical tool. There are several framing ideals for BlackCrit that place the framework in tension with several approaches to multiculturalism. These approaches begin as attempts to enact social justice but ultimately inscribe harm¹⁰. Suggesting a need for this BlackCrit work to connect to other theories of social justice in music education research can remove the revolutionary potential of that work. There are logics and epistemologies that intentionally oppress subaltern

¹⁰ Please refer to Sánchez-Gatt Et al. (in press) for an in-depth exploration of the multicultural music education paradigm and the ability for coloniality to manifest within classroom practices. The specific harm being considered here is a form of epistemic injustice that erases, minimizes, or disregards ways of knowing that do not align with hegemonic Eurocentric norms.

and counterhegemonic ways of knowing the world. I ultimately think it is important to consider this aspect of connectedness with greater nuance.

Philosophy plays a foundational role in informing the field of music education and, therefore, needs to be a site of dynamic and innovative scholarship. Journals such as *Philosophy in Music Education Review* (PMER) and *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* (ACT) have centered important topics such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and other sites where power manifest. Both publications originated in 1993 and have slightly different focuses; PMER solely focuses on philosophy while ACT invites various forms of scholarship situated in critical theory, sociology, and philosophy. This assertion, however, is not fully accurate because PMER publications include qualitative and social theory (Powell 2021). Thus, I believe that it is essential to create counterhegemonic philosophical work that pushes the boundary of what is deemed philosophical and introduces new systems of thought. In the following section of this chapter, I introduce the methodology that guides this dissertation, Endarkened fabulation. I explore the various epistemologies, theories, and considerations that informed my methodology and understandings of responsibility, reciprocity, care, and ethics.

Decentering Philosophical Underpinnings

I began this chapter by discussing and extending the importance of philosophy in scholarship. Ultimately, philosophy plays an essential role in informing, critiquing, and extending scholarship and classroom practices. Miksza et al. (2023) offer that philosophy can explore what music education can *become*. I contend that the field of music education philosophy cannot adequately imagine what music education can become because there is a dire need for ontological diversity. I am often deeply hurt and frustrated by the preponderance of research and philosophy in music education that asks aimless questions. I am not the only scholar

to feel this frustration (Jorgensen 2009; Powell 2021), however I feel an embodied form of dejection and anger. I lack the words to adequately express my frustration, so I turn to the words of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa,

Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept from us—entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space. (Anzaldúa 1990, 25)

The field of music education needs to invite philosophers from different ontological and epistemological backgrounds to matter again. Further, these new philosophers need to be welcomed on *their* terms and not pushed to assimilate to some hegemonic Western standard.

I believe that engaging in a philosophically-oriented qualitative inquiry allows me to utilize my own lived experience and the scholarship of other historically excluded bodies to provide an additional perspective to music education research and practices. My fat, queer, and Afro-Latiné identity create a unique vantage point when paired with my background as a classically-trained violist and amateur fiddle player. My own journey as a junior scholar has opened my eyes to a world of possibility in music education. My theorizations of antiblackness and reflections of Eurocentric music practices highlight the harm music education has perpetuated. Further, engaging in this philosophically-oriented qualitative inquiry helps me develop a foundation of scholarship that explores the curricular and pedagogical implications of centering and affirming racially and culturally marginalized students.

An Endarkened Fabulation Methodology

I utilized an Endarkened fabulation in this dissertation. This methodology allowed me to share and reflect on the joys, sorrows, resistance, and complex array of experiences that exist in the everyday life of the queer Black youth in this study. Further, it allowed me to use my bifocal

lens (BlackCrit and necropolitics), lived experience, and educational background to engage in a critical philosophical inquiry on the state of music education for multiply-marginalized Black youth. The research questions that guide this project require methodologies that center and uphold the experiences of Black youth and allow room for re/imagining affirming spaces in the music classroom. While the exact methodology I am utilizing is unique to this dissertation, this dissertation participates in the Black radical tradition of lifting up stories to counter hegemonic narratives, a tradition aligned with the CRT tenet of counternarrative.

I utilized elements of Endarkened storywork (Toliver 2021) and critical fabulation (Hartman 2008) as a foundation for my methodology. Toliver (2021) coined Endarkened storywork as “a methodology built from the confluence of Endarkened feminist epistemologies (EFE) (Dillard 2000), Indigenous storywork (ISW) (Archibald 2008), and Afrofuturism (Womack 2013), a way of honoring Black storytelling traditions in academia” (15). In the following section I explore how an Endarkened Feminist epistemology (Dillard 2000) informs Endarkened storywork. I then move to explore the work of Hartman (2008) and how her critical fabulation is an act of resistance to what she describes as the violence of the archive. I ultimately consider how EFE functions as the epistemological grounding of Endarkened fabulation.

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

Dillard (2000) compelled marginalized groups in the academy, specifically Black feminist scholars, to challenge white hegemonic research practices and method. EFE is situated in:

the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for Black diasporic women (Dillard 2000, 662)

The notion of an Endarkened approach is intentionally positioned to contrast white hegemonic notions of “enlightenment” that have historically situated blackness and other forms of difference as deficient. Mills (2021) has similarly troubled enlightenment narratives saying, “given the racialization that accompanies modernity, it is then unsurprising that metaphor, color symbolism, and Euro-identity all fuse: whiteness becomes the identity of both enlightenment and of the human bearers of enlightenment” (17).

Mills (2021), instead, positions blackness as an illuminating force that explores the darkness within whiteness. Dillard’s (2000) conceptualization of Endarkening discursively subverts all notions of light and dark and positions blackness as something to be valued and protected.

Ethical responsibility and epistemological diversity are central to EFE. Dillard (2000) highlighted a lack of diversity in education researching stating thus, alternative epistemological truths are required if educational researchers and leaders are to be truly responsible, asking for new ways of looking into the reality of others that opens our own lives to view—and that makes us accountable to the people whom we study, and their interests and needs (662).

EFE requires scholars to reframe research as a responsibility and spiritual¹¹ endeavor (Dillard 2000). This responsibility is to the very communities and participants that are part of the inquiry. Further, EFE highlights a responsibility in expanding and protecting what counts as data. Hurtado (2003) highlights that “to let the ‘other’ speak requires the invention of multiple methods that subvert racist, heterosexist, and imperializing language” (217). The body of scholarship on narrative inquiry is made up of predominantly white scholars that focus on written narratives, despite various cultures having rich storytelling traditions, such as griots that serve as

¹¹ Spirituality is a central facet of EFE. I view spirituality as a highly individualized relationship between myself and how I exist in the world, and the will I have to affect social change. Engaging in culturally-affirming storytelling and sharing the stories of others is an undertaking that allows me to challenge white hegemonic research practices. I am spiritually sustained when I actively resist white supremacy.

oral historians in Western Africa. Endarkened storywork and Endarkened narrative inquiry both share a commitment towards research as a responsibility and resist traditional notions of data collection and analysis.

Applying Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies to Narrative

The work of S.R. Toliver (2021) consists of a form of narrative scholarship informed, partly, by EFE. Endarkened storywork centers the contributions of Black women and the importance and need for epistemological diversity within the academy. Toliver (2021) additionally considers the role Indigenous Storywork (ISW), and Afrofuturism play in Endarkened storywork. Toliver's use of ISW allows her to focus on nurturing, affirming, and truth-telling. This emphasis is different from the narratives by Black folks in academia that focus on counter-narratives in the CRT tradition or other forms of resistance. The use of Afrofuturism further adds the possibility for imagining a Black-affirming future. I briefly overview ISW and Afrofuturism in the following section.

ISW was created by Jo-ann Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem, from the Stó:lō and St'at'imc First Nations. ISW is a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical framework that is informed by and utilizes storytelling. There is a specific focus on how stories are made, told, and understood. Archibald and Parent (2019) note that ISW centers seven principles: reverence, responsibility, holism, respect, reciprocity, synergy, and interrelatedness. These principles, specifically the focus on responsibility, share parallels to EFE and highlight the importance of protecting groups that have and continue to be harmed by white hegemonic research practices (Dillard 2000). ISW is guided and informed by various Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies that allow scholars to utilize unique methodologies, and to adapt Western approaches with care. Toliver (2021) asserts that scholars must refuse a focus on Eurocentric

knowledge processes to be able to access this framework. ISW heavily focuses on the ethics of research and pedagogy, a focus that resists the indiscriminate and so-called objective consumption of knowledge in Eurocentric research. This focus is powerful because it highlights the importance of reciprocity in research relationships and ensuring the safety of participants that may encounter additional sites for harm because of their marginalized identity. ISW finally focuses ethical considerations in the sharing of the stories through the pedagogy of being a storyteller and listener. Archibald (2008) asserts a need for story listeners to be actively engaged because it allows for learning on several levels since listeners must make sense of the information themselves.

Afrofuturism is the third body of scholarship that guides Endarkened storywork. White cultural critic Mark Dery (1994) coins this term to describe his reflection on the convergence of African and African American culture with science fiction. Afrofuturism is uniquely Black from its conceptualization, however, because of the intellectual contributions from Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. Lavender (2019) poignantly clarifies “Dery asks the questions guiding these keen Black minds and frames them with his brief introduction. Unquestionably, Afrofuturism’s critical vitality corresponds to these Black scholars” (2). Afrofuturism predates the 1990s, however, and is one of several ways Black folks can resist oppressive realities while dreaming of a possible future. Lavender’s (2019) book offers an in-depth literary analysis of works by authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, George Schuyler, and others who employed Afrofuturistic themes in their writings. I have also highlighted how “Afrofuturist themes in music can be traced back more than 70 years. Sun Ra (NPR Music 2014), the experimental jazz musician, infused his music with extraterrestrial influence in the 1950s”

(Sánchez-Gatt 2023, 138). These themes are also present in the music of more contemporary artists such as Erykah Badu, Outkast, and Janelle Monáe.

Toliver (2021) engages in an Afrofuturist design aesthetic¹² but looks beyond and notes “although there is much discussion on how Afrofuturism is presented in books, television shows, architecture, music, and movies, there is limited discussion about the Afrofuturistic realities that exist in the everyday, in the mundane” (xxi). I contend that Toliver (2021) utilizes Afrofuturism as a conceptual framework that guides Endarkened storywork.

Endarkened storywork is guided by the notion of Afrofuturist freedom technologies. Toliver (2021) utilizes Lavender’s (2019) conceptualization of freedom technologies where he asserts that:

any kind of practical knowledge that helps Black people solve problems with their environment and in their society, abetting their escape from physical and psychological bondage and thereby allowing them control of their own actions, qualifies as a freedom technology. (26)

These freedom technologies allow space for Black liberatory fantasies (Dumas & ross 2016) and freedom dreaming (Love 2019) to manifest. Toliver (2021) goes on to connect various technologies, such as those used by the trickster spider in West African lore Anansi, and argues that these methods exist to preserve and sustain blackness claiming, “in this way, literacy, spirituality, language, trickery, coding, communal connection, intergenerational links, dance, hope, imagination, and joy can all be classified as technologies of freedom, as Afrofuturist practices” (xxii). I assert that Lavender’s (2019) conceptualization of Afrofuturism becomes an epistemology of Black futurity and resistance when utilized in Endarkened storywork.

¹² See Marvel’s *Black Panther* or the work of Janelle Monáe to gain a better understanding of these futurist design aesthetics.

Critical Fabulation

I sought to showcase stories of pain, joy, resilience, fugitivity, resistance, and possibility in this dissertation while taking great care to share the stories of the participants in a humanizing manner. Additionally, I aimed to do this work in a manner that obfuscated the participants' identities and allowed me to enmesh my own lived experience. I found this opportunity upon reflecting on Hartman's (2008) critical fabulation method. I was compelled to engage with this work because Hartman's critique of the violence in archival methods parallels my concerns with contemporary qualitative research methods. This section introduces Hartman's critical fabulation.

Saidiya Hartman is a literary scholar and cultural historian that regularly engages in archival research. Her work seeks to take the lives of Black enslaved people and to find stories of resistance, joy, and humanity. In her book, *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman critiques archival methods through the artifacts of various Black people and how these methods often erase their humanity. Hartman notes that she "sought to create a method that acknowledged and comprehended the violence of the archive and the forms of silence and oblivion it produced, and yet endeavored to use the archive for contrary purposes" (1997, xxxviii). There is, similarly, a violence to research methods that dehumanizes participants, and reduces them to subjects.

Healing From Archival Violence

Hartman highlights that archival methods are not absent of bias and can deny a person of their humanity by presenting them as singular points, something she has personally done in scholarship. Hartman finds moments of humanity in horror, and highlights how antiblackness is always present by defamiliarizing the familiar. Hartman states that her goal is:

Rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law,

and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. (1997, 2)

I wanted readers to understand, experience, and feel that the people in this study are living beings while simultaneously protecting and obfuscating their identities in a way that is similarly humanizing to Hartman's work. This earlier work begins to lay down her conceptualization of the afterlife of slavery that is fully realized in *Lose your mother*. Hartman spent a year in Ghana to develop the stories of the lives affected by the Transatlantic slave trade, and to give life to the many ancestors many Black people will never come to learn about. Hartman circles back to one specific moment in *Lose your mother* in her work, *Venus in two acts* (2008). She wrote about two girls that were killed on board of a slave ship. One of the girls, Venus, was only briefly mentioned in the archive of a trial that ensued. Hartman notes that she only refers to Venus for two sentences in *Lose your mother*. She highlights the violence of the archive because this is all the information she had about Venus. Hartman states "if I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls" (2008, 8).

This deep regret compels Hartman to further seek moments of love, subversion, and humanity in her work. Hartman conceptualizes this new process as critical fabulation to imagine what could have been. She reframes the narrative within archival confines to create new standpoints of the same stories:

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. (Hartman 2008, 11)

Saidiya Hartman combines her theoretical expertise in antiblackness with her literary scholarship and archival methods. Her work highlights the potential in operationalizing antiblackness in scholarship. Similarly, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an interdisciplinary practice that makes the invisible visible through voice and narrative. In the following section I explicate my rationale in utilizing an Endarkened Fabulation.

Endarkened Fabulation

I enmesh EFE with Hartman's conceptualization of critical fabulation, which I describe as an Endarkened fabulation. I intentionally engage an Endarkened fabulation as an act of challenging white hegemonic research epistemologies. Dillard (2000) highlights the centrality of epistemological stances in research claiming:

Alternative epistemological truths are required if educational researchers and leaders are to be truly responsible, asking for new ways of looking into the reality of others that opens our own lives to view—and that makes us accountable to the people whom we study, and their interests and needs. (662)

Utilizing an approach situated in EFE compels me to conceptualize the components of this dissertation as a responsibility I have to Black youth in music classrooms as opposed to some recipe (Dillard 2000) I need to complete for reportable data. Further, engaging in a novel method situated within culturally relevant epistemological groundings provides an opportunity for expanding what counts as research in academic spaces. I choose to expand the body of scholarship in narrative¹³ research because I similarly observe McClish and Bhattacharya's (2021) contention that "while Black women's narratives have been centered by several scholars (Etter-Lewis 1993; Evans-Winters 2019; Harris 2015; Johnson-Bailey 2010), the methodological discourse in narrative inquiry continues to forward knowledge from predominantly white scholars" (535). Toliver (2021) claims that EFE, which informs the methodology I utilize,

¹³ Critical fabulation and Endarkened storywork are both types of scholarship that utilize narrative.

“intrinsically discards the traditional canon of Eurocentric research and chooses to liberate the mind by allowing space for different truths about reality—truths that refuse objectivity, require community, and remember responsibility” (xvii). Thus, I contend that engaging in my Endarkened fabulation is an act of resistance against hegemonic research practices.

A Methodology Situated in Care and Responsibility

The Endarkened methods that guide this Endarkened fabulation require a close attention and focus to ethics. Mentioned earlier, research conceptualized through EFE centers responsibility towards participants and the communities being served in the inquiry (Dillard 2000). McClish and Bhattacharya (2023) provide a critique of IRB standards and considers that “signing paperwork, historically, has harmed numerous communities worldwide. So, whereas institutional review boards (IRBs) require a consent form, the ethical standards with which one conducts ENI far exceed IRB requirements” (6). This commitment to high ethical standards begins by building relationships with participants and the communities of whom they are a part. Getting to know the assets in these communities and areas where support can be provided allows me to meaningfully consider what is needed to ensure reciprocity. Similarly, this attention to ethics extends throughout the research project. The ISW (Archibald 2008) principles of holism and respect serve as a reminder that sharing stories of oppression can expose the participants in this dissertation to harm, and that care in affirming them and cultivating their heart (Shirley 2017) is my responsibility. McClish and Bhattacharya (2023) further note that there are considerations that must be made regarding the stories shared, and how they must be protected, stating:

We agreed that some knowledge is sacred between [the researcher] and [participants]. [The researcher] had earned the trust of the [participants], but the whole world had not. Therefore, we remained mindful of what needs to remain sacred communal knowledge,

away from published spaces, and what could be shared broadly, mitigating anticipated harm and anxiety. (6)

My responsibility extends to the construction and sharing of the stories shared by participants, and in ensuring their emotional well-being when recounting their stories.

Utilizing Culturally-Relevant Methods

I ultimately chose to engage in an Endarkened fabulation because the confluence of theoretical consideration from EFE and critical fabulation allow space for culturally-relevant methods and data representation. Toliver (2021) uses an Afrofuturist conceptualization of freedom technologies to guide her work and specifically states “in this way, literacy, spirituality, language, trickery, coding, communal connection, intergenerational links, dance, hope, imagination, and joy can all be classified as technologies of freedom, as Afrofuturist practices” (xxii). She goes on to connect various technologies, such as the those used by the trickster spider Anansi and argues that all these methods exist to preserve and sustain blackness. These freedom and trickster technologies allowed Black people to protect and preserve their stories across the Atlantic Ocean. These stories strategically shifted to preserve and sustain blackness through enslavement and into the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2007).

The Endarkened methods I use are informed by these storied traditions and allow me to use a variety of methods to encourage a naturalistic environment and allows me to imagine new and novel ways to represent research that honor the storied traditions of Black diasporic people. McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2023) highlight the improvisational nature of narrative inquiry and point to how “scholars have documented methods, such as formal, informal, semi-structured, open, and natural conversations, to spur and engage in discussion to understand an experience” (4). The authors then note that Endarkened methodologies allow for methods culturally situated in blackness, such as how “among Black women, these intimate dialogues among [those] who

share similar cultural experiences go by many names; for example, sister circles, girl talk, sister-to-sister talk, or kitchen table talk” (Mcclish-Boyd and Bhattacharya 2023. 4). These intimate settings are able to create a naturalistic environment where difficult experiences may be more easily shared. Culturally-situated methods also allow for new ways of representing research that honor the storied traditions of various marginalized groups such as “the ways of griots who were the scholars of their African nations” (Toliver 2021, xv).

Kitchen Table Talks

The primary data collection method in this study consisted of individual and group kitchen table talks. The concepts of kitchen tables talks utilized in this study are situated within the experiences of feminists of color. Wynter-Hoyte et al. describe kitchen table methods as “build[ing] on the legacy of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which was founded in the 1980sin order to foster autonomy from an original and positive perspective by controlling the images and words produced by women of color” (2020, 342).

The imagery of a kitchen table is meant to evoke the feeling of a room that has historically been a safe space for women to work and communicate together. This space is something bell hooks¹⁴ (2008) would refer to as community of care. The intimate conceptualization was used by English literacy scholars in 2016 that focused on Black girls’ literacy. Haddix et al. (2016) highlight how sitting at the “kitchen table connects them to their familial roots and cultural upbringings and links them to the legacy of... Black women writers, scholars, and activists” (381). I wanted to create a community of care for the participants that was reminiscent of the ones I saw growing up. Ultimately, I engaged in three one-on-one kitchen

¹⁴ bell hooks intentionally resisted the capitalization of her name.

table talks (totaling six) and three collective kitchen table talks to develop a narrative based on the participant's experiences. These meetings averaged between two and three hours in duration.

The first set of talks utilized a semi-structured interview protocol where I sought to understand the participants' backgrounds and how the participants see their culture represented in music classrooms. The group talks allowed me to ask the participants clarifying and extending questions to gain a better understanding of their perceptions of their musical instruction. The second round of kitchen table talks focused on how the participants navigate their place in music education. I sought to understand how the participants imagine and dream of a more affirming music education and the changes they dream of seeing in the final round of KTTs.

I engaged in this story collection over the span of six weeks. I also spent time in the classroom space and school during four of those weeks. I specifically aimed to understand the classroom environment and how the directors interacted with students to provide a realistic approximation of the space in the narrative.

Ethnographic Methods

This study is not an ethnography; however, I utilize ethnographic methods that allowed me to create deeply evocative depictions of the classroom spaces and other environments the participants in this study navigate regularly. I specifically approach these methods from a critical ethnographic stance. Critical ethnography developed as an extension and critique of traditional ethnographic methods. Esposito and Evans-Winters' (2022) highlight how critical ethnography can attempt "to account for interpersonal and structural power in research and society" (16). The scholars further position critical ethnographic methods as tools that can be used by critical theorists that acknowledge the role-imposed structures have on participants, one I plan on utilizing. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) also highlight the opportunities that arise for

critical reflexive practices. The participants in the study will be sharing various stories and experiences that may, at times, be contradictory or highlight considerations I have not made. It is essential that I spend enough time in the field to gain a better understanding, and to depict the different narratives and power structures that are highlighted by the participants.

My presence in the classroom space was mutually agreed upon with the director of the high school that served as the research site. I assisted with sectionals, masterclasses, and as a clinician throughout the data collection process. This aspect of my day presence allowed me to offer and demonstrate my expertise as a classically-trained string musician to the members of the musical ensemble, including the participants of this study. I had various opportunities throughout the day at the high school to observe rehearsals and the dynamics and exchanges that occur in classroom spaces and in social spaces such as the hallways and social rotundas that exist on the campus.

Reflexivity and Analysis

Kohl and McCutcheon (2014) highlight the importance of engaging in reflexive practices throughout KTTs. I engaged in journaling throughout the various stages of the KTT and analysis process. I completed, at minimum, an entry per KTT but allowed myself to make additional entries when I was compelled to record a new or unconsidered experience. This reflexive journaling allowed me to make sense of the parallel and divergent experiences I had with the participants and the experiences they had with one another. Further, I used these opportunities to consider what my role was as a scholar-activist in subsequent talks. I could make the decision to share my own lived experience and provide guidance to the participants or come to the realization that my experience was irrelevant to the topic being discussed. This reflexive practice elided into the analysis and crystallization portions of this study and played a central role in the

construction of the Endarkened fabulation. This portion of the study was cyclical and iterative, with each cycle providing more clarity and structure.

I utilized this Endarkened fabulation as an opportunity to deeply engage in reflexivity. The characters in this fabulation are composites of people the participants, Jackii and Ariel¹⁵, shared during kitchen table talks. These composite characters are, additionally, comprised of people I have met throughout various phases of my life, and myself. The various administrators, teachers, and students in the fabulation were constructed as a blending of individuals I have encountered and made to resemble the individuals Jackii and Ariel named. I took this step as an opportunity to preserve the anonymity of the participants and any relationships they may have. Mr. Buck and Wagner were largely based off the stories Jackii and Ariel shared. I diverge from this choice in Chapter 7 when I consider the internal dialogue of one of the directors. This internal dialogue is informed by interactions I have had with music educators throughout my career. There are ultimately two characters that most saliently represent my own thoughts and reflexivity. Stephan and Barry (both discussed in greater detail later) represent who I am as an adult and youth, respectively. It is worth noting that Jackii and Ariel are not composite characters. Their words, thoughts, and feelings are direct reflections of what they shared during our kitchen table talks. I provide greater insight into the crafting of the Endarkened fabulation later in this chapter.

Coding

I sought to use an analytic coding approach that would facilitate the construction of a narrative focused on inter- and intra-personal interactions. I utilized dramaturgical, emotions, and values coding to construct the Endarkened fabulation. Saldaña (2016) contends that

¹⁵ Pseudonyms used throughout

“dramaturgical coding approaches cultural life as performance and its participants as characters in social dramas” (102). This approach allowed me to deeply consider the first research question of this dissertation, how the participants saw their culture reflected around them. I felt, however, that I needed to consider additional aspects to fully satisfy this inquiry. I then considered how I could organize the various ways the participants made sense of the environments they regularly navigate and the hopes they have for a music education that affirms their identities. I used emotions and values coding because it allowed me to map out an emotional trajectory in the fabulation to achieve a level of verisimilitude that provided readers with a glimpse into the realities both participants navigate.

Dramaturgical Coding

I utilized dramaturgical coding to organize various plot devices. Saldaña states that “dramaturgical Coding attunes the researcher to the qualities, perspectives, and drives of the participant. It also provides a deep understanding of how humans in social interaction interpret and manage conflict” (103). This approach allowed me to deeply consider the first research question of this dissertation, how the participants saw their culture reflected around them. Additionally, this portion of the analysis process provided the themes and plotlines that needed to be incorporated into the fabulation. It was my goal to create a narrative that not only explored the beliefs, emotions, and values the participants expressed, I wanted to highlight the interpersonal, curricular, and environmental landscapes they had to navigate. Dramaturgical coding was most effective in organizing and making sense of the stories discussed in our talks. I developed codes related to conflicts, tactics, subtext, and attitudes that were shared through the stories the participants shared. I was ultimately able to utilize the codes to rearrange various elements of the stories the participants shared into a linear temporality. I found it essential to craft the timeline in

this manner because I was able to construct a narrative that was more immersive when compared to the sharing of quotations.

Affective Coding Approaches

I also wanted to better understand how the participants reacted to this landscape, with specific attention to their emotional state of being. Affective coding approaches were best suited to consider the “subjective qualities of human experience” (Saldaña 2016, 124). I utilized both emotions and values coding. Saldaña (2016) states “since emotions are a universal human experience, our acknowledgement of them in our research provides deep insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions. Virtually everything we do has an accompanying emotion(s)” (87). My second research question research question focuses on how the participants navigate their school environments and sociopolitical context, I wanted to better understand the participant’s emotions to provide additional depth and nuance. Similarly, values coding allowed me to better categorize and understand what value the participants attributed to their current education and interactions, and the beliefs they hold for affirming music education practices.

Crystallization of Experiences

I used a crystallization process to showcase the diverse range of perspectives gathered in this study. This process allows there to be multiple interpretations of similar phenomena. Thus, crystallization allows a range of experiences and perspectives to exist within the same space.

Ellingson (2009) states that crystallization

combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (131)

The crystallization process allowed me to engage in a process that is richer than hegemonic triangulation norms that may serve to essentialize the experiences of the Black youth. It is my hope that this approach allows me to not only center themes that are commonly experienced by the participants, but allows me to center less common experiences that may have had a deeply profound effect for one person. I ultimately believe that this crystallization process allows space for tension, dissensus, and multiple truths.

The participants played a role in selecting the specific stories that can be shared in the narrative findings once the themes were identified. I sent various iterations of plots, themes, and stories throughout the process to participants for their feedback. I believe this process allowed the participants to meaningfully engage with the work before it is shared with a larger audience.

Crafting the Endarkened Fabulation

The process of creating the Endarkened fabulation is inextricably tied to the reflexivity, coding, and crystallization portions of this dissertation. Throughout the journaling processes I would engage in reflexive practices where I would pair various stories the participants shared with framings of BlackCrit. I found that I kept organizing the stories of harm using Warren and Coles' (2020) framing of school-based antiblack assaults. Their framing guided my thinking throughout these initial steps of crafting the Endarkened fabulation.

This crafting process carried into the data transcription and analysis phases. I specifically reviewed the audio recordings to hear the spectrum of emotions the participants expressed through their vocal inflections. I would make note of the instances the participants spent an ample amount of time, or ample amount of emotional effort, sharing those stories. I wanted those instances to be central to the Endarkened fabulation. Additionally, I created unique memos for every story shared by the participants that I wanted written into the Endarkened fabulation. I

wanted to maintain their voice throughout the work, with minimal changes to verb tense, and shaping the plot to fit their stories made this reality possible.

I used Leavy's (2022) scholarship in social fiction to guide the organization of the Endarkened fabulation. Leavy (2022) has positioned fiction as an arts-based research methodology that is often guided by the scholar's lived experience and comprised of composite characters the scholar chooses to use. I would reference older journal entries and memos while I engaged in these various aspects of developing the Endarkened fabulation. I needed to organize the confluence of my own reflexive writing and data into a plot that paralleled what an eventful day at Foster could resemble. I had to develop this plot while paying close attention to the themes I wanted to showcase. Additionally, I wanted readers to better attune to the reflexivity process and the kitchen table talks.

I utilized a three-act organizational structure to organize my fabulation. Leavy (2022) suggests that the first act consists of the setup of scene, characters, and the central theme being explored. I made the beginning of the fabulation in a way that centered the two participants/collaborators'—Jackii and Ariel's—school days, and the underlying currents of oppression. I constructed Chapter 4 to highlight the various environments the participants navigate in the study. These environments include their home, their community, and various classroom spaces. I also aimed to lay the groundwork for the rising action that was interpersonal in nature. There is a lasting undertone of antiblack racism throughout the fabulation with varying intersections manifesting throughout the study.

The second act consists of a conflict or rising action. The rising action in this dissertation consisted of antiblackness, transphobia, homophobia, and other assaults enacted by classmates and teachers. I aimed to showcase their mundane nature, but also the breadth of violence. Some

interactions were subtle, while others were overt. I wanted to provide various examples so readers can consider who is subjected to oppression, and who commits the violence. Further, I wanted to consider the confounding nature of this binary. These stories were primarily shared in Chapter 6 where the two protagonists interact with a composite character of myself, Stephan. Chapter 6 was constructed to closely approximate the kitchen table talk environment. I was able to showcase the rising action while simultaneously giving readers insight into my own thoughts through my composite character.

Leavy (2022) then suggests that the third act contain the climax and resolution. I slightly departed from the structure; the protagonists do have a climactic moment when they confront a director, but the resolution is lackluster. This confrontation was fictionalized but was based on a protest the participants organized related to an injustice a classmate faced from a dress-code violation. I made this choice because the participants and I all noted how this classroom had a cycle of harm that never improved, and they wished they had the power to confront their directors. Further, I wanted to highlight the cyclical nature of social justice efforts in music education research while bringing attention to the harms it has, continues, and will continue to engage in.

Chapter Summary and Narrative Overview

I have utilized this chapter to situate the importance of philosophical underpinnings in research and introduced my Endarkened fabulation methodology. I began by “making trouble” through interrogating what is considered philosophical in music education. I then introduce the various epistemic, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings of what I term Endarkened fabulation. I explicate the kitchen table talks and ethnographic methods I used to collect data and

the cyclical relationship between reflexivity and analysis. Ultimately, I argue that a crystallization of the data I collected allows for varied tensions and truths.

The following portion of this dissertation consists of the Endarkened fabulation. There is a stark shift in tone that I have intentionally made to more closely align with the way the participants spoke, and the literature they most enjoy. This fabulation begins with a prologue where I introduce the participants, location, school, relevant characters, and the context needed to follow along. I then ask the readers to navigate the fabulation with certain questions in mind.

PROLOGUE

Dearest gentle reader,

I take the most immense pleasure in being your guide through this journey we are embarking upon. You are already reading this, so you know who I am, we can spare those formalities. I hope that this brief tête-à-tête provides a softer landing into this new world. I will, of course, introduce you to the protagonists of this story. Additionally, I plan to provide you with morsels of information that make you feel like you are on the staff of Foster's School of the Performing and Visual Arts. I believe, however, I should help you get your bearings.

This story takes place in the beautiful state of Florida. Sure, you may be familiar with its popular allures; beaches, theme parks, delicious food, spring break, and so on. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, there are some unsavory aspects; there is sand everywhere, heatwaves, bugs, hurricanes, alligators, and Ron DeSantis. I believe this Ron DeSantis fellow is one you're familiar with, he has made a mockery of education on the national scale.¹⁶ His laws and initiatives have struck fear into educators and researchers. I soon came speculate that it is likely the case that youth are having a much more difficult time. I will continue through this line of thought after I introduce the location to you.

More specifically, this story takes place in Gulfcove, Florida. A misnomer, really, Gulfcove exists within the mainland of the peninsula. The city is surrounded by smaller towns, orange groves, and cattle ranches. No beaches here. Gulfcove is the largest city in the county, but it is by no means large. There is an abundantly charming downtown with trendy shops and restaurants that culminates with a municipal park in the center that spans the length of four city blocks. This park is the site of various festivals, concerts, and events throughout the year. A large,

¹⁶ See Najarro (2023).

gleaming, methodist church sits on the north-end while Foster, the main setting of this story, is at the edge of the southern end of the park. Much like the state of Florida, Gulfcove has a past that is heavily stained by the blood of racial violence. This violence spans hundreds of years and includes lynchings, police brutality, and homegrown vigilantes¹⁷. These atrocities never fully go away, mind you, the echoes reverberate. Florida, and Gulfcove¹⁸ specifically, can feel a bit haunted. I believe these specters make their way throughout parts of the story. Anyway, it seems I have become morose. On with the introduction.

Stephen Foster School for the Performing and Visual Arts is central to this story. Foster, as it is colloquially known, owes its namesake to “the father of American music” and the composer of Florida’s state anthem, *The Old Folks at Home*. It is one of a small handful of performing art high schools in the state. Florida, much like Texas, has a rich tradition in the performing arts, and music education specifically. Foster was one of several programs that was created in the late 1980s as a school-within-a-school. The school currently accepts 100 students a year across a variety of disciplines including: Orchestra, jazz band, choir, musical theater, piano, guitar, theater, technical theater, creative writing, dance, visual arts, and motion picture arts. Foster is situated within Greenlake high school, which serves over 1500 students in the Gulfcove area. The high school was on the front-page news several decades ago, due to gang violence and strong tensions between socioeconomic groups at varying ends of the spectrum. These tensions, however, have largely been quelled by the development of Rikers High School in a nearby agriculture town that displaced many students that lived just east of downtown Gulfcove, just on the other side of the tracks. This tense environment motivated the administration at Foster to

¹⁷ I refer to the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 at the hands of an armed community watch member. See Love (2014) for additional context.

¹⁸ All names used are pseudonyms.

separate itself as much as possible from Greenlake, while still benefitting from the varied course catalog that larger enrollment allowed.

Admission into Foster is quite competitive, each year the school conducts auditions that are open to all 8th grade students across the district's 67 middle schools. Districts are quite large in Florida; this particular one spans hundreds if not thousands of square miles. Foster guarantees bussing¹⁹ for all students that are accepted within the program, including students from the opposite side of the district.

The school is led by principal Dr. Jeffrey Campbell and assistant principal Evangeline O'Hara. Dr. Campbell and Ms. O'Hara travel the district every fall to recruit students for Foster. They coordinate assemblies for the 8th grade students at all the schools in the district. They hand out goodie bags and list the advantages gained through being a Foster School of the Arts (FSA) student. They showcase the millions of dollars in scholarships every graduating class earns, the roles past graduates have earned in Broadway and in professional orchestras. They often highlight the positive aspects of being connected to the larger school, Greenlake, like their award-winning football team that has been the home to several future NFL players and the large amount of available AP classes. Students are also told that Foster School of the Arts is the type of school that is *noticed* on transcripts for students that want to attend Florida State University and the University of Florida. Dr. Campbell and Ms. O'Hara also showcase the international field trips that regularly occur in the orchestra and theatre departments, while highlighting every bell

¹⁹ The infrastructure that supports this bussing is unique to Foster in the school district. The bussing benefits the school more than it benefits the students. Foster's small enrollment is bolstered through the attendance of these students that live across the district, with the farthest students riding the bus several hours a day. This structure, in some ways, parallels the relocation many Black youth experienced because of the Brown V. Board of Education ruling decision that established racial desegregation in schools. This ruling ultimately benefitted white youth and communities while Black children navigated relocations into schools that were often violent and far away from home. See Bell (1980) for additional context.

and whistle that is available on the campus. These attempts, unsurprisingly, create a lot of buzz about the school.

The administration also coordinates field trips and visit days with the schools that have historically served as the school's main feeders. The fieldtrips are artfully coordinated: guests never cross over into the Greenlake portion of the 1500 student-strong campus and are, instead, limited to the towering glass walls of the performing arts center. Students are shown the movie theater, recording studios, music labs, and rehearsal spaces. They are assured of the freedom they receive when they are selected to be a FSA kid and the resources they will have available to them.

This story features two brave protagonists that were allured into Foster who chose to share their experiences with me. I now have the immense pleasure of sharing them with you. I would not have been able to craft this story without their conversations and stories. I will first introduce you to Jackii Kidd and follow with Ariel Bryant.

Jackii has a sharper wit and darker outlook on life than I could ever hope to approximate, I am deeply jealous and impressed. They are 18 years of age and identify as a Black queer non-binary individual. Jackii moved to Gulfcove when they were 10 years old after their parents moved from another region of Florida to avoid overt racial tensions. Jackii was able to keenly name and identify various forms of oppression in our chats. They speak with the expertise of someone that has lived and observed these things, not merely read them from a book. Jackii is the child of Jamaican and Haitian immigrants and has two siblings. They currently live in Gulfcove with their mumma and younger sister. Jackii does not communicate with their father much and their brother is currently in university. Jackii shared many details that highlight how valuable their relationship with their mother is. I deeply sympathize with this sentiment as well. I

also identified with the tensions they shared, tensions many Caribbean children feel from parents that push their children to be successful. Jackii wanted to quit their high school experience at Foster from day one but were pushed to persevere by their parent. They were accepted into the piano and orchestra departments. They chose to pursue violin and join orchestra because that felt like the comfortable choice at the time. They are now currently a violist and enjoy composing.

Ariel is brilliant, kind, boisterous, and strong. She lives in a small town just outside of Gulfcove with her mother and grandparents. Ariel's relationship with her mother is tense but she is quite close to her grandparents. Ariel's grandmother is a principal at a predominately Black middle school in the area and her grandfather is a jazz guitarist and truck driver. Both of Ariel's grandparents are proud HBCU²⁰ graduates, and they have instilled that strong sense of pride into her. Jackii learned early on that Black people are often placed in environments that question and test one's worth, and that it is possible to resist those forces. Jackii also learned how to play guitar from her grandfather, who also taught her the ins and outs of being a jazz musician. She spent many years intently observing his every move and interpretation before learning to play in middle school. Ariel was very clear to express that she attends Foster because she does not think the type of musical instruction and exposure to opportunities she receives currently could be matched by another school in the area. Ariel is the first Black girl to be accepted on guitar in Foster's jazz band program. She wears that crown and regularly feels its weight. Ariel consistently pushes to outperform their classmates and spends countless hours in rehearsals, lessons, and practicing. Ariel has become increasingly frustrated, however, with the power dynamics in jazz. Her desire to be authentically Black and queer is often mitigated by the boys'

²⁰ Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

club²¹ energy that surrounds the jazz program. This suppression is profoundly upsetting when you get to know Ariel; everything about her is wonderfully camp²² and stylish. You will become more acquainted with the various ways Ariel and Jackii are pushed to conceal aspects of themselves in later chapters.

This story is my interpretation of the experiences Jackii and Ariel shared with me. I have, admittedly, added a bit of flair and panache through my delivery of the story, but the words of these two individuals are preserved. The story begins with a glimpse into their days as FSA kids and culminates with an intriguing ending. I ask of you to consider the following as you read this:

1. In what ways does the curriculum and classroom spaces shape the choices Ariel and Jackii make?
2. What undertones do you notice throughout the interactions Jackii and Ariel experience?
3. How does the current sociopolitical landscape in Florida affect Jackii and Ariel?

Additionally, I suggest readers to reconsider the research questions at the beginning of the larger work. It is my hope that you may make some of the same connections I have made throughout the Endarkened fabulation.

I leave readers with a cast of characters to ease your journey. It is less important to look at it now, but I hope it serves as your companion throughout the narrative. The order of the cast is intentional, but sharing the specifics may spoil the story. I look forward to reconnecting, albeit in a more scholarly tone, at the conclusion of this story.

²¹ Meaning a social environment that favors and centers patriarchal masculine interests. These environments often exclude and denigrate women, trans, and gender-expansive people.

²² An aesthetic that uses the exaggeration of various elements to create a playful and amusing product. This term is often associated with aspects of LGBTQ+ culture.

Cast of Characters

Jackii Kidd (They/Them): Violist in Foster's orchestra department

Esther (Mumma) Kidd (She/Her): Jackii's mother

Erika Kidd (She/Her): Jackii's sister and technical theater student at Foster

Ariel Symone (She/Her): Guitarist in Foster's jazz department

Tina Symone (She/Her): Ariel's mother

Peggy Symone (She/Her): Ariel's grandmother

Mr. Ronald Buck (He/Him): Orchestra director at Foster

Mr. Wagner (He/Him): Jazz director at Foster

Mr. Keller (He/Him): Piano teacher at Foster

Dr. Jeffrey Campbell (He/Him): Principal of Foster

Evangeline O'Hara (She/Her): Assistant principal of Foster

Dr. Pérez (She/Her): School therapist

Mr. Garvey (He/Him): Band director at Greenlake

Mrs. Wagner (She/Her): Musical theatre teacher and wife of Mr. Wagner

Mr. Booth (He/Him): American government teacher at Greenlake

Ms. Samson (She/Her): AP economics teacher at Greenlake

Mamma Jinn (She/Her): Ariel's bus driver

Cletus Connelly (He/Him): Fiddler

Ms. Brooks (She/Her): Jackii's private teacher

Stephan Fredericksen (They/He/She): Jackii's Cousin

Clementine (She/Her): Trombone player at Greenlake

Barry (He/Him): Saxophone player in Foster's jazz department

Juan (He/Him): Trombone player in Foster's jazz department

Sydney (She/Her): Guitarist in Foster's jazz department

Keith (He/Him): Trumpet player in Foster's jazz department

Ricky (He/Him): Trumpet player in Foster's jazz department

Tyler (He/Him): Percussionist in Foster's jazz department

Natalie (She/Her): Viola player in Foster's orchestra department

Carlos Ramirez (He/Him): Former violinist in Foster's orchestra department

Da'vonte (He/Him): Former Greenlake student

Trey (He/Him): Musical theatre department student

Katie (She/Her): Musical theatre department student

Kyle, Kaitlin, Kennedy: The Wagner's children

Nina (She/Her): Former flute player in orchestra department

Bliss (She/Her): Former clarinet player in Foster's orchestra department

Rose (She/Her): Stephan's past classmate

Viv Martinique (She/They): Past student in Foster's piano department and composer

CHAPTER 4

4:40 a.m. Tuesday

Ariel lays in bed, tangled in a matrix of sheets, suspended in a moment of serene darkness. The iPhone alarm goes off. Snooze. It goes off again. Snooze. The alarm pushes into her skull with icepick-like precision. Ariel tosses her phone across the room, and winces. “Fuck...” Ariel groans, “I need to ease up on these etudes, since when do I wake up with my hands hurting?” The alarm goes off again, there is no resisting, this time Ariel has to get up.

The phone landed somewhere in the ink-black darkness of the room. Ariel grimaces when she reaches to turn her light on, feeling shards of glass and ice shoot through her hands and wrists. Her phone landed on a pile of laundry she washed the prior evening, “That’s not cute. I’ll tidy up after rehearsal tonight”. Ariel throws on her fluffy pink robe and slippers and heads over to the cage in the corner. “Good morning Mr. snuggles! How are you serving SO MUCH FUCKING cunt this morning?? You’re a hamster! Iconic. You are that girl”.

Alright, Ariel thinks, Imma need to do some stretches because she’s feeling a teeeeeny bit sore. Ariel puts her airpods on and unfurls a yoga mat in her bedroom. She finds a lo-fi afrobeats playlist and goes through several poses to stretch out, recovering from the workout she did the prior evening. The mornings are particularly quiet and peaceful at home, one of the few moments Ariel has to herself. She rolls up the mat and puts it back into the closet before grabbing a pink tank top, jeans, and sliding into some socks and Birkenstocks.

“Thank god the bob is out!” Ariel says to the mirror while she brushes her bleach blonde buzz cut and taps down any rogue curls. Her self-esteem has rocketed since cutting her shoulder-length bob, “And the buzz is efficient!” Ariel does her make up, carefully placing a star on each cheek for a bit of extra flair. She stops in the kitchen before heading out and grabs a banana and

Monster energy drink. The sun hasn't risen by the time she makes it to her bus stop, so she waits at the corner of her block under a streetlamp, making sure the dewy grass doesn't touch her socks.

5:07 a.m. Tuesday

Jackii opens their eyes and reaches for their phone to check the time, "Lovely, twenty-three additional minutes of existential dread. No way I'm going falling back asleep. May as well start the day off right". They grab their AirPods and put on *Epiphany* from Sweeney Todd. Jackii leans back into their still-warm pillow while mouthing the lyrics. *Man, this orchestration can be the soundtrack for so much shit right now*, they think to themselves. *You know Sweeney's invited to the cookout, falsely imprisoned and handling justice without cops. He ate.*"

Jackii scrolls on Tik Tok to catch up on the Pro-Palestinian protests happening on college campuses before they get up and look in their closet, there's an array of clothing. They scoot their jeans, slacks, and blazers to the side. Not quite the look they're going for. They suddenly land on a floor-length cream and light-blue linen cottagecore dress. Jackii freshens up and heads to the kitchen for breakfast. They lock eyes with a hot mug of coffee, the warm morning sun causes the steam to shimmer. Jackii almost misses their mother, seated at the small circular dining room table beside the mug.

"Good morning mumma, how are you? Is there any coffee left?" "Jackii you're going to stay short if you keep drinking coffee! But yes... And I left your mug out. Are you taking your sister to soccer practice afterschool? I have work."

Jackii's mind floods with words while they walk towards the coffee pot, *One, I'm taller than you. Two, I'm 18, I'm done growing. Three, why is being short a BAD thing? Also, why are Caribbean parents always acting like they asked you to do something but they're really just*

telling you to do it? I have work too! Maybe I can get there a few minutes late... “Thank you mumma, and yeah that’s fine. By the way, I decided I am not doing solo and ensemble this year. I don’t think I will have the time to learn my solo well enough. I have been asking Mr. Buck for help but he is always too busy.”

“Oh Jackii. Do you know how hard I had to work to give you all the opportunities you have? So many rude and nasty people. There were some patients that I would not go back to because of the things they said to me. But I still worked hard each and every day for you. Please don’t throw away your opportunities that I fought so hard for.”

“Of course, mumma” Jackii says through clenched teeth, “I will talk to Mr. Buck *again* to see if he has time to help me on another day.” Jackii eats a piece of toast, swallows their coffee, and starts to gather their stuff up for school. They notice that their sister isn’t up yet so they bang on their bedroom door.

6:30 a.m.

“Sorry Erika, I’m calling driver privilege today” Jackii pulls the bright yellow aux cable out of her sister’s hand, “You can passenger DJ afterschool.” Jackii got their license at the beginning of the school year but asked to drive to school alone the first months, so their anxiety didn’t get the best of them, which happens...

Erika slightly rolls her eyes and eases into a small shrug, “Fine whatever, can you just put on some good music?” Jackii tenses up. “What did Broadway ever do to you?? You sound like Mr. Buck, is my music taste ‘not professional’ enough for you?” Erika scrunches her face “Ew! Don’t compare me to your orchestra teacher! I mean real music, that’s coming out now.” Jackii laughs after hearing the dig at their teacher but refocuses: “Musicals are still being made, and I am gonna be one of the ones making them. Carlos and I are going to be the next Rogers and

Hammerstein, Ramirez and Kidd! So you better start liking it.” Erika’s eyes dart to the side “Why isn’t your name first??” “I mean... it makes sense. He’s the better musician and he knows a lot more about music theory and history...” Jackii’s voice trailed off at the end of their sentence.

“Look,” Erika starts “I just think you should give yourself credit. You’re the creative one, right? You come up with the words and melodies, he just follows the rules.” Jackii isn’t accustomed to getting compliments from their sister, “Thanks...? You didn’t have to say all that.”

Jackii puts on the soundtrack from *The Wiz* as they drive to school. Getting a car has been a lifesaver for the siblings. The bussing system for Foster School of the Arts worked, but it was brutal. Jackii used to ride the bus for two hours to make it to class before 7:00am, it felt like a pilgrimage of sorts consisting of transfers between buses supplied by the schoolboard. Their commute is just over half an hour now. There’s been a downside to this change of pace, however. Jackii’s newfound freedom means they are actively putting their eyes on the road, as opposed to doom-scrolling on their phone. *Man, it’s fucking depressing here*, Jackii thinks anytime they drive past a reminder of the state’s racist past. There was Dixie highway, of course, with its reminder of the antebellum south. And then there’s Forrest Street. Jackii stumbled across a Tik Tok account called *FloridaAtSundown* that shared a lot of the state’s [not so] secret history of upholding white supremacy. Nathan Bedford Forrest was the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. It took Jackii a few weeks to realize that the street ran through the Black part of town. Then there was the confederate monument that, funny enough, got relocated from downtown Gulfcove into a predominately Black part of town that is being partially displaced by a city-funded convention center. Quite poetic, actually. Jackii would hyperfocus on these signs

sometimes and would get to school with a stomachache. Jackii turned up *Ease on Down the Road* and focused on getting to school.

5:30 a.m.

Ariel hears the soft silk-like whine of the school bus engine before she sees the blinking lights reflecting off the final remnants of the night's fog. Ariel's morning commute is lengthy, about an hour and a half, because of an elaborate transfer system the county developed for the students at Foster School of the Arts and the International Baccalaureate program on the other side of the district. Not many students use the bussing system, only those that want to work their *hardest* to get a premium education. The entire program, however, is one of the district's proudest endeavors.

The door swings open, "Mornin' hun!" Ariel slips her phone in her purse and is met by the driver's warm smile. "Good morning mamma Jinn, how was your shift at Walmart yesterday?" Ariel and mamma Jinn developed a ritual after nearly two years of bus rides. One, Ariel was in charge of initiating conversation. Mamma Jinn didn't want to talk to a sleep-deprived cranky teen. Two, no fake how-are-you conversations. This bus and Dr. Pérez's office felt like the only places Ariel could talk openly. Ariel was the only student that lived as far West in the county as she did, so the bus was just for her. The two continue in pleasant conversation until they reach the transfer school. The transfer bus was already parked so Ariel begins to exit before mamma Jinn stop her "Sugar, don't be paying those skinny white girls no mind. They can't take your crown if you don't let them." Ariel forces a smile before boarding the next bus.

Bus 0957 is one of Ariel's least favorite parts of the day. One, the bus was built in 2009, the seats embodied human suffering, with bits of exposed springs to tear clothes and drenched in a stench of sweat and Purell. And two, Ariel must mentally armor herself to survive the White

Wall. There are several descriptors that can be used to describe the dance students at Foster, better known as the White Wall. *Precise, graceful, professional, cloned, cruel*, and *Klan-like* come to mind. *Kindness*, however, does not.

Ariel rushes past them, eyes cast towards the floor. None of the dancers talk to her, but their eyes say enough. She often wonders if they hate the way that she walks, or if it's the way that she talks. Maybe it's the way that she dresses? Is it because she's just a little chubby and Black? What Ariel is most perplexed and disgusted by, however, is how OBSESSED the guys in jazz are with the dancers. Well, how obsessed they are with half of the dance department. *It's so wild to me that the department with the most Black people is also the most racist. Then again, look at how they segregate themselves!*

Juan motions for Ariel to sit by him. They've been friends from day one at Foster. As she goes to sit she overhears Barry yell, "Careful Ariel, I don't know how much room is left on the bench with big booty Pablo there!" Ariel's bandmates and the dancers on the bus erupt with laughter. Juan manages a laugh, but Ariel isn't convinced. *I am like... 10 or 15lbs skinnier than Juan, like what the fuck?* "Barry," Ariel starts "I remember how you used to be the cutest little Black boy in elementary school. And I remember how you were so sweet in middle school. What the fuck happened to you?" They lock eyes while the chatter on the bus deadened. Barry checked his phone after the uncomfortable pause, laughed, shrugged, and says "Ariel, I'm not Black I'm mixed," before looking away. *Why is he so ashamed of being Black?* Ariel thinks to herself before noticing that Juan laughed too. "Did I miss something?" The confusion Ariel felt made her tense up. "Dude, it's nothing, just the jazz chat." Juan's attempt to pacify Ariel fell short, however. "Oh yeah? The jazz chat everyone is in except for the two girls in the group?"

Whatever..." Ariel pulls her airpods out of her purse and listens to music for the remainder of the ride.

11:00 a.m.

Ariel and Jackii are an unconventional pairing. One, they're not even in the same department. The different departments at Foster are willingly segregated. No one wants to talk to the choir kids; they can't keep time and are awful at theory. The guitarists are too cool to hang around anyone else. Theatre and musical theatre folks spend their waking lives in rehearsals. It's heavily disputed if the art kids actually exist; no one has spotted one. The dancers are just fucking mean. The piano kids are so unproblematic, it's problematic. And then there's the jazz kids, who don't even play "serious" music, and the orchestra kids that lack any real kind of creativity. Sure, these are stereotypes, but you'd be hard-pressed to hear anyone push against them. Ariel and Jackii are best friends though, thanks to Ariel's exuberant optimism and tenacity.

"Hey girlyyyy! How's your day been?" Ariel's voice was just as melodic as her guitar playing. Jackii scrunches their shoulders up and releases them "Honestly? Not too bad. I got to class right at 7 and the morning has been a blur. I ran into one of the assholes who bullied me when I was a sophomore, but I don't think they recognize me now that I shaved my head and don't wear a mask. Girl, Covid days were tough. But what part of Greenlake isn't steeped in trauma? I still think about the time Da'vonte every time I walk past the gym. And how he was tased for running from a fight. I guess things are a bit more boring now. Anyway, how are you?"

"Honey, I'm feeling cunt! Bus this morning was not it, but Mr. Booth got me out of my funk." "He's so nice and understanding," Jackii interrupts, "Does he still ask people to email him with their learning preferences and all that?" Ariel grins, "Yup! He does all that and still wears that nerdy white boy AC/DC belt. It's cringe but he's so nice and cares so I don't even care. He's

also the only teacher that still asks us what name we want to go by, he doesn't give a fuck about those district name forms."

"LANGUAGE!"

Jackii freezes in place. Four years in this program and their blood still ices over whenever Mr. Wagner yells. Drill sergeants likely learned their tactics from this man. Jackii slowly move their eyes towards Ariel, hoping to not incur Wagner's wrath, but she's already gone. Ariel bolts down the steps towards the jazz rehearsal space and sets up within two seconds. Jackii grabs their viola and heads into the orchestra room. They're the only two set up for rehearsal, everyone else is still chatting with friends and unpacking.

11:03 a.m.

Ariel moves her shoulders up, down, and in circular motions. Her fingers move with a hydraulic precision and glasslike smoothness. *Okay, firm, but not tight. My wrists need to stay flexible. I hate how smug Mr. Wagner gets; he's being doing this since before I was born, of course his posture is relaxed.* Ariel winces when she feels a white flash of pain in one of her wrists, so she focuses on stretching.

Ariel notices Keith sneak into class late. It's hard not to notice him, he's slender like a palm tree, has gorgeous blue eyes, and he dominates the trumpet section. He turns the lights off to distract the room and run towards his seat. Someone immediately yells "Where'd Barry go?? I can't see him!" The room erupts in laughter. "Barry, smile so we can see you!" Ariel wants to say something so badly, but she knows it won't make a difference, especially because she's darker than Barry. Mr. Wagner turns on the light, slight smirk on his face. "Okay enough fooling around, let's start with *How High the Moon*. You have the melody first trombones, make it

known. Trumpets, make those chords short but let them ring out. Fill the room with the resonance of your notes. Ariel, keep it clean.”

The fuck does he even mean when he says clean? I still don't understand what he wants. This is the first piece by a Black composer we've had in I don't know how long. Well, not a Black composer, but Ella made it famous. I can't mess this up... The piece kicks off and you'd be hard-pressed to believe that the group was anything other than a studio band. There is not a misplaced note, rhythm, or accent. A smile washes over Ariel's face as her shoulders relax. Guitar has been her passion since she was a little girl. She learned most of her skills from her grandpa, observing everything he did at shows before he started teaching her when she was nine. Being the first Black female guitarist in the jazz program felt like a huge responsibility for Ariel. She knew she represented the school and her teachers, but she also represented her family and other Black women.

Mr. Wagner cuts everyone off: “Bass, first note measure thirty-two, what do you have?” Barry runs his finger down the line until he reaches the measure “I have an F.” “WRONG” snarls Mr. Wagner, “look closer” Barry double checks the measure. “All I see is an F”. “WRONG! I swear some of you teens just need a slap to the head. KEY SIGNATURE. It's either natural, sharp, or flat. You can't just call it an F, next thing you know it's going to be a nonbinary or trans F.” Everyone in the room roars with laughter except Ariel. *See, this is why you'll neverrrr know I'm gay. You think this is all a joke.*

“Alright now that we stopped let's go through and fix a few parts.” Mr. Wagner proceeds to call out a few sections with pitch discrepancies that are so minute only he notices. “Alright, let me hear you on during the first verse Ariel. You're exposed after square B, and it was a little messy. Let me hear it.” Ariel starts playing but Mr. Wagner cuts her off, “Nope! Too messy.

Again” Ariel plays it again, tuning out the pain in her wrists. “It’s almost there. Tighten it up, maybe not clean. Clarify.” Ariel takes a deep breath before playing the section “No! Are you going to get serious about this now? I’ll cut this piece if we can’t get it together guys. It’s sloppy.” Mr. Wagner keeps pushing her. Ariel feels her insides begin to boil over with rage when she notices how many eyes are on her. Then it hits her: *Yes massa*, she thinks, *I didn’t laugh at your stupid ass joke and now you’re going to take it out on me. These old white dudes just want to be right. Imma act like I’m doing something different.* “Sorry Mr. Wagner, I think I get what you’re saying now. I must have just been a teensy bit silly... Does it sound like this?” Ariels proceeds to play the EXACT excerpt with the EXACT same accents as the prior five times. “Yes that! Perfect. Glad you got there, write down ‘clarify’ since that helped you so much. Okay, folks, let’s move onto Take Five!”

11:05 a.m.

Jackii hated the claustrophobia-inducing nature of the orchestra room. The drop-ceiling was removed at some point to create space for the sound to go, but the exposed microphones and wiring made the cramped space feel like an operating room lit by harsh fluorescent lighting. Everything about the room made Jackii’s skin crawl. The burgundy color accents clashed with the lab-like aesthetic of the room, but nothing bothered them more than the décor. The walls were covered with medals earned by past ensembles, Mr. Buck called those the glory days. The Covid pandemic took a toll on Foster. The full symphony rehearses twice a week afterschool now. That ensemble used to rehearse daily within school hours. Mr. Buck talks about those groups with a deep fondness.

I wonder if he’s mad at us because he felt like he had to make diversity picks. Jackii always questioned their place at Foster. They tried to quit the program within their first week of

school, but their mom didn't let them. *I mean, come on, almost every single person in these photos is white. That can't be a coincidence.* Jackii's eyes scan the medals and picture frames. *I just don't get it, only like 20 people of color in ten years? 2010-2020 must've sucked. There's over 100 people in each photo!*

Jackii's focus is broken when the concertmaster stands, and the oboist plays her first A. "Alright folks, let's kick it off with American Salute. Then we'll play Swan Lake. Then we'll do the Coleridge-Taylor." The orchestra was preparing for an international music festival, Mr. Buck rarely cycles the same pieces within the school year, but he wanted the group to sound flawless and to represent the United States well.

Mr. Buck starts with American Salute. His conducting is a bit lackluster compared to Mr. Wagner, but he made up for it with kindness. Well, he was at least the less brutal of the two. "Hey violas, I'm sorry but that triplet section sounds a little like a car wreck. Make sure you lift your elbow BEFORE you move to the C-string. You'll have a clearer tone." Jackii scribbled the note into the part using a freshly-sharpened Ticonderoga. *Oh yeah, the Cadillac of pencils. This will pull me through the rehearsal because I literally cannot fucking play that right now and am faking it. It's too fast but I don't want him to yell at me.* Mr. Buck continues rehearsing the piece and giving tips: "Don't forget, this piece is a medley based on *When Johnny Comes Home*. It was an important song for both sides of the Civil War. It's about wanting your soldiers to come back safely. We need to make this sound as regimented as a military." *Oh cool, Jackii thinks, I'll write that down so I can look it up later.* He continues through the rest of the piece with limited feedback.

The Swan Lake selection is a bit of a blur for Jackii. Viola players don't lead the most active lives during rehearsals. Jackii doesn't miss a note, but their focus is on what kind of

PubSub they'll make at work later that afternoon. They usually get a chicken tender one on a multigrain roll, but they've been wanting to try the mojo pork. "Alright folks, Coleridge-Taylor next, focus on intonation and tone." Jackii begins to think again: *I wonder if Buck knows that Coleridge-Taylor is a Black Englishman. I would've never known unless cuzzo had mentioned it. Why wouldn't Mr. Buck say anything? He'll literally go out of his way to tell you what Tchaikovsky or Mozart ate for breakfast the day they wrote a masterpiece but knowing where Coleridge-Taylor is from is apparently not important?*

The orchestra finishes a playthrough of *Hiawatha Overture* and Mr. Buck looks at his watch. "Alright! Solid playthrough. Any mistakes will iron themselves out if you all look at it. Also, the bell is going to ring soon. Take the next few minutes to play through any problem spots in *American Salute!*"

11:50 a.m.

Jackii rushes to the locker-room first and slides their viola into its space. *I remember this was one of the selling points they showed parents when we toured the school. Funny how it's one of the few spaces that feels like it's ours.* The designer wood trim of the lockers used to make Jackii feel out of place, like they were walking through one of those boutiques downtown that always searches their bags on the way out, but it's grown to feel warm. Jackii immediately notices Ariel walk in, with her gaze cast towards the floor. "Oh no girl! Would you like a hug?" Ariel looks up and smiles "OMG stop, you never hug people. Please!" She continues after they hugged "We can talk later; Mr. Wagner was just his jolly self today and everyone in that room was on worst behavior. I cannot stand it." Jackii furrows their brow, "Did he make you step off again?"

“Ma’am, best believe I’d be with the school therapist if that was the case. Not this time, he didn’t take over my part for me. But hey, I’m gonna practice during lunch so I’ll see you afterschool. I need to work on ‘clarifying’ my parts or whatever...”

“Okay... that sounds like trauma..? Sure, you sure you don’t want to do lunch?” Jackii always worried about how Ariel navigated the stress of the department.

“No, forreal I’m fine. Go eat with your Zesty besties.”

Lunchbreak

Jackii started attending Foster in 2020; it was not a great time. Their mother is a nurse, which strained the home environment because Jackii has always had a history of getting quite ill regularly. Then there was the bullying. They couldn’t tell who was calling them racist and homophobic slurs behind masks in the halls, but that didn’t make it hurt less. Then there was all the tripping and shoving in the halls. Masks protected the students, particularly the white students, from ever being disciplined. The real irony is that Jackii and others got in trouble for things they didn’t even do. They lost track of how many Black kids they had been confused for.

The only place Jackii felt safe was when they were with the other orchestra freshman and in the GSA support group. Jackii had the group stolen from them, however, when Florida ratified the Don’t Say Gay bill²³. That moment reminded them a bit of Trump’s election. They were younger and so scared that they were going to be deported because their mom was once a Haitian citizen. The fear they felt going to school the day after Trump’s election has been similar to their time at Foster.

²³ I chose to preserve Jackii’s thoughts here. But it is vitally important to note that the Equal Access Act Federal law, passed in 1984 protects students' right to form clubs at any high school receiving federal funding. GSAs are almost always considered non-curricular. Policy such as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill functions, in part, through fear mongering that compels districts to behave reactively. Educators and caregivers must push against any reactive initiatives proposed by school administrators or district-level personnel. Please see <https://eqfl.org/know-your-legal-rights> for additional information.

There were only 8 orchestra freshmen due to the pandemic affecting enrollment. They quickly discovered they all had varying queer identities and were navigating verbal and physical assaults on the Greenlake side of campus. They all learned to accept and care for one another and took the orchestra by force in later years. It was actually Ariel that approached Jackii first last year. Ariel admired how authentically the self-titled Zesty besties were and Jackii was the most approachable since there were both Black queer femmes.

Jackii has since explained all the troubles they faced in Foster and Greenlake. Specifically, how some part of their identity is always being attacked. They're either too gay to be on the Greenlake side of campus or too Black on the Foster side. The Zesty besties have learned a lot from Jackii and try to be supportive, but Jackii has never been able to be authentically queer *and* Black around them. Jackii is so thankful Ariel became a friend.

2:05 p.m.

The final bell rings and the halls are packed in everyone on their way to buses, rehearsals, and elsewhere. Ariel begins her push from Greenlake all the way over to Foster. Her relationship on the Greenlake side of campus was better than Jackii's. She didn't deal with the same type of bullying Jackii did, and she had a group of rock band friends she walked with. Foster doesn't have its own pop music major, so any contemporary music happens at Greenlake. Some of the jazz folks playfully teased Ariel for stooping low enough to be around the rock band people but all the love and friendship from the Greenlake folks was more than worth it.

"Y'all are always too sweet for walking with meeeee!" Ariel beamed while saying this. "It's all good! We don't mind and we get to peek into bougie world!" Clementine, a trombone player, loved messing with Ariel. She also auditioned for Foster but wasn't allowed to join

because of some weak sightreading. She mostly learned to play by ear in middle school. She always admired how talented Ariel is and her passion for obscure jazz pieces.

The group pops into Mr. Booth's class and waves before making it to the main walkway. Despite being outside, the walkway was suffocating and cramped. Both sides were lined by teachers that yelled at students to keep it moving. "Most of these teachers act like overseers, making sure that no slave is out of line. I can't stand it." Ariel mutters this to her friends who burst with laughter and a chorus of "Say that!" and "Now say it with yo' chest!"

The group rounds the corner and makes their way to the Foster courtyard. Rehearsals started at 2:30, so folks would usually sit at a picnic table or sit along the theatre building. There was one large tree that provided shade to half the area, but the white wall of dancers colonized that space daily. Ariel and her crew then notice the assistant principal, Mrs. O'Hara in her off-the-rack Hilary Clinton-esque pantsuit from Dillard's standing in the courtyard.

Clementine does an instant 180, "Not dealing with her today. Sorry girl, see you tomorrow!" Ariel's friends quickly change course towards the parking lot. There has been past tension between the Greenlake and FSA kids in the past, so there was usually someone outside afterschool. A lot of the teachers didn't care who hung around as long as they weren't yelling but Mrs. O'Hara had a zero-tolerance approach with Greenlake students. Ariel walks past the dancers and some theatre kids and makes her way to Jackii.

"Can you remind me why I signed up for this?" Ariel asks this question at least once a week. "Look," Jackii starts "I told you to get out while you could. But who is Foster's #1 fan anytime there's a concert?? That's you, girl. I told you it's wretched and damned here. Now you count the days you have left just like me."

Ariel smirks, “And how much time is that?” Jackii hits Ariel with some side-eye “Would you like calendar or business days? Perhaps remaining hours?” They both burst out laughing, not noticing the muted thud of Mrs. O’Hara’s Keds shoes as she makes her way towards them.

“Excuse me, ladies, where are you supposed to be right now?” Jackii speaks first “Hi Mrs. O’Hara we’re just waiting for full symphony and jazz to start. We’ll be on our way in a few minutes.”

“Excellent! And it’s best for you ladies to remember that to be early is on time. You can wait in the orchestra room.”

Ariel’s eyes narrow “Thank you so much for that advice Mrs. O’Hara! My grandma taught me that haste makes waste. So we planned on walking in with all the other students that are outside.”

“Ariel, some of our more active students are outside so they can stretch a bit. I suggest you both find where you need to be.”

“But... Aren’t they stretching out when they’re dancing? Also, we’re not the only jazz and orchestra kids out here.” Jackii tends to avoid contact with school admin, but they were reminded of their talk with their mom earlier in the morning. They had some steam to let off.

“Ladies I will speak to your director if you continue to be insubordinate.”

“No, it’s fine. Let’s go Ariel. I REALLY love your pantsuit, by the way, Mrs. O’Hara.”

Both friends burst into laughter once they were inside. “You did not hit her with the pantsuit. Oh my god! It’s so ugly,” Jackii smirks, “Oh she knows it too. Anyway, do you want to FaceTime tonight?”

“Maybe, I have a lesson after rehearsal so I might be busy, just text me.”

“Sounds good!”

7:30 p.m.

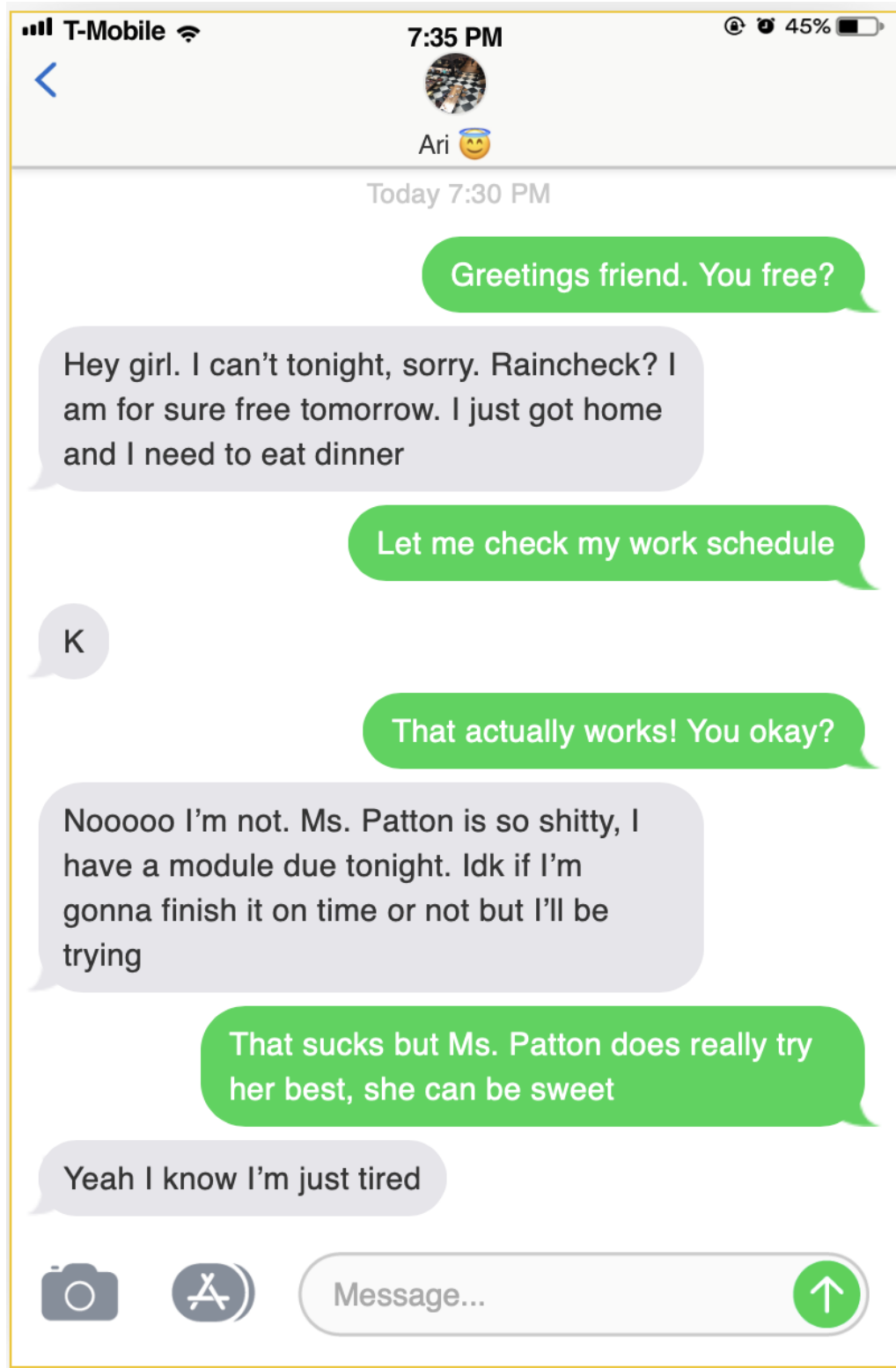


Figure 1. Text exchange.

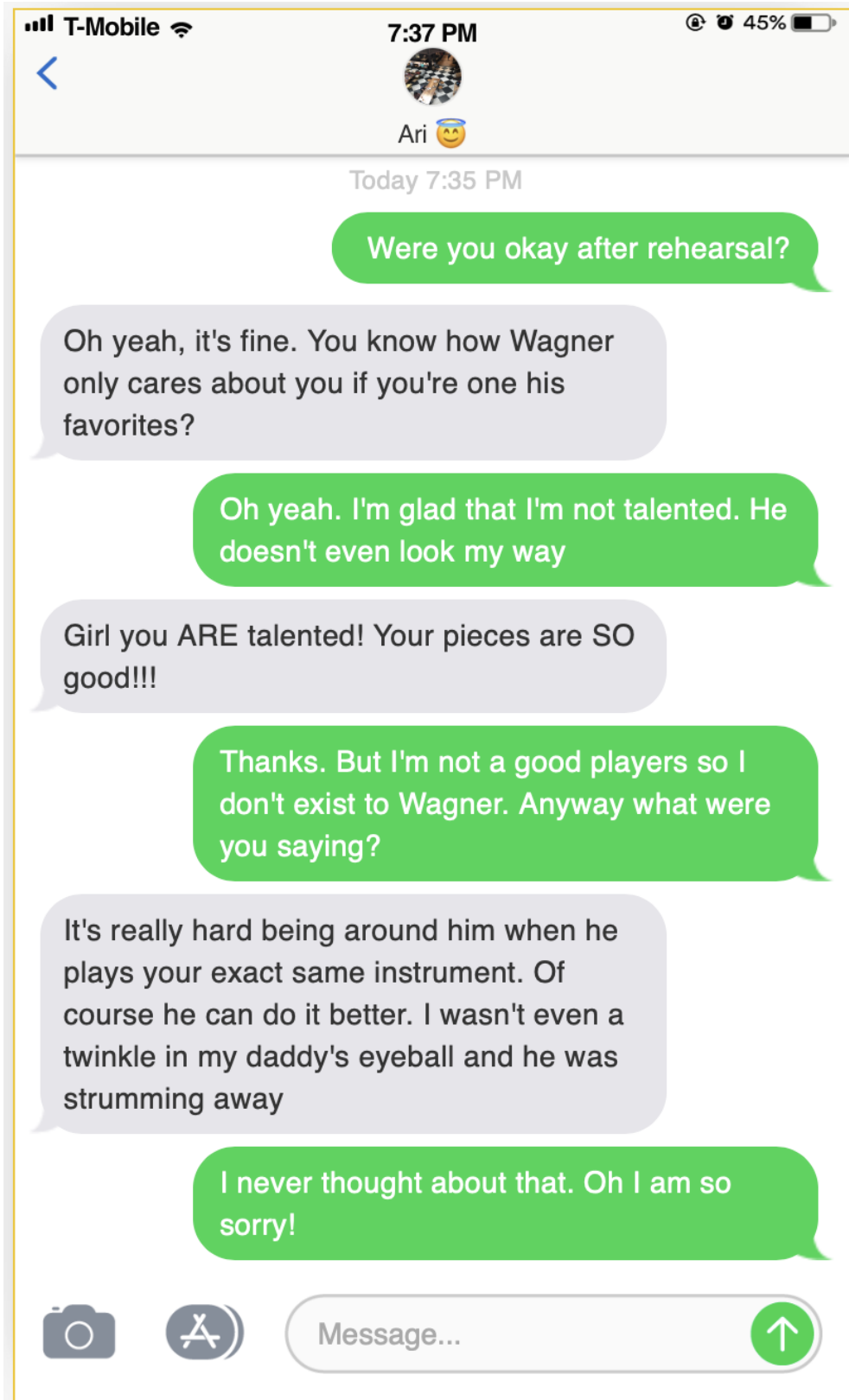


Figure 2. Text exchange.

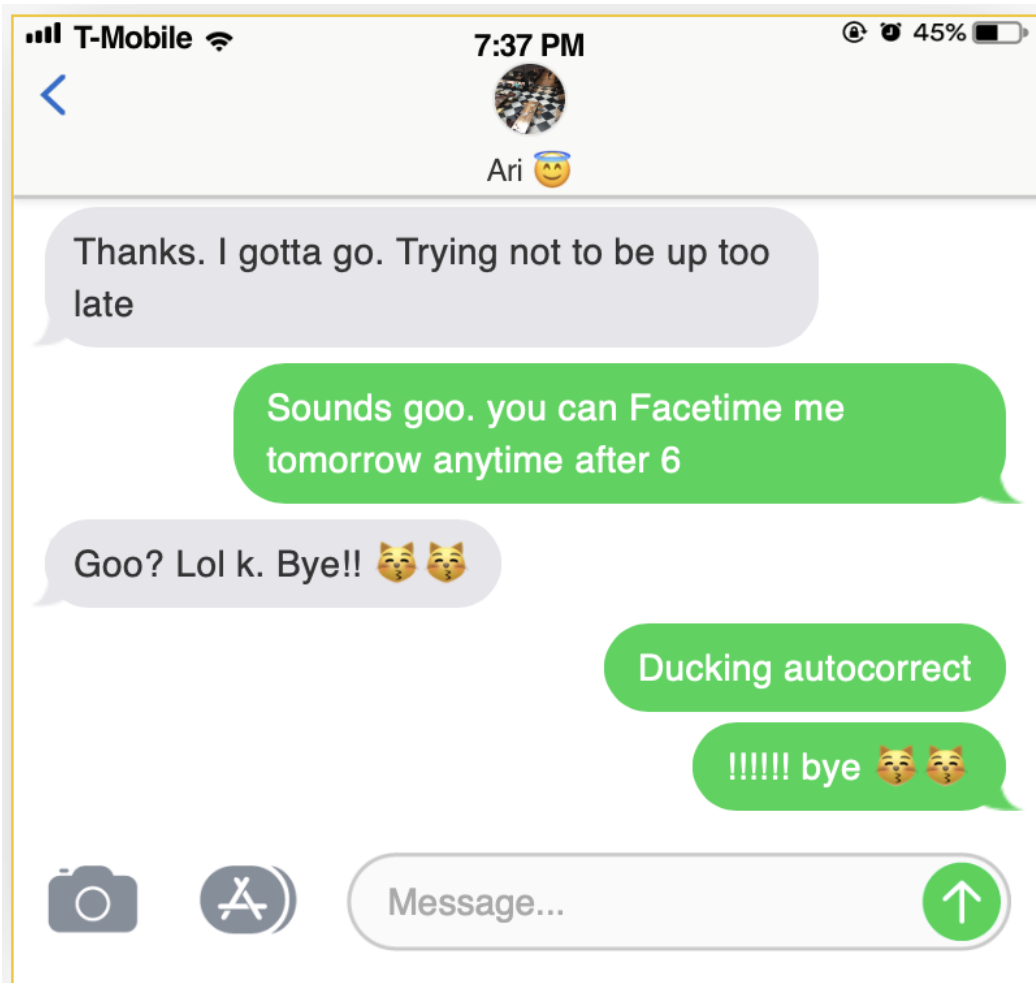


Figure 3. Text exchange.

CHAPTER 5

6:16 p.m. Wednesday

The school day was a whirlwind. Jackii and Ariel somehow managed to miss one another throughout the day. Jackii had a small stomachache that had persisted throughout the day, but it worsened when they thought Ariel might be having some sort of crisis. They needed a distraction, so Jackii decided to work on a snippet of music in MuseScore. Ariel has impeccable timing, however, and rang in the moment Jackii opened the app.

“I thought you were dead! Where were you today??”

“Oh my god, why are you being so extra? That’s *my* job.”

“... True. That is your job. How are you?” Ariel could hear the genuine warmth and concern in Jackii’s voice. It was life-giving for her.

“Girl, I don’t even think I can get started with that yet. Today was a mess. What about you?”

Jackii lingers for a moment. They normally don’t share their feelings with people. But they knew Ariel was a great friend and confidante. “Honestly? My day was shit from the moment I woke up. Have you heard of that podcast *Waking Florida Up*? They talk about all the troubled shit all over the state and the long history of racism and homophobia here. Anyway, they talked about Gulfcove in the video! About this fucking lynching that happened in the earl 1900s. Maybe everyone’s heard of it, but I hadn’t. It was a 16-year-old boy that was burned at the stake despite the sheriff trying to stop people from killing him. Turns out there’s also a tree by a bridge I go over DAILY for school that has been used for hanging people. I know it was a long time ago but sometimes... I don’t know. I saw some Spanish moss hanging from a tree off the riverbank on the drive to school. I almost started crying because it made me think about all the people that

could've been hanging off that same exact spot. It's not a big deal, but it fucked with me. I was off the rest of the day. Made me think of that song you showed me, *Strange Fruit*. Like think about it: there's a chance that the grandchildren of the people that did that could be our teachers or go to our concerts.

"Oh my goodness! Jackii! That's so awful! I'm so sorry. That podcast sounds awful, why do you even bother? I try to not think about how many racists are out there."

"Don't even, you know you are the same way. I would rather know and so would you. At least we know what we're dealing with and living around."

"Yeah, you're right. My grandma always says that 'Truth doesn't change. Only our awareness of it'. I forget who she got that from though. And also, my day was kind of shit too. That's why I didn't talk before class, I wasn't up for it. And then I had to go be with the mental health facilitator because guess who started their day by fighting her mom??"

"Oh no! What happened?"

"OKAY... So let me be real for a second... I knew Tina was gonna come for me this morning. I got home yesterday from my lesson and I tidied up my room and then practiced this section in one of our jazz pieces that has been making me go a little crazy. I swear to god that Mr. Wagner is gaslighting me. Anyway, when I tell you my hand was HURTINGGGG. I think I need to check it out, but I don't want Tina to have another reason to fight with me."

"Um... Yes, you should get it checked out. And also your mom should be worried!"

"HOLDUP. You're on my side, number one. And, two, let me keep going."

"Okay, that's fair, continue."

"So, TINA comes in while I'm doing my homework last night and takes away my MacBook. Yes, mind you, it's almost midnight my head was bobbing up and down. And yes,

mind you, I only slept like four hours. But that is beside the point, I had a module due by midnight for Ms. Samson's class and it wasn't going to wait."

"Naturally, she's ruthless. I think she dislikes us FSA kids. And I know some of us them are full of themselves but not us."

"RIGHT? So, I get up a bit later than I want to and I see that cold kitchen light on at the end of the hall. I knew it was going to be an interrogation. So, I go into the bathroom and hype myself up because there's no way I can handle this. So I'm looking in the mirror and am like 'You are that girl, Ariel' and say 'no one can wear your hair the way you do, no one can rock your fashion, you are smart and strong, no one can play the guitar the way you do, you are cunt.' So I perk up a bit and try to run in, grab my Monster Energy, and dip out but there she is with a 'Ariel, we need to talk about how much sleep you're getting.'"

"Ooh girl, I've been there with my mom too. It's like a rite of passage I guess"

"Well, I hate it. So, then I'm like, 'No, mom, I am going to be late for school. You know, the thing that's going to make me successful? I got home late from rehearsal. Then I went to a lesson, tidied, practiced, ate and did homework. I'm not being a bad kid. I'm not doing drugs.' And ooh girl she got so huffy and started yelling with 'Ariel! Stop putting words in my mouth. I'm worried that you're burning the candle on both ends, honey.' Ooh she makes me so mad with the honey nonsense. I then grab the Monster and she pulls it out of my hand! Saying it'll give me a heart attack, when missing the bus is what's gonna give me a heart attack. Does she forget that this school is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Does she know how hard it is to be the first Black female guitarist in my jazz band? Does she know how much responsibility that is? I think about it every day, I WILL make something of myself. I try to be the perfect daughter, the perfect student, and the perfect musician, but it's not enough. She doesn't get it! She always says the

world chews up and spits out strong Black women if you let that happen to you, so I won't stop working."

"Yeah but don't you just get tired of it all sometimes?"

"Of course I do. I can't stand Mr. Wagner sometimes. I think he's so goofy, looking like an assembly line manager in his pressed slacks, button up, polished shoes with a sharpie to hide any scuffs. But what completes it is his fucking shoulder towel for all that sweat and spit when he's yelling at people."

"Ewww yeah. And the worst part is when he throws it at people so they can switch them out for him! Then you have Mr. Buck with his dirty sneakers, wrinkled khakis, and dusty flannels. He just looks so clueless."

"Girl, that's not the outfit... So, I have that bad morning. Barely focused in my first two classes. At least Mr. Booth was nice enough to check in on me."

"Yeah he's so sweet. And he'll actually hear you out without spamming the mandatory reporter button..."

"Right? But then Mr. Wagner goes off on me TWICE today. I can't with him. I'm so close to quitting."

Jackii immediately sits up in their bed. "Oh shit! What happened??"

"Well, I'm sure you heard some mumblings..."

"All I know is that Mrs. O'Hara came into your rehearsal this afternoon..."

"UGH! Okay let me set the story straight. Number one, I went straight to rehearsal afterschool and practiced the whole time to avoid HER. She's the one seeking a fight I swear to god. So, you know how Wagner is having Sydney and I switch out on guitar more?"

“Yeah. Is she the reason why? I dislike her so much.” Jackii scrunches up their face and does a gagging motion for added dramatic flair.

“Hey, she’s the only other girl in class. I try to depend on her. Anyway no. She’s playing so I’m just sitting this tune out. Mind you, I asked Mr. Wagner if he wanted me to do some improv, and he said he wants the piece to be clean. He has said no. I have written that in my folder. Easy peasy.”

“Okay. So far so normal”

“Well. Kind of. I missed class today because I had to go to the mental health facilitator. I heard through the grapevine that Wagner said there better actually be something wrong with me like I’m dying or something if I’m missing class. So that’s great? I’ll get back to that.” Ariel sees that Jackii’s mouth is wide open in shock, but she continues.

“So, I’m feeling a bit down and I decide that I can get cute and hype myself up. Nothing wild, just cute lip color situation. And in comes Ms. O’Hara, looking like a viper that’s ready to strike. She just watches for a bit, no reaction on her face. Then she locks eyes with me and I see the corners of her lips fall downward. It was some Meryl Streep in *Devil Wears Prada* kind of shit.”

“Okay coming through with the niche reference!”

“Thanks! And then I see her walk towards Mr. Wagner and whisper in his ear and they both look in my direction. Suddenly it looks like this man is charging up for a hyperbeam like a Pokémon or something and he goes ‘ARIEL! This may surprise you, but this is not a salon. Get on your part and stop being lazy! It is a privilege for you to be here. Your behavior speaks louder than words. Get on your part NOW!’ And I fucking see a smile on Mrs. O’Hara’s face as she walks out like nothing just happened.”

“The fuck? No way. But there was nothing for you to play??? What happened?”

“Well, first thing’s first I did not cry. So that felt like a win. I looked at him and quietly said that he asked me not to play. He laughed it off and said he was just messing around.”

“Right.” Jackii says with deadpan delivery, “So believable”.

“I can’t stand when he says I’m messy. It’s made me start obsessing with being clean at home. Like I will lose sleep just to make sure everything is in place. He always says I’m either messy or playing too loudly.”

“Hate to say it, but you know people always tell Black women they’re too loud. I’ve gone into the locker room to grab rosin during rehearsal before. I only hear the saxes. Not you. It’s either the saxophones overplaying or it’s Mr. Wagner yelling.”

Ariel lowered her shoulders and took a deep breath “that’s a really good point. When I was with Dr. Pérez today she talked about how I might be worn out from all the microaggressions in Mr. Wagner’s class.”

“No offense, but no shit.”

“No, no... I get it. I just never thought of the *word* microaggression. Because that’s just the way Mr. Wagner is. The first time Dr. Pérez brought it up was with the Wakanda moment last year.”

“I still cannot believe that everyone in that jazz room bowed and said, ‘Happy Black history month my Wakandan queen’ and acted like it wasn’t some fucked up joke. You said they were all laughing!”

“You have no idea Jackii. Even Mr. Wagner was laughing. If I’ve learned anything in jazz band these last two years is that verbal and physical boundaries mean nothing to Mr. Wagner. That’s just how it is.”

“I really hate that for you, I’m sorry friend. But I also hard agree. They’re also so good at gaslighting us into thinking they’re helping.

“Yeah! I feel like I have that one psychological disease... What’s it called? You know the thing Princess Peach probably has with Bowser?”

“Mario reference? Weird but respectable. Anyway. Are you thinking of Stockholm syndrome?”

“YES.”

Ariel and Jackii burst into laughter and continue to chat, moving towards conversations about funny Tik Toks they’ve seen, the newest shows they have been streaming, and some of the more interesting gossip occurring at school.

“I sometimes wonder if Mr. Wagner has always been this way... Or if he learned that behavior from his wife,” Jackii said in a hushed whisper.

“STOP are you talking about that one time Mrs. Wagner touched your hair?”

“Oh my god, don’t remind me. She thinks she can do what she wants because she’s the best musical theater teacher in the area. She gasped when she saw me that day and said, ‘Oh you’ve got your crazy hair out today!’ and reached for my head. I froze. I didn’t know what to do.”

“No way! she fucking didn’t... Are you serious?”

“Yup. I cut my hair that weekend. It felt tainted. And I felt free after I shaved it off.”

“That’s why I knocked off the bob! I am serving so much more cunt now” Ariel exclaims while running her hand over her blonde buzz-cut.

“Girl you looked great in that bob too! But I get it. And no, I was talking about all the casting drama with *In the Heights*.”

“Oh? I didn’t hear about that.”

“AHHH. So, Mrs. Wagner cast Trey and Katie for Vanessa and Usnavi. She cast two blonde-haired and blue-eyed people for those roles. Vanessa and Usnavi are PoCs. Not like a feature. It plays a role in how they exist in the show. But Mrs. Wagner told everyone she did a colorblind casting. So, whatever. But get this. Someone overheard her on the phone in her office saying she cast them because they were the BEST LOOK for the roles!”

Ariel’s gasp is audible. “What does that mean?”

Jackii turned their head to give a devastatingly bombastic side-eye. “Yup. The Wagners are a pair. But Mr. Wagner was there wayyyy before Mrs. Wagner was. I think he’s always been that way.”

“That’s probably why they named their kids KKK. Think about it: Kyle, Kaitlin, and Kennedy.”

“Ariel! That might be too far for me. But really, they can get away with anything.”

“Isn’t that always the case here though? You can do what you want if you’re talented enough and know the right people. Look at Ricky. They caught him with over 500 dirty pictures of girls AND guys on campus. The cops came on campus and took him away. He admitted to it! He’s still here though because his mom is cousins with the theatre teacher here and he’s a great trumpet player.”

“That’s always the case. And if you’re not talented you’re invisible. Which, sometimes isn’t that bad honestly.”

“Worst case scenario is when you’re not talented and they don’t like you though. You know Tyler? He’s always trying to fit into jazz with homophobic and racist jokes but even Mr.

Wagner yells at him for those. There's a formula for being one of Mr. Wagner's favorites. You have to be talented, and you have to punch down. Kind of like what Barry does now."

"Yeah... You didn't go to school with her, but I think a lot about Nina. She was one of the most talented flute players you could imagine. Only got things wrong the first time, had perfect pitch, a great ear for rhythm. One day Mr. Wagner was conducting the symphony afterschool, and he kept telling her to play the same part differently. And he doesn't know a ton about flute, and it started showing, so she smirked a bit. And he lost his cool and started yelling at her to get it right so she..."

Ariel cuts her off. "Oh no honey, you've told me this story. It gives me LIFE. She got so mad she said, 'Yes massa,' and played it for him right?? That was the moment?"

"Yup! I'm glad she's still leaving an impression on people. But Mr. Wagner became a bigger jerk. Making her sight read in front of the entire orchestra, giving her grief for not ensuring the section had coordinated breath marks. Extra responsibilities. Until one day she was gone. The worst part is if you bring it up to Mr. Wagner, he'll just say it's a shame she had an attitude and that she didn't have the interest or resilience to keep it up."

"At least you get to deal with Mr. Buck more. That's better, right? I only really see him during some of the afterschool rehearsals."

"Kind of? It's kind of like Mr. Wagner serves up Big Mac sized racism and Mr. Buck is a happy-meal racist?" The friends burst into laughter again before Jackii continues. "You know he confused me with Natalie the last three years? He blames Covid masks but we didn't wear those last year. I look like Lupita Nyong'o! She looks like Zendaya! I'm bald! Natalie has locs!!"

"Ooh girl, that is not it."

“Yup. He’s just so lukewarm about everything. He thinks taking the middle-ground is noble but it’s not when you’re one of the people that’s cast to the side. He made me so angry in rehearsal today.”

“Oh?? What happened?”

“Okay... So it’s not the same as what you’re going through. But it’s still so annoying. Do you ever notice how they both seem to know everything about every piece except the ones by Black people or women?”

“Yup. They say they don’t want to be controversial.”

“Right. But there’s nothing controversial about knowing why someone wrote a piece. Or even knowing what the composer looks like. So yeah... There’s a lot of that. I think he chooses music by PoC he thinks are fun. But all the classical pieces have some sort of purpose. Anyway. We played through all the music and then he starts going on and on about how we need some lively music for a festival that’s coming up at the park. A ton of us ask if we can use the string quartet arrangements of rock and pop songs he uses for wedding gigs. Also, side note, those are boring too. But they’re less boring than what he makes us do. Anyway, he says they’re too ‘unprofessional’.”

“What does that even mean? Aren’t wedding gigs professional??”

“He’s gone on and on about how he has friends that do weddings full time. But somehow no, not professional enough. So what does he suggest? He wants us to play the fiddle music set we learned last year with *Cletus Connelly*.” Jackii was particularly proud of the extra twang they used for the fiddle player’s name.

“Wait. I thought that was a cool thing? Was it not?”

“It definitely was not. Mr. Buck made that whole experience traumatic. But I’ve got to help mom with dinner right now. Can I call you back?”

“Yeah of course. I’m gonna try to get some exercise in. I’ve been too busy to do it all week, but it brings me peace. You can call me back whenever; mom is working until 11 and I finished my homework on the bus.”

6:45 p.m.

Ariel loves lifting weights. She never expected to like it, she took a semester of weightlifting at the beginning of the year out of curiosity, now she believes it gives her stamina on the guitar. Ariel was the first sophomore in years to be next in line to be band leader. Mr. Garvey, the director, was hesitant about placing FSA students in leadership roles, regardless of their talent, because he focused more on the collective morale of the band. There was no question, however, that Ariel was dedicated and was there to make music and support the community. The extra time commitments took a toll on Ariel’s free time and sleep, but even the mental health facilitator recommended she stay in the group. Weightlifting and rocking out made her feel like she was enough.

Jackii’s favorite moments with their mom are either silly or quiet. Their mom had to navigate adverse conditions when she immigrated to Florida. She had to navigate various language and cultural barriers to become a visiting nurse. There were many instances where she had to survive abhorrently racist patients, leading to a moment where she decided to move her family to an area in the state that was less overtly racist. She doesn’t accept that treatment anymore and has a zero-tolerance policy towards racist interactions. Jackii’s mom tries to share all the lessons she’s learned with her children, and to guide them towards making better decisions. Jackii gets tired of those lessons though; they learned at a young age that it’s less

about making the right decisions and more about the internalized racism, homophobia, sexism, and other types of discrimination around them. They just need a space to recover, heal, and to feel like a kid again. Jackii and their mom made rice and beans with some plantains while they talked about how Mr. Wagner likely finds ranch dressing to be spicy. There was much laughter.

8:50 p.m.

“Hey! What’s good?” Ariel answers her FaceTime call in much higher spirits this time around!

“Absolutely nothing. The world is burning.” Jackii and Ariel pause for a moment before they burst into laughter. Gallows humor is quite common between them as of late.

“Okay so tell me about this fiddle stuff, but let me get a blanket first.”

“So, this is story time I guess? None of us really like talking about it. But it’s a great story. So last year Mr. Buck came back from the all-state FMEA²⁴ stuff and it was EXCITING. He was talking about wanting us to be experts in different styles and creative and whatnot. So I’m like okay... Is this finally my chance to be something??? Maybe we’re going to compose music for the group. Or maybe we’re going to start a band. No clue. But we end up with fiddling... So he hires his friend Mr. Connelly who is a fiddler. But he tells us to call him by his first name.”

“Of course he makes you all learn country music. He’s such an airhead I swear.”

“Okay... So hear me out. Cletus was actually really cool. He’s a blind guy that learned how to play fiddle in Tennessee and he became an orchestra teacher later in life for the healthcare. He even takes an uber just to get to work. He does so much. Anyway. I’m getting ahead of myself. You’re right. We didn’t want to play the music at first.”

²⁴ Florida Music Educators Association

“See? What’d I say?”

“A lot of people made fun of his playing. Saying how he doesn’t know how to shift and that his bow articulations were so crunchy it was like he was eating a bag of Doritos...”

“OMG STOP. Let me go get some Doritos for this story. Be right back.”

“You are so extra. Anyway. He calls us out one day and says that while he can’t see that we’re up to no good, he can hear it. He then talks about how there are two ways he’s learned to think about fingering, one that focuses on tone up and down the fingerboard, and another that focuses on patterns that are easy to move *across* the fingerboard. And that he always prioritizes rhythmic emphasis over smoothness. He made us do some exercises copying him by ear and he was SO RIGHT. It took like 4 weeks for us to finally buy in. He was showing us the history behind the pieces and even talked about how there are Black and Brown fiddlers, that they’ve always been a part of the music.”

“What CAN’T Black people do!” Ariel exclaims while snacking on some cool ranch Doritos.

“I heard that. So we were getting a bit closer to Arts in the Park. And Mr. Buck decides to listen. He is HORRIFIED. Says we’re learning bad posture and that all he hears is people making mistakes. Cletus jumps in and says that jam sessions are about learning and getting better each time. And how the audience can join in by singing and dancing. Mr. Buck loses it and says that since we’ll be mic’d onstage all the scratching will be noticeable. It’s the weirdest thing in the world because you know that Mr. Buck is kind of... I don’t want to say spineless... But he’s not aggressive the way Mr. Wagner is. But you could see it, that they’re both the same at their core. The next day in class Mr. Buck tells us that he and Mr. Connelly spent the evening transcribing the music and that we could use the music onstage. He also wrote out some solos that people

could audition for. It ruined the fun, honestly. Mr. Buck took over the rehearsals and conducted and Cletus was just there to give advice on how to sound more “authentic” when we played. There was one day that Mr. Buck asked that question and Cletus said ‘I could tell you how to make it authentic; I just don’t think you’ll like what I have to say. So I’ll just say it’s great.’ I still think about that moment.”

“You know... Maybe they both need to hear the truth.” Ariel’s lips began to faintly curl into a smile.

“Yeah? And who’s going to do that so I can tell them it’s a horrible decision?”

“Just hear me out. I’m talking about staging a huge protest between jazz and orchestra. We call out the racist and sexist behaviors. We call out the bad teaching. All of it. And they can’t do us like they did Nina. There would be too many of us for them to do anything about it.”

“If you’re thinking that big, are we including our parents? Because I don’t know how that’s gonna fly.”

“I think our parents will lose it if they know what we’re dealing with daily. They’d probably yell at us for not saying anything sooner even though they’re not dumb, they have to see all the abuse too, right?”

Jackii paused for a moment to consider Ariel’s question, “I... I don’t think they do. They have no clue how many times we’ve been yelled at, picked on, or bullied to get there. I mean, fuck, sometimes I feel like it’s all worth it when we have a really good concert. Also. There’s another issue. Other than you and Barry, none of their favorites are going to join us.”

“Ha! You think Barry is joining? He’s changed so much since middle school. He used to be the sweetest Black boy but now he just wants to fit in with Mr. Wagner and all the other white boys.”

“They’re not all even white.”

“Yeah, but you know what I mean. It’s like they hate being Black. Maybe this won’t work...”

“Wait. Ugh... You made me buy in. So now hear me out please. Not sure if you remember but the Zesties and a few other people held a protest last year. Bliss got sent to the office for a dress code violation just because she was curvy and happened to wear a skirt and apparently teachers can’t handle how sexual that is? Fucking gross. But it got worse. Bliss said she wasn’t going to leave class because she wasn’t breaking the dress code and Mrs. O’Hara came to pull her from class and called her a *slut*. We all heard it. We were so pissed. So a bunch of us got on a group chat and like 25 of us showed up in miniskirts on Friday. We’re talking short, tall, thin, thick, girls, guys, gays, and theys. And Mrs. O’Hara and Dr. Campbell APPLAUD us for our efforts. But then they say their hands are tied and they are forced to enforce the rules.”

Ariel fiercely interjects “What about these white walkers in dance with their crop tops though???”

“Nah girl I get it. But they tell us we *must* take it to the district. We did. That was a year ago. We’re still waiting on our initial review... So I think if we want to make any impact we might just have to handle this one on one.”

“No way that’s happening I’m too scared of Mr. Buck for that.”

“Here’s the thing though. I think in some weird, misguided way they might care about us? Or at least they think they do? Maybe we don’t talk to them the way Nina did and try to talk to them after rehearsal one day? I can drive you home so don’t worry about taking the shuttle bus.”

“Shit, I guess this might be happening? What if it’s two on one though? I’m not ready to talk to Mr. Wagner yet. I don’t even know exactly what it is I want. I just know that this isn’t it.”

“No, you’re good. It makes sense. You still have two years left; you should be careful. I’m done at the beginning of June, so I don’t have much to lose, and I want to make things better for you and the other people after me. Plus, Wagner and Buck work together, they’ll talk.

“Ugh, I have no clue what I’ll do when you’re gone. It’s going to be so hard”

“We only see each other in the hall, we will be fine, I promise! Oh! I just had a good idea! Let me call you back.” Jackii quickly hangs up.

“Well damn, I guess they’re leaving me now.” Ariel rolls over and starts scrolling on their phone. Only a few minutes pass before their phone rings.

“Oh, thanks for not abandoning me.”

“I’m sorry! But hey—do you remember my cousin, Stephan?”

“The one that went to FSA before you?”

“Yeah! Did I ever tell you that they’re a music teacher?”

“Wait really? What did they play?”

“They’re also a viola player! It’s a bit complicated. They don’t get along with all the family too well. And then they didn’t want to make me feel nervous about playing since they were section leader for three years and an all-state musician and all that jazz. Which, I guess I respect but they could’ve asked me for my opinion... But we’re cool.”

“So, if they’re so good why don’t they teach lessons at Foster or guest conduct?”

“Here’s the tea: I am pretty sure Stephan HATES Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner. Or at least there’s drama there? It came up at dinner a long time ago and when I asked them to explain their feelings, but they said we’d talk once I was out of Foster. They also aren’t an orchestra teacher;

they do all of these weird experimental groups and stuff. Anyway, I called them and explained what we were talking about. They said they're down to share thoughts and hear us out. I know you just said you weren't even sure what it is you want. This might help us talk to Mr. Buck?"

"Oh my gosh! That sounds really cool! Let's do it. When?"

"Do you want to go to the farmer's market and then get coffee after? I know Stephan cannot say no to a farmer's market. They're that kind of queer."

"Number one—SAME. Two—You were using they/them pronouns, so I was *hopeful*, but I wasn't sure. Are they old?"

"Umm, I would not say they're old? But they're old enough to teach?"

"Yeah that's cool. You know it's not even about age. Some teachers are cool, and some aren't.

"Yeah like Mr. Booth, he just gets it"

"Oh fuck, Mr. Booth! I need to get off the phone. I forgot I had an assignment I need to turn in."

"Oh no! Yeah I'll send you deets. Might end up being closer to the end of the year though."

"That might be the best time, actually. So, if they get mad, you're gone, and I have a summer in between hahaha. Text me details when you have them please. Bye!!!!"

CHAPTER 6

7:30 a.m. Saturday



Figure 4. Text exchange.

Jackii quickly jumps out of bed and throws on jeans, a soft yellow t-shirt, sneakers, and a Publix tote before heading out the door. They coordinated a get-together with their cousin, Stephan, and Ariel at the farmer's market. It has been several weeks since the trio decided to chat but, if anything, Jackii and Ariel's resolve to talk to Mr. Buck has increased. Jackii puts on *The Book of Mormon* soundtrack as they drive to Ariel's.

8:00 a.m.

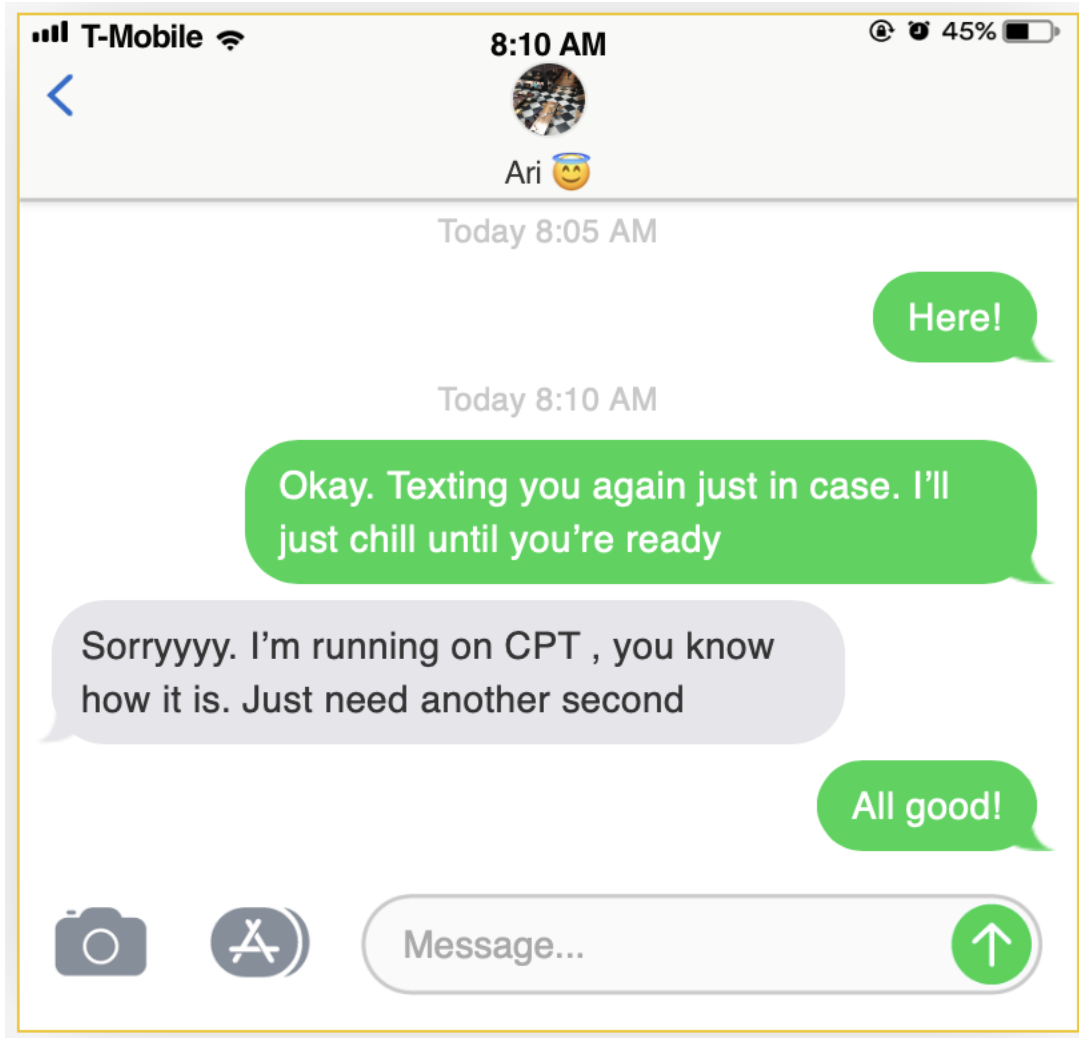


Figure 5. Text exchange.²⁵

Ariel runs out 10 minutes later in converse, pink shorts, a black tank top, and crescent moon earrings. “Sorry! Are we running late now?”

“Nope, we’re good. We’re not meeting with Stephan until 11, I figured we could get our shopping in first. Also, those shorts are so cute on you! Are they new?”

²⁵ I understand this term may be unfamiliar for some. I’d leave it at “if you know you know” (IYKYK), but I’d like to receive my degree. Colored People Time (CPT) is a term used to explain the fluid temporality of folks with higher concentrations of melanin of the African diaspora.

Ariel scrunches her nose as she smiles, “Thanks! No not new. I just don’t want to give those assholes SOMETHING ELSE to run their mouths about so I keep it cute. But that’s for another time!”

“I really hate that there’s something going on with those folks. But those shorts are cute! Anyway, where are we stopping first?”

“Thank you for letting us shop first! Let’s go to the flower stand and check out the plants they have.”

Ariel and Jackii talk the entire way to the farmer’s market. The conversation ranges from talking about Ariel’s upcoming interview to be a student liaison for the rock band and Jackii’s search for off-campus university housing. They also talk about some of the drama between and amongst their classmates, taking particular pride in the fact they avoid most of it.

8:35 a.m.

Jackii pulls into the parking garage that is closest to the park and immediately finds a spot. “That’s one of the perks of getting here early!” Jackii exclaims as they pull into a spot. “Not just that,” Ariel interjects, “I bet there’s no line for the smoothie bowl guy! Let’s go pleaseeeee!”

Ariel and Jackii race to the stand *Berry Good Bowls* and see a short line. *Berry Good Bowls* is a smoothie stand that takes a farm-to-table approach to its drinks and bowls. This stand is in the running for a James Beard award.²⁶ This isn’t the first time a stand at the Gulfcove farmer’s market received accolades; two other stands had been featured on *Food & Wine* and *Magnolia* magazine. The Gulfcove area has always been regarded as a hidden cultural gem with various food and arts festivals throughout the year. The farmer’s market in and of itself is a point of pride for the city. Nearly 200 booths and stands line the perimeter of the expansive park

²⁶ This award recognizes restaurant business professionals in the United States that are lauded for their excellence. Refer to www.jamesbeard.org for additional information.

serving food and selling goods from a variety of different cultures. The center is left open for people to picnic or listen to live performances.

Jackii and Ariel begin to make it towards the front of the line, and they begin discussing their options. “Okay the granola is a must!” Ariel takes a deep breath before she continues “How is it crunchy and light without it being dusty? There’s cinnamon in it but something else?”

“Yeah, totally, you can tell it’s fresh, but I’m obsessed with the peanut butter cookie drizzle. I didn’t even know that existed until I had one of her bowls.” Ariel gasps, “I haven’t tried that! It’s going down today.”

As Ariel and Jackii make their way to the front of the line Jackii hears a familiar voice. “Hey! Cuzzo! Hey!!! We had the same idea!” Jackii and Ariel turn and see someone waving both of their arms several spots further back in the line wearing a bright pink t-shirt, jeans, and Air Force 1s. Their most notable feature, however, is their full head of bushy brown hair. “Oh man, they can be kind of embarrassing. Well, that’s Stephan.” Jackii waves and before they get their phone out Stephan interjects. “Don’t lose your spot in line! I’ll meet up with you once I get my bowl!” Ariel and Jackii grab their orders before walking to the center of the park and sitting at one of the open picnic tables.

“A lot easier being out here since they got rid of that racist ass statue²⁷! Did you know they were put up by a bunch of white supremacist groups to instill a faint sense of terror in Black folk at all times? I think the group was called the *United Daughters of the Confederacy* or some shit. It’s a shame you and auntie have to see it all the time now, but it makes sense that they’d put it there.” Stephan turns to Ariel, “Oh my god. Sorry to come in with the heavy. Hi! I’m Jackii’s cousin. Are you Ariel?” Ariel smiles and nods. *Damn, they really are cousins.* “Cool! You can

²⁷ This statue is the Confederate monument Ariel noticed earlier in Chapter 4.

call me Stephan. I know we were going to link up at 11. I can wander and shop if you want?"

Jackii looks and sees Ariel shrugging "No it's all good! Unless you get here early to shop?"

Stephan takes a large scoop out of their acai bowl "I came here for three things. Acai bowl, some cute succulents since mine died, and to chat with you two! I can't believe I got here early enough for the peanut butter cookie drizzle. I'd swim in that shit if I could."

"Okayyyyy!" Ariel chimes in, "You seem cool, I like you. I also need to know how this tastes!" Ariel takes a bite and does a small happy dance in her seat. "Oh my god! I'm obsessed!" Ariel quickly turns towards Jackii "So, what have you filled them in on?" Jackii looks towards Stephan "We talked like a week ago? I don't remember everything I said though, can you summarize, Stephan?"

They quickly swallow a bite of food "For sure! So cuzzo says y'all want to have a come to Jesus moment with Mr. Buck, so to speak? I'm sure they've filled you in, but I am also a music teacher. I went to Foster for orchestra too but graduated when y'all were in in middle or elementary school. I think it's so cool that y'all want to do this, so I'm happy to support."

Stephan straightens up a bit at the picnic table "Okay, so... Tea- I have a lot of baggage and trauma from my own experiences at Foster. Stuff I am still processing. That's why I didn't talk to you about it at first, cuzzo. I didn't want to shit on something you were so excited for, and I couldn't tell if it was a me thing, if that makes sense. But it sounds like it's not a great time, so can you both fill me in on what's going on?"

Ariel glances at Jackii before she speaks, "There is so much wrong with Wagner and Buck... But if I had to choose somewhere to start it's that it... It's that they have two sides. Do you know what I mean?"

Stephan puts their hand on their chin, “I think I do, but I don’t want to assume. Can y’all say more about that?”

“Yeah absolutely. So, Mr. Wagner, right? One second he’s all jolly and cracking jokes. Then, no idea why, a switch flicks, and he’ll be yelling at someone. Either they sound like crap, or they’re playing like wimps, or that he has no clue why they’re still at Foster. I tell my mental health facilitator that it kind of is like verbal abuse.”

“One, fuck that.” Stephan starts, “And two, I am so terribly sorry. I had a feeling that’s what you meant.”

“Thanks. I’ve said this before, but the two main things I have learned at Foster is that verbal and physical boundaries do not exist.”

Jackii jumps in “Mr. Buck is like that too, but it’s less noticeable. He’s a naturally awkward guy, and I love that about him, but he always looks like he’s not 100% happy. But you can tell when he’s upset with someone. He’ll instantly pivot to saying he’ll kick you out.”

“Which he would never do to one of his favorites,” Ariel adds

“Yup, or he’ll threaten to call someone’s parents. Which he doesn’t do. But it’s all about having control for them.”

Stephan sighs, “Yeah... Almost everyone I played with in orchestra quit. It was a similar kind of treatment for us. I graduated with 25 other orchestra kids. I think three of us still do music. And I ended up doing it completely different from Buck and Wagner. I don’t even conduct my groups though; I feel like there’s too much power baked into that paradigm if you know what I mean? Anyway. Okay, so there are two sides to them. What else? What do you mean about control?”

“Oh gosh, where can I start?” Jackii sits up. “They both get to decide who makes it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Okay here’s an example. We’re getting ready for our juries so he’s letting us practice during 6th period. You know how the school partially pays for some of our lessons? I took advantage of that but those got used quickly. Mr. Buck knows I haven’t had lessons since January. It’s May. Guess how many times he’s walked over to me? NONE. He spends all his time with the section leaders or Kendra since she got into All-State.”

Ariel quickly finishes her bowl, “The fucking favoritism! Wait sorry, I didn’t mean to say that word.”

Stephan laughs, “I’m not your teacher, you can cuss if you want.”

“The fucking favoritism! The harder solos, any gig opportunities, combos, it’s all his favorites. He’ll also crack jokes and be nicer to his favorites. Here’s the thing though. I’m one of Mr. Wagner’s favorites sometimes. But it’s like he has two sides. One day he’s making jokes or we’re sightreading a piece for fun. Next moment I hear him yelling ‘ARIEL! Cut that rock and roll crap and play softer! You need to comply!!!’ Seriously dude? You can’t just tell me to play softer? He’s either my best friend or he’s yelling at me and saying I’m not a refined enough player.”

Jackii jumps in, “Can we also pause for a moment to talk about the *kinds* of jokes that happen?” Jackii and Ariel then share several stories to Stephan. These include instances like when Mrs. Wagner’s casting debacles, to nonbinary and trans jokes that are thrown in throughout music theory.

“Ooh! I have a story that I haven’t even told you about yet Jackii! So, this shit happened last week. We’re playing this Benny Goodman medley, and we reach the end of rehearsal and Mr. Wagner was talking to the class about how Sydney and I were cleaning up the space around

our section, because that's just something I naturally like doing and she was helping. Like, I hate seeing it so messy. Like there's junk everywhere and nobody's willing to clean it, and it's so easy to get tangled up in cables and pedals. So, we were just cleaning up the cables and he's like, 'Thank you to our girls there, you'll make really, really good housewives.' And me and Sydney look at each other, I'm like, 'Guys, am I dreaming?' Like I... I have never heard that. Never heard that. I think like, to me personally, I've seen people be implicitly sexist, but I've never seen it that way. He says 'You'll make really, really good housewives. Well, I don't know about Ariel there. She's a little messy.'”

Jackii and Stephan look at each other in disbelief before Stephan speaks “So either you’re messy and lazy. Or you clean and are still called messy? Let me guess, is Sydney...?”

“Yeah, she’s white.”

“Right...” Stephan takes a deep breath “I hate to say it, but your experiences are not surprising to me, but I hate how overt it all is. I don’t know if I remember things being that overtly bad. Does anyone ever call them out?”

Jackii sucks their teeth. “No one’s going to. They’re either too scared to speak up or they get something out of it.”

“What do you mean they get something out of it?”

“Everyone hears the jokes Mr. Wagner makes. Mr. Buck usually doesn’t crack jokes, but he looks the other way which is just as bad. So, everyone sees what they think is so funny and they join in. The worse ones are the seniors and juniors; they make the most racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes. Also, it doesn’t matter if they’re Black or white or girls and guys. People will crack whatever joke they can to try to impress them. They’ve created a gross cycle where the upperclassmen teach the newer students what it takes to be noticed.”

“Yup,” Ariel interjects, “And I swear to you that I’ve seen Mr. Wagner chuckle about it too. But they always pretend they don’t hear it. And when they do call it out it’s because someone untalented made the joke.”

Stephan pauses to think for a moment, “It sounds like people are doing and saying whatever they can to be part of Mr. Wagner and Buck’s inner circle. But it’s at the expense of Brown queer folk?”

“Or if you’re fat, or poor, or whatever. They always find something, it’s just more nonstop if you’re a Black girl. It’s like they all want to be just like Mr. Wagner and Mr. Buck,” Ariel says.

The trio continue to eat their acai bowls while talking about an array of instances where Jackii and Ariel’s classmates would cross the line with a joke. Stephan finally interjects, “I’ll be real with you. I am not sure what advice I can give y’all on how to talk to Mr. Buck about this. I seriously think he’ll flip out and enter fragile mode unless y’all are walking on eggshells the whole time. Plus, some of the student interactions are out of their power, even though they created the environment that allows it. I want to know more about how y’all are handling this day-by-day to be honest, but maybe we talk about that in a bit. I think you’re right about not going at it head on though. I think your best bet right now is if you focus on their teaching. It’s getting a bit warm out too, can I buy y’all some lemonade and we can keep talking?”

9:20 a.m.

The trio grab lemonade and visit the plant and flower stands. “Wait, how do you even kill succulents?” Jackii asks while hiding a smirk. “No clue!” Stephan exclaims. “Either under-watered it or over-watered it are my two guesses.” Ariel is half-paying attention to the back and forth before she rejoins the conversation “Stephan, I have a question. I don’t think I’ve seen you

in any of the orchestra photos. Why is that?” It’s in this moment that Jackii realizes the same thing.

“Oh, I’m in there. You know how it’s always ‘conductor knows best’ with them? Well, they thought it would be best for the orchestra to look ‘professional’ and homogenous or whatever other trope you can think of. They basically forced me to either cut my hair or braid it my first year. I went the cornrow route. But I’m tender-headed! I had a migraine for two straight weeks because my mom said it was expensive and she needed to get her money’s worth. Then I cut my hair my sophomore year. And look, y’all look fantastic, I just looked like some confused little boy. And don’t laugh, but I had my hair permed my last two years there. I slicked it back. I wanted to fit in so badly but ended up just being called mushroom head. I shaved my head during undergrad and decided to let it be free after that.”

“Oh my god! I love that the three of us are all on different parts of our hair journey!” Ariel beams. “Y’all are killing this journey.” Stephan chimes in, “I just wanted to fit in with the white kids while I was at Foster. I didn’t see that until I was a lot older. But it’s hard not to when everything else around you is white.”

Jackii and Ariel notice a lot of their classmates at the farmer’s market so they ask Stephan if they can sit at the coffeeshop attached to the public library.

9:40 a.m.

Stephan kicks the conversation off once they settle in. “Yeah, so I know there are a lot of interpersonal issues going on. What about the actual teaching or classroom space? Do you feel like you’re getting what you need in that department?”

Jackii doesn’t hesitate, “Oh absolutely not! This is gonna sound mean, but I can explain it. I... Kind of don’t see them as teachers? I sometimes wonder if they wanted to be professional

musicians or conductors but just chose the classroom instead. I've asked Mr. Buck for help with my first two years! And he screwed us all over when it came to vibrato. We spent one day in class working on it, other than that it's up to our private teachers. The worst part is that Mr. Buck isn't even passionate, at least Mr. Wagner cares."

"Yikes. What about you, Ariel, do you agree?"

"I feel like I am the wrong person to ask about that. Mr. Wagner is a guitar player and percussionist, so he *knows* every little thing I do wrong. And he's always ready to call it out."

Jackii chimes in, "I think you are a great person to answer this. Do you feel like he's actually helpful?"

"Oh, in that case no. He just stresses me out. He either yells at me or has me step off. I hate when he does that so much. It's demoralizing. It's like he's saying hey you suck so much that I can't even explain it to you, I have to show you. It's so annoying though because he only does that to guitar players and drummers."

"I mean, can he play anything else? It takes him 10 seconds to find chords on the piano in theory," Jackii jabs in.

Stephan furrows their brow. *Maybe they just need to get this off their chest? They're not wrong though, I've seen both of them do this. It's like they just want to be artists.* "How do you both handle the lack of support?"

"I cry. Well, I try not to cry. And I practice." Jackii avoids eye contact while saying this. "The expectations are so high sometimes that I have to fake it. It's so disappointing. I came to this school thinking I would learn new skills and get better at playing the violin. I practice whenever I can. And I have had lessons the whole time until recently. What has that earned me? I got switched to viola. Mr. Buck only cares about the section leaders and chamber players, the

rest of us are just there. I would be completely lost if it wasn't for Ms. Brooks and my lessons with her."

"I'm at least glad to hear you have a good private teacher! Check this, the teacher I had told me I would never grow up to become a professional musician." Jackii and Ariel both gasped before Stephan took a breath to continue, "It was a whole fucking thing. I quit her studio at the beginning of my senior year and had to prepare for college auditions all by myself. A few other people decided to quit when they realize several of us were getting the same treatment. They found other teachers though. That reminds me, is Foster still doing the thing where they pay for part of your lessons?"

Jackii and Ariel both nod before Ariel answers, "Yup! I think they pay for half of our lesson ten times each semester."

Stephan lets out a laugh, "Not gonna lie, that is an amazing deal. Their expectations are ridiculous though, that's for sure. The only reason they have kept this program going for so long is because of all the money donated to the school. What do you both cover in your lessons? Solos, etudes, what?"

Jackii puts their hands forward and teeters them back and forth, "Well, it's a balance but I mostly look at the orchestra music in my lessons, so I don't fall too far behind. But I think it depends on the player. But most of us that take lessons at the school only work on the orchestra music. Or it at least sounds that way."

Stephan interrupts, "School?"

"Yeah. You only get the discount if you take lessons with teachers that are approved through the county. A lot of the section leaders don't do that though and take lessons with the

FSU professors or some of the freelance musicians that go all over the place. I know they tend to focus on solos.”

Stephan takes a sigh. *Well, that’s interesting I wonder how much of that leftover money goes to the kids that need it, and how much of it goes towards all the new additions to the school and instrument purchases. Didn’t they just get a harp and contrabassoon last year?* “I hate to keep the ball rolling, but I want to make sure I hear all your concerns before you talk to Mr. Buck. Do you at least like the music you’re covering in class?”

Jackii nods their head in agreement, “No, you’re right Stephan. I guess... I don’t know if you’d agree Ariel, but I have a hard time with how lazy Mr. Buck and Wagner can be when it comes to teaching music that is not your average dead old white guy, do you know what I mean?”

Stephan tries keep a straight face to hide their total agreement “I am not sure, do you agree with that Ariel? Do either of y’all have a specific memory in mind?”

“Of course I agree! It’s embarrassing how little they know. Do you remember when Mr. Buck choked on stage?”

“Oh my god how could I forget?” Jackii sits up, “So get this. We’re doing a benefit concert at the arts center in that little town with all the rich people, Manatee Bay? Anyway, the last piece we’re playing is by Samuel Coleridge Taylor. And Mr. Buck goes, ‘Alright and our next piece is by Coleridge Taylor who is a.. An Afri... A Black American’ and the audience laughs because not only did Mr. Buck trip on his words, but all of us gave him huge side-eye because he had never mentioned that before! I went home and looked him up later... He’s not even African American! He’s British!”

The three of them burst into a frantic laughter, but it's not clear if they're amused or angry. Stephan stops laughing first, "Yeah... I remember we talked about that a long time ago for some reason. That's a fumble."

"It's so embarrassing. Mr. Buck probably thinks I'm African American too even though I'm Afro-Caribbean. Our experiences are so different! It's just so upsetting though. He probably knows what Tchaikovsky had for lunch the day he started Swan Lake, but knowing where Coleridge Taylor from is somehow too difficult. I bet he can't even name five women composers while we're at it."

"Ughhhh. Mr. Wagner does the same thing too." Ariel starts "He doesn't teach us anyyyy of that stuff if it's by a Black artist. And it's sad because Black women are the coolest jazz musicians. Billie Holiday and Nina Simone are both GOATs that weren't afraid of anything!"

Stephan interrupts "Wait. So how do you know about them?"

"Netflix. All the interesting stuff is there."

"There are also a ton of Tik Tok pages and podcasts that talk about this stuff," Jackii interjects.

"So, you called them both lazy. Are there other reasons you used that word?"

Jackii starts, "You know, it just seems like they pick the pieces 'cause it was cool, they didn't pick the piece or like... Did any other additional research on it when that's their job! I feel like that should be your job as a music teacher. Also, they just play the music the way they want it to sound. They don't care about the way the composer wanted it to sound, but again, they wouldn't do that for Mozart, we're gonna play Mozart exactly it's intended to be played. They want to do that for Beethoven or Bach, we're gonna play it exactly as they wanted us to."

“That is a great point!” Stephan continues, “Some people worry though that too much focus on authenticity will make people not play the music. What do you think about that?”

“I mean... We don’t play Bach on baroque violins. But Mr. Wagner gave a two-week workshop on baroque phrasing. I think he could figure it out if he cared.”

Ariel jumps in, “I also notice that whenever we play something, Mr. Wagner and Buck have a million reasons about why the dead white dude music is important. Either the style, or the difficulty, or the history, or we focus on a technique. But all the non-white music is just fun. Which is cool, but it’s lazy.”

“That’s not surprising” Stephan takes a long sip of lemonade, “I read a paper in when I was in school that talks about how folks take a ‘saris, steelpans, and samosas’ approach to multicultural music.²⁸ So, they only engage with the fun parts of the history. But they never talk about how we got there or the troubling parts of history.”

“My grandpa says the same thing about jazz! He says it’s just a bunch of white folks that don’t know anything about anything.”

Stephan smiles at Ariel, “He’s smart and knows what he’s talking about.”

Jackii furrows their brow, “I guess... It makes me wonder about why there is a lack of teachers that teach Black music. Yeah, then that begs the question of *why* they don’t want to teach it. And then that begs another question, are they even knowledgeable about the music? And if not, why aren’t universities teaching that stuff? It just keeps leading to more questions...”

The group of three sit in silence for a moment. Stephan peeks out through the glass wall of the library. Over the lake towards the northern part of the park they catch a glimpse of Foster. *I truly cannot understand how these children are going through the same shit I went through.*

²⁸ See Brah (1996)

That place holds so much trauma. It's kind of sick that I still feel a faint sense of pride when I think of my time there, I'm sure they will too. But that doesn't make it okay. I mean... how many of my classmates are still doing music? Two of us, maybe three? They murdered our love for it. It's even worse for them now with all these damn laws...

Stephan continues to think to himself until Ariel breaks the silence “I think we also keep ignoring the complete lack of diverse music we have. That’s probably the biggest problem”

“The saddest part is teachers have been talking about that for years. We never get past square one. And we even have a fucking online database! But don’t even get me started on that. It’s problematic too.”

Ariel’s curiosity is peaked, “Why is that? It sounds like a good thing.”

“So, having a list of LGBT composers would be great. But...some composers were outed... and then the people that made the database sometimes guessed what the person’s ethnicity was? And like... Look at me. If I ended up on that list they would have no clue what to label me, hahah.”

“Ooh! That is not cute.”

Jackii joins in “One, that’s cringe. And two, I think the last thing I want to bring up is that there is almost no freedom at Foster unless you’re one of the favorites. The talented players get to choose their own pieces, Mr. Buck chooses everyone else’s for them. He says he does it because he knows our abilities well, but I can’t even tell you when the last time he heard me play was.”

Ariel turns to Jackii, “Wait, what about comp and arranging? You said I’d like that class!”

“Okay. You’re right. There are two good classes. Keyboard and composition. Mr. Keller teaches keyboard and he’s just the sweetest guy. His son went to school here so I think he gets how stressful it can be. But, oddly enough, Mr. Buck is awesome in composition.”

“Can you say more about that?” Stephan is intrigued by the sudden compliment.

“Yeah. Mr. Buck is like a totally different person. Well, kind of. He spent one entire class period talking about Erbkönig once... But other than that, he kind of left us alone to do what we wanted to do. That’s where I discovered my love of composing. And I got to see a whole different side of Mr. Buck too, I felt like we could make mistakes and it wouldn’t be the end of the world. That’s what I think we need more of. Creative freedom.”

“Yeah... When I graduated I felt like I was really good at viola, but only viola. I wasn’t able to improvise, composing was frustrating, and I didn’t know much of anything outside of orchestra.”

Ariel speaks up, “Did you feel like you were robbed?”

“Well, that’s a heavy question. But... Yes. I would say yes. But I’m recovering what was stolen. And I think it’s amazing that y’all are fighting for what you need now. I wish I would’ve done that. But I was drinking the Kool-Aid when I was at Foster.”

“Naturally,” Jackii said “No offense cuzzo but you were talented and light skinned. All the guys are like that at Foster.”

“None taken, you’re just speaking your mind. Not that this makes it better, but I hope you know that they’re getting hurt too.”

Ariel chimes in, “I say that about Barry too. He’s in my jazz class and is a light skinned boy. He was so cute and nice in middle school. He’s become rotten now. But I know that he’ll

have a rude awakening in college when he realizes he's only around white people. I know that I'm Black and I love my Black skin."

"I wish I would've learned that sooner. I think my relationship with my family and friends would've been different." Stephan pauses for a moment to look at Jackii before continuing. "That being said though. Y'all are conscious as fuck, and that doesn't make it easier. It's just a different challenge. How are you both getting through school? Like... How do you handle Mr. Buck's and Wagner's aloofness, or all of the problematic interactions? What brings you joy?"

"Oh, that's easy!" Ariel starts "Concerts. No doubt. It's so sad, but it's always the concerts. When I tell you no matter how many times he's yelled at me, no matter how many times I've cried, no matter how many times I've sobbed, I will still go play my butt off in that concert. And like, even though he yelled at me the last concert, but that was cause I was like, I was actually being bad since I was not supposed to go out on the stage when I did. But still, it's always the concerts."

All three smile and nod before Stephan speaks "Ooh, that hit me to my core. There is some sort of magic there, right? Do you feel the same way, Jackii?"

"I'd say yes and no? Sometimes I'm so nervous about the parts I didn't fully learn. Or if I'm going to miss a meter change or something. But, there's still that magic. Yeah... But you know, it's like, when we're not playing. When we're just sitting around talking, chatting, it's a lot of fun. You know, people don't wanna leave. People don't wanna start the concert because it's just really fun because we're all very compatible with each other."

Ariel nods before speaking "Absolutely! Like I keep saying, I knew a lot of the people in jazz before Foster. We're all friends. We all have tons in common. We all chose to stay. It's just

the rehearsals and bullying Mr. Wagner and Buck put us through. It really messes me up sometimes.”

“Absolutely.” Jackii chimes in, “Absolutely. I love writing. I love playing. I love listening. I love music. I love going to concerts. But again, there's also that guilt of knowing what those musicians are probably going through behind closed doors. We're only getting the finished product, but I mean, knowing that, I actually do that a lot where if I'm watching something live, when I was ushering for the jazz concert a couple of weeks ago, I remember every part, I could identify parts where weeks ago or a month ago, walking to my car, going down the building and I can overhear Mr. Wagner yelling to them about that part. And then it sounds effortless on stage.”

“Fun fact. I read a paper in school that talked exactly about what y’all are talking about. Where the person described concerts as a phantasmagoria.²⁹ And it’s just a dope word to describe something that looks all polished and perfect when you look at it, but there’s no way of acknowledging the weeks or months of work that took place that made it possible.”

Jackii looks at Stephan, “That’s a cool word, can you spell it out? I want to use it in a musical or something and be meta.”

Stephan laughs as they write the word down, “So here’s more academic speak. We talked about this idea of fugitivity in my classes. And yeah, it comes from this notion of running away but it’s a lot deeper than that. It can be tracked back to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and also all these laws that prevented Black folks from learning to read and write.³⁰ I think about fugitivity when I think of little moments in the hallway where you slow down and are in community with

²⁹ See Abramo (2017)

³⁰ See Givens (2021)

your own people, whoever that is. Or I think about it like with those moments before the concert you talked about. Does any of that resonate with you?”

“Ooh, it makes me think of your Zesty besties! Y’all are fugitive queers!” Ariel laughs while saying this.

“Okay, so you’re not wrong, but maybe don’t say it like that? It’s cringe. But yeah, it’s like that. Or like when we meet in the locker room before class.”

“Oh, I did that too!” Stephan cuts them off. “My best friend Rose and I would talk in the corner right up until class starts. That’s why I had locker 137. It’s probably gone but there used to be a blue stripe on it. It was paint off of my case, haha”.

The three continue to share stories about specific rooms and spaces where they were able to take a breather from the stresses of Foster. There was a significant amount of overlap in the spaces and how they felt hallowed in a sense. Stephan finally reorients the conversation.

“Thinking back to what we were talking about. there aren’t enough concerts to make Foster bearable. I would know, I skipped so much school to avoid the constant pressure and abuse. And, now that I think about it, the only reason I wasn’t kicked out was because I was a section leader... But outside of the concerts. How do you make sense of all the stuff you navigate? How are you coping with or resisting the drama, the expectations, and everything else?”

“I think my family helps me cut through all the static. Especially my grandma and grandpa.” Ariel continues, “My grandparents went to an HBCU and they always talk about how they learned to love being Black in their sororities and whatnot. And they talk about how it’s their job to teach that to me now. And I can see the difference when I look at some of my

classmates, like Barry. I know who I am, I don't think he knows who he is. He's trying to always be what white people want him to be. At least I have a line."

"That's deep! Damn... I'm just learning that as a grown-ass adult..."

"To be fair. I also handle it by crying a lot. And I go to therapy. And I work out. And sometimes I just have to look in the mirror and remind myself I'm always serving cunt."

"Yes!! That still makes you much more regulated than the average adult, hah. What about you, Jackii?"

"I really just force myself to push through most of the time. Counting down how many days of school I have left is one. Done that since the second day of freshman year. But I also really love composing. I don't see myself as a musician while I'm at school. I see it when I'm at home composing or when I'm listening to music and I'm hearing the orchestra parts. I don't consider myself a musician while I'm at school, even when I'm in orchestra. I'm just a student there. I think because in my opinion, being a musician is different than just playing an instrument and learning how to do music. It's actually enjoying doing all of that. If you don't really enjoy it, it just becomes another academic class. So, I am definitely just a student while I'm at school. And I'm also very particular about how I dress. I do it for me, not for anyone else. Sometimes I will wear the opposite of what people expect just so I tick them off."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Okay, so for the prom everyone thought I was going to be in a tux because that's what I wear for orchestra concerts. But no, I flipped it on them. I wore the cutest dress, I was a short-haired Princess Tiana."

“We love a butch princess!” Ariel yelled this out before looking at the barista, “Sorry, I know, library on other side of the wall. I can’t help how gay I am. Anyway, yeah. I do the same with the way I dress. It’s all about knowing who I am.”

“The coolest thing about defying expectations is that you’re telling the world around you that it can’t fit you into a box. That’s what resistance is about in a sense. What y’all are doing right now, preparing to have a heart-to-heart with Mr. Buck. That’s an act of resistance! You both have shared so much with me, how about we get into the nitty gritty and come up with some points for your conversation with Mr. Buck now? It’s 11, so we can do that and check out the other stands at the market before y’all need to head out.”

CHAPTER 7

2:10 p.m. End of School Year



Figure 6. Text exchange.

It has been several weeks since Jackii and Ariel met with Stephan. The two had decided to wait towards the end of the school year just in case talking to Mr. Buck didn't go according to plan. This particular afternoon was one of the last days Jackii could make it happen. The final orchestra and jazz concerts had been the prior week and seniors finished their classes a few weeks before the rest of the students in the district. There were no after-school rehearsals this week which made it easy to meet with Mr. Buck.

Ariel runs over to Jackii and gives them a hug, "Hey girl, are we sure we want to do this? I'm feeling nervous as fuck! What if he yells at us and tells us to get out?"

“I mean, if he does we just walk out. But I’ve never heard him do much other than threatening to call parents or publicly shaming someone. Neither of those can really work right now.”

“Okay, but what if he holds a grudge?”

“Well... That’s fair. And I don’t know how to answer that. I am realizing now that I don’t really have anything to lose so I’m gonna go for it either way. I can talk to him by myself if you want? I can say I just have to give you a ride home and you need to practice?”

Ariel pauses to consider her options, “No... I’m not going to do that to you. I will go too. But I don’t know if I can speak up a ton. I’m suddenly afraid of having a target on my back after this.”

“I mean.... Totally makes sense. What if I do the bulk of the talking and you’re just my social support friend? Again, nothing wrong with focusing on you.”

“I can do that. Can I ask a real ass question really quick though? How are you not super worn out from always having to fight? Or always having to explain stuff to people?”

“I honestly... I know what you’re talking about people feeling. But I think that I’ve experienced the opposite. I think that the more that I’m around this kind of environment, the more I want to try to stop it, the more I want to try to change it. I am tired, but that tiredness is kind of fueling me to make the source of the tiredness stop. Because I mean, it’s not going to stop until people try to stop it.

“Damn girl. Okay. Let’s do this. How did he sound when you talked to him this morning?”

“He’s been in such a good mood all week, and guess what. He told me he was proud of me today!”

“Of course he is! About time he says it.”

“You’re sweet, but no. It’s literally the first time and it’s because I had my jury today. Which, to be fair, I ate up. But he just said it because I’m about to leave. I felt a little dirty after he said it too. He mentioned he could tell how much I’ve been enjoying viola since I switched. But, fun fact, I don’t like the viola and *he* switched me. But whatever, it’s fueling me right now.”

“Yikes, he is so good at putting his foot in his mouth! But at least he’s in a good mood. Let’s do this.”

2:20 p.m.

Jackii and Ariel enter the music building. They both feel a nervous energy that transforms the hall as they walk through it. The orchestra door is 30 yards from the entrance, yet the seemingly endless continuum of practice room doors makes today’s walk unique. “Doesn’t this feel like we’re in the backrooms? I work out all the time and this is harder.” Ariel’s attempts at lightening the mood don’t reach Jackii’s ears; they are too busy focusing on their breathing.

Mr. Buck is at his desk, carefully thumbing through various scores. He looks up as he hears the door close and sees Jackii and Ariel come in.

“Hey ladies! You caught me while I was trying to narrow down next year’s music choices! Do you want a peek?”

Jackii and Ariel look at one another and nod before agreeing to look at the music. Mr. Buck shows them Hindemith’s *Symphonic Metamorphosis* for the full orchestra and insists on playing a clip of a past ensemble playing the piece at Midwest clinic. Ariel slides her phone out while the recording is playing and texts Jackii.

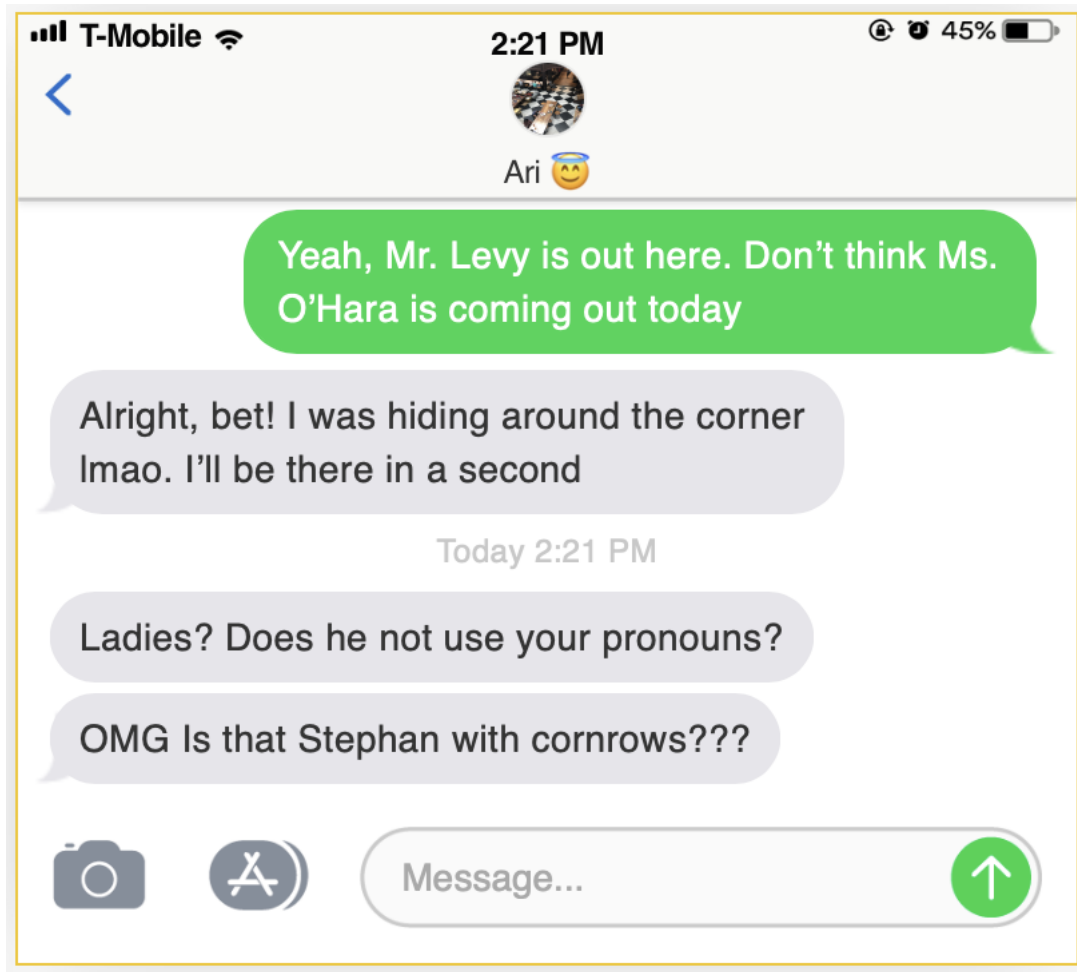


Figure 7. Text exchange.

Jackii peeks at their phone but is too nervous to respond and briefly shakes their head and mouths “later”. Ariel finally realizes that Jackii is absolutely mortified so she mouths back, “I got you!”

Jackii manages to take a deep breath before straightening their back out. “Hey, Mr. Buck? This piece sounds super cool, and I love it because Hindemith isn’t the most known. Which kind of makes me think about why I wanted to talk to you...”

“Oh right! You said you and Ariel wanted to talk afterschool. I didn’t know you’d want to do a summer camp as a senior.”

“Oh, um. No? Sorry, I wasn’t clear. No.” Jackii pauses to take in another breath. In that moment they think about all the stories their mom has shared about every patient she dumped over the years because of their microaggressions. “Mr. Buck, I asked if I could talk to you because I wanted to get some stuff off my chest that has been frustrating me. I was kind of disappointed after our concert last week and I realized that I haven’t been happy in orchestra the last few years...”

Mr. Buck was staring at Jackii with an absent look in his eyes “Alright! I don’t know what you’re thinking right now so I’m going to keep talking. I told Ariel how upset I’ve been. And I won’t speak for her. But I will say we talked, and she helped me come up with a list of things that made going to school at Foster really hard. I would really appreciate it if you just heard me and Ariel out because you and Mr. Wagner say the best part of Foster is that everyone has freedom because they are trusted and that the school turns students into future leaders...”

Stephan suggested that Ariel and Jackii should start the conversation off this way to ease Mr. Buck into the conversation. *Oh my god, he looks like I spit on him. I thought this was supposed to help with the white fragility?* Jackii’s thoughts were spinning but they maintained a neutral look on their face. This was not the case for Mr. Buck.

“Wow. Um. Jackii... If you felt this way this whole time why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Honestly? It doesn’t always feel safe. I’m only doing it now because it feels a bit ‘now or never’ with just a week of school left.”

Jackii was always eager to help organize field trips and concerts, and they seemed to enjoy orchestra, so Mr. Buck was taken aback. “It’s alarming that you’re feeling this way! What’s the deal? I didn’t know that you thought I was scary.”

Ariel interjects “What I think Jackii is trying to say is that there are things we wanted to talk to you about regarding orchestra and jazz but were nervous about how *other* teachers would feel...”

It was no secret that Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner didn’t get along. Jackii once overheard Mr. Buck on the phone calling Mr. Wagner “a real tough pill to swallow”. Similarly, Ariel heard Mr. Wagner call Mr. Buck “soft” in the middle of a rehearsal. They didn’t collaborate much and would instead split their rehearsals. Ariel’s words seemed to have had an impact and Mr. Buck’s shoulders started to lower, “Oh! I get what you’re saying now. So, what’s frustrating you about the way we run things?”

Jackii pulls out a folded sheet of paper. “Do you mind if I just?” Mr. Buck nods and motions for them both to sit as Jackii unfurls a piece of paper. “Okay, so I’ll just touch on the biggest thing, but then come back to it... And it’s that we just wish you all would listen to us more. And not just the section leaders. All of us. You keep saying that’s how professional orchestras are run but I don’t think many of us are becoming professional orchestra musicians. I know that I want to get into nursing after Foster, and I hope that I am listened to there too.”

“Yes! Of course, I totally understand that. Maybe we’re a bit harsh but we don’t hide that from you all. The biggest draw is the high caliber of musicianship we have here. But okay, I’ll listen.”

Did he seriously already start ignoring Jackii? I’m not letting her do this alone. Ariel tenses and relaxes her hands before interjecting. “Mr. Buck, do you know my grandma Mrs. Peggy? She said she’s sad to have missed the last few concerts because she loves your conducting.”

Ariel's grandmother had recently retired from being principal at a predominately Black middle school that is one of the main feeders for Foster and has always been a patron of the school's endeavors. This comment made Mr. Buck relax and smile "Oh that's so sweet! Of course I know Mrs. Peggy, her school is the biggest feeder for dance and art. Tell her we miss her."

"Of course! Will do. I thought of her just now because she has gotten frustrated in the past by what she says is 'a lack of intentionality' in the music program." Ariel copied her grandmother's way of speaking so accurately that the three of them laughed. "I've had some talks with her and she's always disappointed that I don't know what makes some of the musicians we cover in class so important. She made me watch these movies with her about Nina Simone and Billie Holiday. Have you seen them? I didn't know that both had run-ins with the government for their beliefs and statements. I thought that was really cool and made me think about how there are so many things to take a stand for now. But we don't cover that in class."

Jackii adds to Ariel's point, "Yes, and we want to know about how the composers ended up writings the pieces we play. And not just Mozart and Beethoven. I don't think knowing why someone wrote a piece, or what they even looked like, should be controversial. We knew next to nothing about the Coleridge-Taylor piece you gave us. And I think we would have played it better if we did. It sometimes feels like there's a reason for programming a lot of the pieces we play, but you and Mr. Wagner just go with whatever is fun when it's a diverse composer."

"Alright, hold on now. I am listening but we are intentional with the choices we make. A lot of these composers have not gotten the exposure they deserve so we choose pieces that engage the audience. That's how we increase diversity without getting in trouble."

Jackii remembered part of their conversation with Stephan in that moment. “Okay, that makes sense if we were a professional orchestra, but we are your students. It’s your job to make us well-rounded musicians. I feel that way about a lot of things. There’s a lot we should be taught but aren’t. I mean, I think that if it can be put into print, actually no, no. I think if it can be seen in music, if it can be heard in music, we should be taught it. If we’re not taught how to do it by them directly, at least give us the resources to learn it on our own. I’m going to take shifting for an example. We spent a month at most in ninth grade doing shifting exercises from the essential elements book, and if you didn’t get it, then you didn’t get it, and we moved on. That was it. Never brought back up again.”

Ariel had never seen Jackii be so direct. And judging by the slight look of panic in their eyes, they hadn’t either. Neither Ariel nor Jackii could tell what was going through Mr. Buck’s mind.

That’s why we set them up with private teachers, to focus on the technique so I can focus on making music with them... I will need to have a chat with folks. Mr. Buck steadied himself before continuing, “Okay... Noted. Anything else?”

“We just want what we’re doing to mean something” Ariel continues, “For example, we will probably have this like notion of what being Hispanic was like, and it’s probably not right. You know? How do you want to kind of like combat the stereotypes that are found in media, how do you want to do that? We can do that with the music we pick. And if that’s too much even choosing pieces because they’re important or teach a special technique. Because it feels like you both just choose what you like most of the time. And that’s probably not true, but that’s what it feels like.”

“Thank you for that.” Jackii continues, “Yeah, the biggest thing we talked about here was needing real diversity. When we were at UCF for State MPA we were walking down the hall and I saw a poster that made me stop in my tracks. It was a poster full of Black composers. I remember because I cracked some joke about diversity picks and then I realized that EVERY composer on that poster was Black. And it made me so happy. And then it made me incredibly sad.”

Mr. Buck was intrigued “Why would that make you sad?”

“Because it’s not that there’s a lack of Black music and musicians. There’s just a lack of people that want to teach about them.”

Suddenly his brow furrows. “Whoa there. Just one second. What you are saying is hurtful and false. Did you forget about how we commissioned a piece from Viv Martinique and had her do a residency? That sounds exactly like what you are asking for.”

“Okay, thank you so much for bringing her up. Yes, thank you for doing that. I will be honest and say that it was one of the most formative experiences here. It was magical. I felt I saw myself in her, you know? She mentioned how she wasn't that good at her instrument, but she was good in the 11th grade composition class and I was like that's me! That's totally me. So if she can do it, so can I.”

Jackii clear their throat, “But you are kind of missing the point though. I have been here for four years. Orchestra, music theory, music history, electronic composition. And I can only tell you what two Black composers look like? And I had to google one of them myself? Also, you did not mention that Viv was Black or queer at any point leading up to the residency. I only found out because Ariel was curious and looked her up on Instagram. If I had been sick and missed those two days of school then it would’ve made no difference.”

“If I may...” Ariel interjects, “I also think it’s important to mention that I thought Viv was really cool. But I didn’t see myself in her. I saw Jackii fifteen years in the future. A lot of us didn’t connect with her. And I kinda feel that way with a lot of the *diversity* stuff I saw a few years ago. It was just a bunch of posters and random music. I remember my middle school teachers would pick music and it felt like she chose them at random because they were cool, she didn’t pick the piece like or did any other additional research on it when that’s her job, I feel like that’s all of your jobs as music teachers. To actually take the time.”

Mr. Buck becomes increasingly agitated, “So should I not even bother then? I do the right thing and most of you didn’t like it so why am I going to force it? Most of the stuff you both are suggesting would also make me lose my job.” Mr. Buck continues to talk about all the obstacles he has to face as a string teacher. Jackii and Ariel both struggle to follow along with all the excuses he started to give.

I mean... One, I don’t think you’ll lose your job for choosing music carefully. And two, that doesn’t stop you from programming most of the boring shit you program anyway... Ariel hides her smirk before speaking, “Well it mattered for Jackii. That’s the point they are trying to tell you. We Black people are not going to fit into some one-size-fits all approach. It is kinda racist to think that bringing in one or two people of color is enough.”

Jackii’s eyes mist over, “Once I got to know Viv and understand her music I worked so hard to play it well, and in turn that hyped my section. And I believe that helped the whole orchestra. I know I’m talking a lot, but it’s just like representation matters even when you don’t feel it does. Someone else will see themselves in that representation, I think that that’s the problem with white music teachers and, honestly, a lot of white people in general. They don’t

think that representation, you know, should even happen, or they don't care enough and do it wrong."

"I am sorry that you are both in a position where you have to talk to me about this. I am listening." Mr. Buck stopped maintaining eye contact a while ago and began to stare at the carpet.

Jackii glances down at the list. "I think the last thing about diversity that I want to bring up is *how* you and Mr. Wagner talk about music. I don't know if either of you realize how often you call different pieces unprofessional. Or specifically what gets to count as professional. We are still highschoolers. And we're not like those Suzuki method kids. I chose to go here because I love music. But it's hard when anything I like is called unprofessional."

"You know... That's a good point Jackii. I am sorry I have been so defensive. I promise I am listening."

Ariel smiles "We really appreciate it. Can we share like three more points with you if that's okay?"

My god, how are they so thorough? Was this ambush planned? "Yes, of course. I'm going to grab a water, would either of you like one?"

Ariel and Jackii shake their heads and point at their water bottles.

The tension in the room begins to take a toll on everyone involved. Ariel plays with the lid of her water bottle, *I really hope Mr. Wagner doesn't take it out on me after he talks to Mr. Buck. Will he just cut anything I think is interesting next year? What if I don't get section leader? I know that seat is mine.* Jackii, meanwhile, is biting their lip. *I can't tell if Mr. Buck is taking it well or if he's dying on the inside.*

“So the next thing we wanted to talk about might really interest you Mr. Buck. It has to do with the electronic composition class. Well, kind of.” Jackii continues, “That class has been my favorite part of Foster. And it’s because of how awesome you were in that class.”

Seriously? Their favorite thing is the closest I have to a dump class. I don’t even do anything special in there, they just mess around on their own. “Well, that’s good to hear! I am wondering why exactly?”

Jackii sits at the edge of their seat and leans in towards Mr. Buck, “You gave us so much freedom! Not only that, you are like a different teacher. Maybe a totally different person. I loved composition because instead of interpreting music, I was creating my own, so I could interpret it the way that I wanted to. And if MuseScore couldn’t do that, then I could just, like, I felt the confidence to just verbally tell you, “Oh, you know, it’s supposed to kind of sound like sadder here, but I couldn’t get it onto MuseScore.” It was nice. It was weird, having that contrast of fourth period being demanding and then seventh period just being kind of chill.”

Jackii turns to Ariel, “I forgot, you haven’t taken it yet. So it was, so like with every, I guess unit, there would be like a guideline and then something else to tie in with it. So, we would need to use certain instruments, for example. And then something else to tie with it. So for our first project it was, do a piano piece. But the catch is that it must be in ABA form. Another part, my favorite one was do a brass quintet, but you had to use a hymn for your inspiration. Or something that sounded like a hymn. I did a West Side Story song.”

“Thank you Jackii, that’s really kind of you to say! The funny part is that I didn’t even know what to expect for that class because I only applied to be an orchestra teacher.”

“That does sound like a cool class, to be honest. I can’t wait to take it next year. Is there any way you and Mr. Wagner could make orchestra and jazz more free like that?” Ariel glances

down at the sheet before continuing, “Yeah it would be great if there was more room for flexibility and for things to be student-centered.”

Of course, I’m talking to someone who has a principal for a grandma. “It would be amazing if we could do that, I agree. But there are so many skills Mr. Wagner and I have to teach all of you.”

Jackii barely manages to contain a laugh: *Well that’s bullshit. We spend most of our time learning music that is too hard that more than half the ensemble fakes. Stephan said he was going to pull this card.* “You are right, but you also tell us that we make time for what’s important whenever you say we need to practice more. It would be easier to do that if we were playing music and learning things we believed in. I think it would be cool if class was more flexible and you treated it the way a doctor would with patients. But like a good doctor that goes to each patient with a clean slate because you never, you never know when patients don’t fit the stereotypes and then you misdiagnose them and then they get the wrong medicine and then they die. That’s kind of what happens in art. But for that to work you’re going to have to get to know and understand the patients.”

Ariel smiles “I like that metaphor. It’s serving... medical field professional! And I totally get it. Like for me, I would love to know more about what other departments are doing. I want to know how art or theatre can influence my music. Or even dance for that matter. I would like to see dance students taking music, our music students taking dance classes, musical theater kids taking art, art kids taking piano cause we’re in our own bubbles and then that kind of keeps us tracked. And I know that Jackii doesn’t care about that as much, they like knowing about the history behind stuff more.”

Mr. Buck sighs, “I understand and see where you are coming from, but do you know that I have students reach out to me year after year in college for music that thank us for the education they have? They know more theory, history, and repertoire than their classmates that are going to great schools like FSU, UF,³¹ and out of state schools too. It’s my responsibility to prepare you all with a quality music education.”

Yeah, but are you preparing them for the future or are you just teaching them to do what you do, and your teacher did, and their teacher did? Ariel considers saying it but softens it: “I understand how that is important. But you yourselves say that most students don’t continue to get a degree in music. So, what is this all about?”

“This is why music teachers do what we do. There’s a whole world of music out there that you are just not informed in. It’s our job to show you the real potential of music. It is a magical thing, but you need to know who came before you and the theory that makes it.”

Jackii starts to speak a bit more loudly than anyone expected. “You’re going back to that whole professional vs. unprofessional comparison again!” Jackii takes a breath, “I’m sorry. But of course, we know music is a magical thing. And we also know there’s a lot out there. I think about Mr. Connelly a lot and when he would rehearse with us afterschool. No one thought it was cool, but he convinced us that fiddling was cool. We learned a lot from him and had a great time. It wasn’t until it got close to the performance that things changed.” Jackii peeks at their notes again, “I just think it would be cool if professionals in other kinds of music could be brought in or if we were allowed to explore what we think is important and interesting.”

Mr. Buck continues to stare at the carpet for a brief moment before speaking, “I am sorry if you feel like I have messed up as your director. I do not think that’s the case, and I think you

³¹ Florida State University and the University of Florida, respectively.

will realize that now that you'll be done with Foster. Most schools *wish* they could have a program of this caliber. I will think about what you said about the electronic arranging class."

Ariel smiles "Thank you!! And we wanted to talk about one last thing. And I think you will understand what I am talking about. It has to do with the kind of jokes that are allowed but also how different people get treated. If that makes sense..."

"Yeah.... I know what you mean. I think equality is important and I've been trying to make progress with Mr. Wagner but it's going to take some time, you know? He can be a tough pill. Share whatever you want. I'm all ears."

"I just wish I felt safe." Ariel trailed off for a moment before continuing. "I'm in Foster for jazz guitar. And it's so isolating. I'm the first Black girl on guitar. And there is zero encouragement. No posters, no guests, not even the music. And the hard part of that is that jazz is *that* department. The racism, the homophobia, and definitely the sexism. And you see it everywhere. It's talked about every day. Jokes are made every single day. Not by just the students, but even by Mr. Wagner, which makes it kind of hard to like him, you know? It feels like this culture is not just allowed; it's encouraged. And it's not just the verbal boundaries. Even the physical boundaries. Mr. Wagner is a big strong grown man; it feels like he's trying to break my bones every time he pats me on my shoulder. And it's so gross when he throws his sweaty towels at people."

Mr. Buck lets out a sigh, "I totally understand where you are coming from. It is not okay, and it is not funny."

Ariel waits for Mr. Buck to continue but he does not. "Okay... So are you going to say something to him then? You both work together."

“Yes, I will just need to figure out how to talk to him. I don’t want him to feel attacked. Everyone has a different on-ramp for discussing these things.”

Jackii speaks up finally, “I think that what could fix orchestra and what could fix Foster in general, is just listening. Listen to your students, you know? Listen to your players, listen to your actors, listen to your artists, listen to what they want to do, and then help them. Right now, it feels like we can only have dreams if they match what you and Mr. Wagner want. It feels like a one-size-fits-all approach sometimes, it just doesn't work. Sometimes it feels like me and some others were the diversity picks to make the school look good, but we’re suffering. It doesn’t feel like you even notice how much we suffer here sometimes.”

“Now I have to shut you down on that one. Sorry, Jackii. But that’s not true. I have always been colorblind with every choice I make and with every audition. You’ve made a lot of big claims today, but you have not once acknowledged all the opportunities you have here because of our program.”

“This is what I mean, Mr. Buck. I talked about Viv visiting and I’ve talked about composing. I do love parts of this school; you’re just not listening to those. It’s always like that. You ask us what music we want to play. ‘Too bad, it’s unprofessional.’ So we end up doing what you want. We say we have issues; you say you agree and do nothing. You do the bare minimum to make it look like you’re doing something. If you only care about the music you should have become a conductor or a soloist.”

Mr. Buck jumps from his chair, “Jackii! You crossed a line. Do you need me to call your mom? This is not how we’re going to handle the rest of the year! This is unacceptable behavior.”

Oh shit he did go down that road. Oh shit... I went too far. Would mumma be mad though? Has he ever actually called a parent? How do I get out of this? Jackii looks at Ariel and

sees that she's crying. *Oh this is bad... Okay...* "Mr. Buck, I went too far. I think the graduation emotions are high. I'm going to get Ariel home." Jackii grabs throws their backpack over a shoulder and helps Ariel up with her stuff and they make their way out before Mr. Wagner gets another word in."

Jackii and Ariel make it to the music rotunda and turn right towards the nearest exist. They quickly make their way outside and are hit with the oppressive Floridian heat and humidity.

Ariel dabs at her eyes with a tissue "Holy shit girl! You went off! I started crying because I knew we had to get out of there."

Jackii's jaw hangs open, "Wait, are you for real? Did you fake that?"

"Look, a girl always has a trick up her sleeve. Also, it wasn't hard to do because I did get emotional and start panicking a bit haha."

The two sat in Jackii's car for what easily could've been a lifetime before leaving campus. Jackii put Ariel's address into their phone and just let whatever music was in the queue play. Ariel scrolled on her phone and spent the ride thinking about what the rest of the school year was going to be like. Jackii wondered if another fight would be waiting for them at home if Mr. Buck had, in fact, called their mom.

2:55 p.m.

Ronald Buck paced the room for a few brief moments before trying to finish his errands for the day. He couldn't maintain his focus, though. "It's so easy to point out everything that's wrong. They have no clue what they have here. And how dare she call me a failed musician?" Ronald continued to open and close the same filing cabinets, but he kept thinking back to the argument. Ronald became so frustrated that he slammed and punched a filing cabinet shut, "Why

is it always that I am the problem?? Okay... Okay. I need to take a breath. I can come back to this later or tomorrow I guess. No way I'm cooling off while I'm here."

Ronald decided he needed a treat. He made a habit of sneaking off to Burger King once or twice a week after his wife decided the household should eat less processed foods. He took his laptop with him to try to catch up on emails. He always skipped the location closest to the school to make sure he didn't have any awkward run-ins with students. He grabbed a whopper, fries, a drink and settled into a booth at the back which seemed to be the cleanest seat of the bunch.


Ronald pulled out his laptop to work but realized he couldn't get logged onto the wifi. He decided to scroll on Facebook instead. He wasn't huge on using social media but appreciated being in touch with family and the teacher groups. *You know? The end of the year is always a bit rough. Maybe other teachers are dealing with this same Covid-generation angst.* Ronald opened up the Music Teacher Facebook group and decided to make an anonymous post.

I was accused of not being inclusive today. I teach at a large performing arts high school. We subsidize lessons for our students. Provide bussing for anyone selected into the program. We have performing, composition, and theory classes. And we recently commissioned a piece from a marginalized composer. I am in Florida. Keeping it anonymous because my admin is on here. Am I not inclusive?


Ronald pocketed his phone and went to get a refill, order some cheesy tots, and to ask if there was a wifi network he could use. He got his food and password and checked emails while snacking away. He was distracted by a faint buzz in his pocket and checked his phone. He had over 30 Facebook notifications from his anonymous post."




Figure 8. Facebook post.


**Anonymous** Asked a question in "I'm a Music Teacher!"
Today at 2:57pm · 🌐

I was accused of not being inclusive today. I teach at a large performing arts high school. We subsidize lessons for our students. Provide bussing for anyone selected into the program. We have performing, composition, and theory classes. And we recently commissioned a piece from a marginalized composer. I am in Florida. Keeping it anonymous because my admin is on here. Am I not inclusive?



 174



21 Comments 10 Shares


 Like

 Share

View more 16 Comments

**Brianna White** I'm one of the DEI coordinators of my district. I'll GLADLY write something up on your behalf proving all of these points if you'd like written documentation supporting this in case of a complaint.
 4
Like · Reply · 1h

**Stephan Fredericksen** It's worth noting that you didn't ask the group how you could be more inclusive, but you instead asked the group if you are inclusive. At the end of the day we can all strive to do better. But it's also true that we're all striving to do the best that we can. It might be worth it to just revisit this claim that was made in a few days to see where you're at. Time and reflection are powerful tools for growth and healing in my experience.
 2
Haha · Reply · 1h

 Write a comment...




Figure 9. Facebook post.

Mr. Buck thinned his lips into a thin disapproving frown, *Of course Stephan posts that. He's been a constant downer since he's been riding the woke train. He doesn't even take his kids to festival so who knows how bad things are there. Anyway...* He then continues to read the comments.



Figure 10. Facebook post.

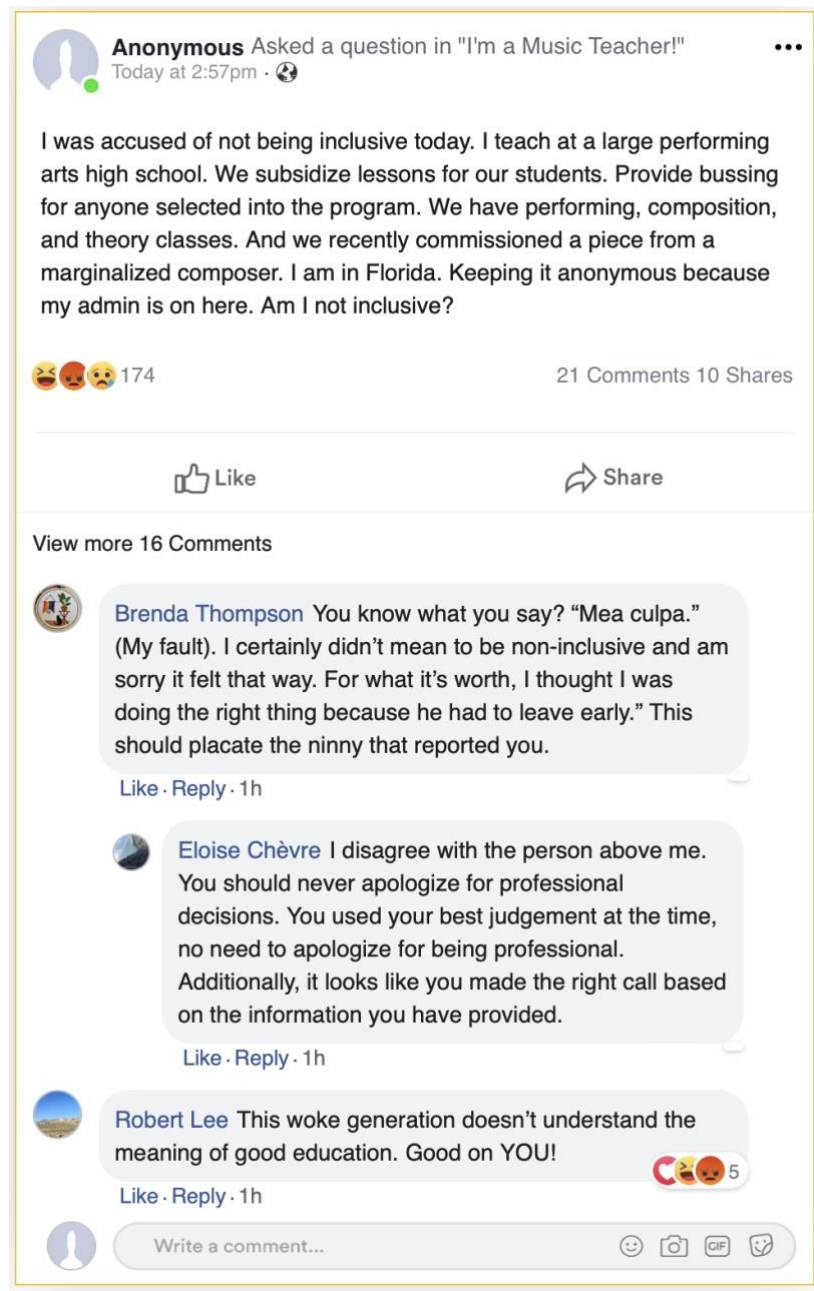


Figure 11. Facebook post.

Ronald smiled and let out a long sigh. *I guess Jackii and Ariel are just feeling jitters and growing pains. I'll try to play nice and patch things up so we can end the year.* Ronald proceeded to pack up his computer, toss his trash, and wash his hands and face in the bathroom to try to conceal the whopper smell. He got in his classic late 90s red BMW and listened to Arvo Pärt on the drive home.

7:30 p.m.

Ariel hears a buzz from across the bedroom and scrambles to find her phone. She could see Ariel's photo on the screen from across the room. "Oh my god! You're still alive! Thank goodness."

"I knew he wouldn't call my mom. He's such a punk."

"So, what was the deal with him misgendering you today?"

Jackii rolls their eyes, "I don't even fucking know. He's not one of the teachers that cares about the county name document. But he's also awful at follow-through with that kind of stuff? He apologizes if you correct him, but he doesn't get any better at getting pronouns right. It's more of him being lazy I guess..."

"Sounds about right. Glad it's not intentional though! So... Not to take away from how cool you were today, but it does look like you're hiding from him under your blankets." They both laugh once Jackii realizes they turned their comforter into a makeshift hood.

"Oh, girl hush. Anyway! I'm gonna add Stephan to the chat, they wanted to know how it went."

Jackii quickly adds Stephan into the chat, "Heyyyy! So how'd it go?" Stephan immediately noticed how wiped their cousin and Ariel looked, "Was it rough?"

Jackii kicks it off "Well..." But Ariel takes the call over, "OH MY GOD. Your cousin and Mr. Buck went off! We had to cry and run away!"

Stephan's mouth is gaped open, "Uhhh.. Cuzzo? Ariel, I do not mean to offend, but this sounds uncharacteristically cousin-like."

Jackii shapes their mouth into a grimace-like smile, "So about that..." Stephan laughs and shakes their head, "Ah, you've got auntie's temper. I knew it was there somewhere!"

Jackii rolls their eyes before they and Ariel share all the details with Stephan who tries to patiently listen. Stephan, however, does interject a few times.

“Oh my god. I am so sick of these *wah wah I’m gonna lose my job if I say gay teachers*. I literally just saw one of those anonymous posts today! I mean, yes, some teachers have lost their jobs. But I’ve got two truths for you honey. One, if you lose your morals you’re done for. And, two, how many decades of prison and thousands of dollars do you think these teachers owe for their ‘accidental’ copyright infringement?”

“Wait, can y’all help me visualize this a bit better? What did y’all wear for this showdown? I assume he was still in his rumpled ass khakis and Kenneth Cole bag you know he bought from Staples that’s been falling apart for years.”

Ariel interjects, “You clocked him with that shade. I was looking extra cute today with my face gems and I had on jeans with a camo jacket. Meanwhile Jackii was in the frilliest dress.”

“OKAY! Serving spoon full of sugar realness!”

Jackii and Ariel continue to share more of the chat before Stephan interjects. “Fun fact- Mr. Wagner has been at Foster since the 90s, but did you know Mr. Buck has worked there for 15 years? But yeah, sure, he’s still waiting for the right time to talk to Mr. Wagner about how he bullies students.”

Ariel finally gets towards the end of the interaction and Stephan gasps, “Oh shit... You said that? I mean... Let’s be clear, is it a low blow if you just stated facts? No. I don’t think you should feel bad for any of it, cuzzo.”

Ariel finally speaks up, “I am glad this happened, but I am nervous about next year now.”

“I think you don’t have much to worry about, honestly. Can I make a few suggestions though?” Stephan pauses and waits. Ariel nods so they continue “He’s a hothead, but he respects

people that take a stand. You should stay out of his way until he talks to you, if he even does.

There's a chance Mr. Buck won't share any of it. Between us: I don't think they like each other.

But yeah, if you go to him first he'll feel 'threatened' and he's a nasty fragile person. If he does try to talk to you try to do it before or after class. He has a weird habit of being a bigger asshole when there's an audience."

"You know, I had started figuring some of those out. Thanks Stephan."

"No problem! And can I say one last thing before I bounce? Don't be surprised if nothing changes with Mr. Buck. The reality is that y'all even being able to talk about this is a sign that progress is being made. I could never have come up with the words to explain what I was feeling but y'all can. You are the change. The fact that y'all are likely the first to ever be this upfront with them. That's impressive. You created an iconic moment people will talk about in the future if you choose to share. And you both know that you have it in you to stand up to people that cause harm. Most people aren't able to reach that point. I always want to be real though. I go to these music conferences every year and all these white teachers come out acting like they know how to play jazz, and blues, and improv, and everything else under the sun. And then they try for a week and quit and go back to the same old. Y'all can call him out, but don't expect him to change overnight, if at all.

Jackii sighs, "Yeah, you're right. But I still feel like I did what I was supposed to do. It's all up to him now."

"Yes it is. But hey, I'm gonna let you both chat. Let me know if y'all ever need any other help with stuff like this. I'm unfortunately getting good and dealing with that type of person."

Stephan flashes a peace sign before signing off.

Ariel and Jackii stay on the call and sit in silence for a few brief moments. “Well,” Jackii starts, “We’ll see how tomorrow goes I guess?”

Ariel nods and lets out a forced laugh “Yup. We’ll get through it.” Her eyes suddenly opened widely “Oh my fucking goodness, I forgot to tell you because of all of this! I have TEA to spill about the guys’ jazz chat!”

Jackii and Ariel stay on FaceTime the rest of the evening scrolling through Tik Tok and Instagram while catching up on all the drama and updates regarding people’s social lives.

CHAPTER 8

Introduction

Most who write about storytelling focus on its community-building functions: stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics. Counterstories, which challenge the received wisdom, do that as well. They can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. They enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone. Counterstories can quicken and engage conscience. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot. But stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half-the destructive half- of the creative dialectic. -- Richard Delgado (1989 2014-2015)

The story you have read is true. These instances did not occur in a way that can be tangibly recorded and recounted, however, the emotions, experiences, words, and experiences shared by the participants are accurate. Toliver (2021) argues that “all stories contain elements of truth; that truth just shows up in different ways – in characters, in settings, in metaphorical renderings of the current times” (190). Further, their stories are shaped by elements of my own story and lived experience.

The world brought into focus through this narrative is one that is in utter distress. Various sites of harm were identified within the music classroom, in classroom spaces at large, and in every environment the participants navigated. It would be naïve of me to assume that music education is some panacea to the harms of the world, but it would be exceedingly irresponsible to not consider the manner in which music education can be a site where harm or healing occurs in the lives of multiply-marginalized Black youth.

I aim to revisit each research question in this chapter and consider what truths may be gleaned from Jackii and Ariel’s narratives. I revisit the initial question of how Black youth see their culture reflected in their everyday lives and classroom spaces through Warren and Coles’

(2020) conceptualizations of interpersonal, curricular, and environmental antiblack assaults. I do, however, expand the sites beyond blackness to engage with the intersectional identities of the participants. I then reflect upon how the participants navigated their everyday environments with specific attention to the music classroom. I consider how the participants navigate instances of spirit-murder (Williams 1987; Love 2019) through resilient, resistant, and fugitive means. I ultimately revisit the question of how the participants re/imagine a music education that celebrates and lifts their identities and provide implications for future research and action.

How Do Black Youth See Themselves Reflected

Bettina Love's scholarship (2016; 2019) not only considers the constant state of survival Black and Brown youth navigate as a result of sustained racial trauma, but she additionally considers how this ongoing harm leads to a specific form of violence through spirit-murder stating:

Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things children need to be educated. The White rage in our schools murders dark students' spirits. Physical survival is not enough. Spirit-murder is not only about race and racism; dark people's other identity categories, such as gender, citizenship, religion, language, class, ethnicity, nationality, and queerness, are additional, distinct factors driving discrimination, bigotry, and violence. (2019, Chapter 2, Spirit-Murder)

The participants shared various instances where they navigated spiritually fatal instances of harms with narrow escapes. They also shared their perspective on their classmates, many with spirits that have been exceedingly mutilated. Warren and Coles' (2020) conceptualization of sites of antiblack assault provide three classifications of violence worthy of exploration: interpersonal, curricular, and environmental. Moreover, I choose to use their conceptualization of assault because the participants did not share one single positive conceptualization of blackness within their classroom contexts in our 20 hours of interviews. While there were positive moments that affirmed the students when they received additional autonomy, the environment was far from an

affirmation of their blackness, queerness, or gender expression. It is particularly important for multiply-minoritized youth to have all aspects of their identity affirmed because each facet has specific needs that must be supported and strengths that need to be cultivated.

I reflect upon the more significant aspects and moments of harm that appeared in the narrative. I additionally showcase brief moments that provided sanctuary for the participants. This analysis focuses on the most salient points I identified in this inquiry. Some of the harms experienced were overt, while other harms were subtler in nature. I will bring attention to several harms as exemplars, but the instances such harms occurred are sufficiently numerous that highlighting each one could contribute to a loss of clarity. I first consider what these instances mean in the immediate lives of the participants through the conceptualization of environmental, interpersonal, and curricular reflections. I will then consider what the ramifications are when considering the music education field.

Environmental Reflections

Endemic Antiblackness

I intended for readers to immediately notice the antiblackness the participants navigate and its incessant and endemic nature. Antiblackness infiltrates their homes, friendships, and classrooms. It starts from the moment they wake. The narrative begins by focusing on Ariel, who is a young woman who is confident in her Black identity. I represent this confidence through the serene darkness that surrounds her. The matrix of sheets she finds herself wrapped in resemble various aspects of her identity she is still coming to terms with. Her alarm serves as a painful reminder that she has a full day to navigate. Additionally, she is met with pain in her hands from overplaying her etudes the moment she opens her eyes. Jackii's morning reflects a different perspective. They are already prepared to navigate the day but expect a difficult start. I also find

it noteworthy that both participants rely heavily on coffee and energy drinks. While I do believe it is commonplace for teenagers to enjoy the allure of caffeine, the participants were clear in stating that they would be unable to complete their massively packed schedules without their dependence on it.

Gulfcove's Echoes of Violence

The Gulfcove area itself is loaded with racialized trauma from antebellum symbolism and confederate monuments. The confederate monument in the narrative was initially placed in the center of the park that Foster faces. These statues were erected largely between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and served as a reminder of the antebellum south confederate soldiers fought to preserve, largely the institution of slavery. This reminder of Black subjugation was ultimately moved to a predominately Black part of town by advocates that wanted to remove this symbol from the center of the park downtown that is comprised of boutique shops that are frequented by more affluent, predominately white, folks in town. This move means the Black folks in the community will now see it regularly. The movement of the statue was an act of interest convergence, the tenet in Critical Race Theory (CRT) that states that progress for people of color only occurs when the white hegemony can benefit (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). The white elite in the community were able to assuage their guilt and remove the reminder that they continue to be complicit in the subjugation of Black people in the community despite moving this reminder into a predominately Black community. The Black folks impacted by this move are merely collateral damage. This symbolism is an all-encompassing reminder that these areas were, and continue to be, controlled by affluent white families of the community. Street names. School names. Business names. Anthems. Bumper stickers. Lawn signs.

Billboards. These symbols also serve as a warning to Black, Brown, and other minoritized people to know their place.

These reminders are brought into an abrupt focus when Jackii and Ariel were speaking on FaceTime in Chapter 5. Jackii considers how lynchings happened across the state and that these atrocities are not only close to home, they occurred not that long ago. Jackii specifically mentioned in our meetings that they often thought about how their mother had to care for overt white supremacists and former Klansmen in her role as a nurse. It was in this exchange that the unsettling fact that close descendants of these individuals are heavily enmeshed in the fabric of the Gulfcove community. While these harms and crimes are interpersonal in nature, the echoes they leave resulted in the environment the participants navigate daily. Jackii specifically notes how these reminders happen throughout their drive to school. These violent environmental assaults shape how the participants exist in the various spaces they navigate, including schooling.

Sterile Classrooms

Both participants mentioned a massive dislike for the classroom spaces and facilities at Foster. They both were clear that they felt that the school was deceitful in its recruitment tactics and created the image that Foster was more racially and culturally diverse and allowed for more autonomy than it does in reality. The neoliberal aspects that make Foster “great” ultimately serve as an enticing feature for *some* students. It is worth considering that the elaborate labs, performance halls, and studios are only for those students the teachers deem talented enough. Similarly, the narrative of student freedom that is proliferated through the recruitment process is, again, a falsehood for many students. Jackii specifically considered how aspects of the room that may seem desirable to some individuals, such as the taller ceilings with recording equipment

hanging from the ceilings or large reference monitors in the group, caused them an adverse reaction.

Jackii described the classroom as sharing a resemblance to an operating room. This comparison is powerful on various fronts. First, Jackii considers the surgical-level precision of the directors—an aspect that I believe the directors would be proud of achieving. While their precision is impressive, it compels me to consider how surgeries are invasive and potentially traumatic. Additionally, I consider how the medical procedure mortality rate is higher for Black women (Lucas et al. 2006) and how this often stems from a lack of care and attention to the needs of these women. Jackii shared the fear they felt in rehearsals because they never knew when they would be asked to play a section they had yet to master in front of the ensemble. I felt a slight tinge of disgust remembering how I felt a deep sense of vindication and joy during these moments when I was a high schooler. I enjoyed seeing people's lack of preparation and laziness exposed. These schools often create a neoliberal culture where the myth of meritocracy is well and alive (Liu 2011). This myth can cause people of color to believe that racism and other forms of oppression have no material consequences, and that they can become successful if they push hard enough. Lies created by those that have less talent or are lazier. There is always a price for these things, and in this case the high-stakes rehearsal environment thrived upon the death of Black and Brown people's self-confidence and joy of music. Moreover, it is a zero-sum game. The Black and Brown students that do receive accolades for their playing exist with a larger target³² on their back in this highly competitive environment. Ariel shared that she felt that Mr. Wagner would have her step off of her part to be put in her place. She was specific in stating that she was often unable to hear any difference in phrasing during these interactions, and that Mr.

³² Refer to discussion on talent-based economy in interpersonal reflection section.

Wagner would just play the part louder. Further, one of Mr. Wagner's core critiques for Ariel is that she plays too loudly. It is a worthy reminder here that antiblackness functions, at its core, as the tether that secures what is white, pure, and good (Nakagawa 2012). The function of Mr. Wagner's actions, then, becomes less about correcting interpretation and more about reminding the class that Ariel will never meet the standard Mr. Wagner is capable of achieving as a talented [read: white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual] man.

Jackii and Ariel both have acknowledged that the severe absence of people of color took a toll on their self-efficacy and well-being. This absence was not only relegated to the chosen role models in the room, but even the photos of past students that were predominately white. Moreover, Jackii specifically felt that they were deceived by Foster's recruitment tactics that placed an emphasis on freedom and diversity. While discussed in Chapter 6 it is worth noting how the directors played a strong role in controlling the image of their students by enforcing a culture of professionalism that was emblematic of conservative Eurocentric aesthetics. This culture, in turn, created a homogenized look of whiteness across the ensemble. Jackii and Ariel do not even notice Stephan in some of the photos because of the control the directors exercised on their image. The classroom space is one that primarily represents and affirms predominately Eurocentric white males. We discussed the only environmental counternarrative in our kitchen table talks. In Chapter 7, Jackii remembers walking past a poster of Black composers during a State-level festival. Jackii notices the sheer volume of Black composers on the poster that they literally stop in their tracks to admire it. This happy moment does not last and becomes one fueled with anger. Jackii realizes that the issue is not that there is a lack of Black musicians. They arrive to the conclusion that there ultimately exists a lack of people who care and are willing to highlight them.

Incessant Environmental Assaults

Various systemic aspects of Jackii and Ariel's afterschool environments should be considered. High schools regularly have afterschool rehearsals and practices. Foster is unique in the sense that they provide afterschool shuttle busses, making rehearsals easier to plan. This afterschool environment was briefly a sustaining one for Jackii. They were able to join a queer support group their first year at Foster that provided them with a safe space to consider their gender identity and place in society. While this group didn't necessarily serve as an affirming place for Jackii's identity as a Black person, it was a necessary space for them to consider their queerness. This support, however, was short-lived and the group was disbanded when DeSantis' "don't say gay" bill was implemented. I noted in Chapter 1 how Florida's Parental Rights in Education Law imposed limitations on "topics of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation" (Najarro 2023) in public schools. While these bills and laws do not, in reality, threaten non-curricular clubs like GSAs their implementation functions as a scare tactic. This scare tactic often causes schools and educators to act reactively, not always knowing their rights. Ultimately, this law functions to repress groups and conversations that allow youth to make sense of their own identities.

Educators from Foster and Greenlake would often exacerbate and amplify environmental tensions. Ariel named this oppressive environment directly in our table talks, sharing how teachers lined the hallways after school to essentially push the students towards the bus ramp. Ariel called them overseers in our talks because the teachers often resorted to snide remarks and interactions to move the students out of the buildings. I agree with Ariel's insight and believe that the teachers upheld plantation politics through the mistreatment of students afterschool. Dancy et al. (2018) have considered how plantation politics and antiblackness manifest in academia,

stating that antiblackness is reproduced through two institutional arrangements: “the extraction of labor from the Black body without engaging the body as a laborer, but as property, and the mechanisms (e.g., stereotypical narratives) that institutions use to police, control, imprison, and kill” (180). The participants noted that the teachers would rely on the hierarchical structures that allotted them power, ultimately treating the students with a lack of respect or care. Chapter 4 showcases this appeal when Mrs. O’Hara was unwilling to hear why Jackii and Ariel would need to stay afterschool. Both participants spent an extended amount of time describing how Mrs. O’Hara’s presence was a symbol of strife. It is particularly important to consider that while Ariel and Jackii were being accosted by Mrs. O’Hara, she left the other white dancers alone. I revisit this interaction later when considering interpersonal assaults, but even the physical presence of some staff and faculty was sufficient to instill fear into the participants.

I ultimately question the choice of opening enrollment to students across the entire district and believe it is an irresponsible move. While this offer is kind at face value it leads to hours of bussing for the students on the outskirts. Apart from one town, the surrounding areas come from a generally low socioeconomic context and are comprised by higher percentages of Black and Brown children. Ariel was quite vocal on the emotional and physical toll she felt due to the exhausting Foster environment. She, however, felt that this trade-off was worth the opportunities she has received thus far. My personal experiences attending a similar schooling context, however, make me believe that the physical toll that environment took was higher than the “opportunity” I received. This approach to access and inclusion resembles the compulsory bussing Black and Brown children endured after *Brown V. Board of education*. The ultimate outcome of that decision led to the closure of schools in predominately Black communities, the dismissal of Black educators, and additional time spent on travel for Black and Brown families

(Bell 1980). Schools and white families benefitted most from this decision, receiving robust funding. This same tactic has been utilized to most directly benefit Foster and the Gulfcove community.

Interpersonal Reflections

The interpersonal assaults Jackii and Ariel navigated occurred both in and outside of school. These interactions could occur at any point within the day and were between classmates, faculty, administrators, and even family. Home contexts are highly variable and can be the sites of harm and healing, I therefore largely focus on interactions with classmates, directors, and administration. Additionally, I aim to highlight the presence of a talent-based economy at Foster that accepts interpersonal assaults as a form of currency. Both participants were able to curate some affirming spaces, but the various interpersonal assaults they encountered outnumbered the affirming contexts. I aim to focus on the affirming spaces in a following section of this chapter and choose here to reflect on the interpersonal assaults with which Jackii and Ariel regularly contended.

Student-Driven Violence

Ariel and Jackii navigated various interpersonal contexts with their classmates throughout the school days. I began the fabulation with Ariel having to cross the white wall and her perception of the whitewalkers³³. The white wall and walkers were regularly referenced throughout our kitchen table talks. This term was created by the Black and Brown dancers and was eventually spread throughout Foster. The dance department is comprised of students that have taken ballet lessons or attended one of the two programs in the district that offer ballet and

³³ Ariel used these terms, taken from the *Game of Thrones* franchise. The whitewalkers are a zombie-like adversary that are a threat to humanity in this setting. Ariel is engaging in signifyin' here, which is a practice in Black American culture that takes advantage of the gaps between the figurative and literal meaning of words.

contemporary dance. Racial tensions are high in the department because both feeder programs were situated in predominately Black communities in the district and many of the students that took lessons outside of school were from wealthier predominately white communities. The difference in background, when paired with the highly competitive nature of Foster and sudden integration of groups, fuels an intense segregation. While an interrogation of the dance department is outside of the scope of this dissertation and fabulation, it does provide context into the various racialized dynamics that occur within Foster. Additionally, the dance program reveals an important dynamic worth considering; increasing the diversity of the student body in a classroom will not compel meaningful progress. The diverse racial demographics of the dance department compelled the white students to protect their self-interests through racist “mean girl”³⁴ behavior.

I introduced another theme during Ariel’s bus ride that recurs throughout the fabulation, the various ways students would engage in “punching down”. I utilize this term to capture moments when jokes or critiques were made at the expense of someone with less power or capital. These instances of punching down can best be understood through scholarship on microaggressions (see for example Pierce 1970, Sue et al. 2007).

Laissez-Faire Microaggressions

Microaggressions were first theorized by Pierce (1970) to describe the slights, dismissals, and insults faced by African Americans. The term is now most associated with Derald Wing Sue, whose collaborative and solo writings have operationalized the term in great detail. Sue et al. (2007) define racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile,

³⁴ This term is in direct reference to the movie *Mean Girls* that was released in 2004. This film highlights the dynamics of a popular group of girls and their cruel and mean antics.

derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities (271)". The term has expanded from its racial origins to include other sites of oppression, including gender, sexuality, and ability.

Microaggressions can manifest in numerous ways, and in a variety of environments. Dismissive gestures, mocking tones, snide remarks, backhanded compliments, and other interpersonal manifestations create microaggressive interactions. These interactions remind racialized minorities of power dynamics and hierarchies. Students from various marginalized groups engaged in microaggressive punching down. Ariel's interpersonal dynamic with the group of white dance department students captures how, regardless of intent, these interactions are volatile. Similarly, Mrs. O'Hara's interaction with Jackii and Ariel afterschool illustrate how microaggressions serve to reinforce not only a hierarchy amongst students, but one between students and faculty.

More overtly racialized interactions can best be understood as microassaults. The work of Sue et al. (2007) identifies three distinct classes of microaggressions in the form of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are "attack[s] meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (274). This form of microaggression is the closest to instances of "old-fashioned" racism, usually conscious and intentional. This form is deemed a microassault because they are generally committed in "private" interactions that allow the perpetrator some level of deniability, but they take on a more overt nature in Foster. For example, Barry, a light-skinned Black boy made fat-phobic remarks about Pablo on the bus in front of classmates in Chapter 4. These

microassaults also occurred later in the Chapter 4 when Keith turns off the lights and Barry is made fun of for being Black, and therefore “disappearing” in the dark.

These instances of punching down bring several considerations into focus. First, there is a seemingly arbitrary nature to these assaults. Pablo is only a handful of pounds heavier than his classmates, and Barry has a lighter complexion. These remarks exist purely to remind the individual that they should remain in the margins. Second, it is revealed throughout the fabulation that these jokes and punching down are perfectly acceptable if the students are talented enough. Further, the students feel that they need to engage in this behavior to receive the approval of the directors, Mr. Wagner specifically, which alludes to the enmeshed nature of these interpersonal interactions. Additionally, Mr. Wagner and Mr. Buck communicate to students that this behavior is professional, and that if they are not “talented” they have little worth as a musician and person. Further, students ultimately learn what aspects of their identity are worthless and reviled.

Staff-Endorsed Harm

Mr. Wagner’s “focus” on talent and Mr. Buck’s focus on “professionalism” create what I describe as a “talent-based” economy. I believe this economy was initially fueled by students’ desires to become professional musicians but became distorted over time. This distortion came from a desire for their teachers’ approval. The students quickly learned that Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner had favorites that received additional attention. Jackii and Ariel additionally noted that the “favorite” students would make bigoted jokes to maintain their connection to both directors, but Mr. Wagner specifically. Both participants shared stories of the numerous ways these interpersonal assaults were used as a means of entertainment but also a way of putting talented marginalized players, like Ariel, in her place.

Ariel and Jackii also navigated various interpersonal assaults from school staff and administration. These exchanges happened with various teachers and administrators, but I focus here on Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner. Ariel and Jackii interacted with these two adults with the highest frequencies and they were the main culprits of their spirit injuries. I do find it worth noting, however, that Ariel and Jackii did find some comfort and healing with their private teachers and teachers like Mr. Booth who prioritized the entire well-being of their students. Additionally, Ariel depends on her mental health facilitator deeply for support. I will consider their supportive roles more deeply in a later section of this discussion.

Mr. Buck's interpersonal assaults manifest through what Dotson (2011) theorizes as pernicious ignorance. She describes this form of ignorance as one that is destructive and purposeful. There are various instances throughout Chapter 7 when Jackii and Ariel directly communicate their beliefs regarding their education. Mr. Buck is brought face-to-face with the reality that his approach to orchestral teaching constricts and confines a majority of his students. Jackii notes how Mr. Buck is unable to provide them with meaningful feedback and that the way he treats various players in the orchestra is indicative of another problem altogether; some students are simply warm bodies in the room that create the illusion of a large and diverse ensemble. It is common, and concerning, that in the current ensemble paradigm there are entire instrument groups that receive less feedback solely because of the part they play. I am sure that this disparity is exacerbated when various points of marginalization further compound the erasure students like Jackii experience, particularly when the director is somehow unable to differentiate between some of his Black students.

One of the most poignant moments in the fabulation is when Mr. Buck washes his hands of the intervention as he reads Facebook comments in a Burger King. Mr. Buck is aware in this

moment of the moves he can begin to make, but he chooses to blame Jackii for their end of year jitters. I believe that Mr. Buck represents the markers of prototypical colorblind racist³⁵ behavior, specifically the minimization of racism framing. He demonstrates this through his inability to confront Mr. Wagner for his overt bigotry in the classroom, claiming that everyone has a different on-ramp for these conversations. DiAngelo (2018) discusses this phenomenon of white fragility, the small amount of effort needed to make a white individual feel discomfort when discussing race. She further argues that this fragility is a manifestation of white privilege that functions to uphold itself. It is a privilege to have limited conversations related to racialized oppression, and an additional privilege to be able to disengage from the conversation. Mr. Buck not only avoids discomfort in this moment with Ariel and Jackii, but he also preserves white supremacy and prioritizes white emotionality over the wellbeing of his students.

I want to be clear that there was no artistic license with my depiction of Mr. Wagner. Every story shared came from the participants. This is generally the case for Mr. Buck and Mrs. O'Hara, but their bigotry lacks the overt nature of Mr. Wagner's persona. This range of interpersonal assaults makes it difficult for Jackii and Ariel to predict when they may occur. Further, regardless of their magnitude, these assaults leave lasting harm. There are many instances I could reflect upon in this fabulation but I focus on three.

The first rehearsal in Chapter 4 is emblematic of the various ways Mr. Wagner would attempt to demonstrate his expertise and superiority as a musician. I specifically refer to the scene where Mr. Wagner continuously demands increased clarity. This lack of a quantifiable objective cements Ariel as being less knowledgeable and Mr. Wagner as the expert. In reality, it demonstrates that Mr. Wagner lacks the words to communicate a desired outcome. I do not

³⁵ Bonilla-Silva (2013) theorized four sites of colorblind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism.

believe that feedback necessarily has to be verbal; Mr. Wagner, however, could demonstrate what he wants on the instrument, but he tends to save that as a tool for demoralizing students. That is, at least, how Ariel describes his interventions. It is also important to note that he continuously uses terms such as “clean” and “clarify” to describe what he wants when speaking to Ariel. This is something she felt pathologized her, particularly after he called her “messy”. Mr. Wagner ultimately gaslights Ariel into thinking he gave proper pedagogical feedback when she actually figured out how to alter her tone on her own.

Mr. Wagner’s interpersonal assaults also manifested outside of rehearsal. In our initial kitchen table talks Ariel noted how Mr. Wagner loves inserting sexist and transphobic types of jokes throughout his music theory class. He does this because of all of the binaries and classifications the students consider in class. The joke that appears in Chapter 4 is one such instance. There are several things worth noting in these moments. Ariel instantly loses any trust she is developing in Mr. Wagner any time such a joke is made. I find it interesting that Ariel is still willing to cultivate a trusting connection with Mr. Wagner. She wants to be able to trust her teacher, but his actions prevent that connection from developing. This lack of trust leads to a lack of openness on Ariel’s part, which is more than understandable. Additionally, the laughter from the students both emboldens any bigoted views that may be shared and simultaneously lets them know that this humor is okay and encouraged. Finally, Mr. Wagner’s humor leads to the realization that sexuality and gender can be discussed in classroom spaces, as long as it is done disparagingly. It ultimately seems that the “don’t say gay” bill serves to repress thoughts, statements, and sentiments that affirm queer and gender-expansive identities while simultaneously creating an environment that accommodates homophobia and transphobia.

The afterschool rehearsal Ariel shares details about in Chapter 5 is emblematic of a moment where Mr. Wagner punches down to preserve his role and power. Mr. Wagner chose to fabricate a scene where he calls Ariel lazy, to Mrs. O'Hara's delight, when Ariel was simply waiting for a piece she had a part on. Notice the Meryl Streep comparison from *The Devil Wears Prada* that Ariel creates, imagining she is a ruthless image-obsessed editor who eliminates anything that is not up to her standard. This administrator is a monster in Ariel's world. And this person is someone that she knows she cannot avoid. This surreal moment points to how Black girlhood can be criminalized at any moment (Morris 2016). Not only that, Mr. Wagner also demonstrates his power when he puts Ariel down. He utilizes Ariel's harm as a form of currency. It is through interpersonal assaults such as the constant reminders of the value of musical talent and that marginalized aspects of identity are worthy of ridicule that Mr. Wagner is able to cement his authority. To say it differently, this attempt at spirit murder is used as a foundation for the hierarchy of the ensemble.

Curricular Reflections

I constructed Chapter 7 in such a way that Jackie and Ariel's main contentions regarding the curricular assaults they navigate became the main points of concern. They noted the following curricular assaults: a lack of intentionality when engaging with multicultural and popular musics, performative approaches to diversity, a lack of freedom, lack of ensemble variety, lack of flexibility and student-centered instruction, and a pathologizing between what is and is not professional. Some of these points have been raised in music education literature including, but not limited to, the lack of intentionality (Hess 2021b), the need to interrogate professionalism (Bowman 2007), and lack of ensemble variety (Savage and Harry 2024). Conversely, others are novel to this study or under-researched. Each of these assaults functioned

to cause unique forms of harm, but many shared antiblack undertones. I focus on the Eurocentricity and lack of intentionality in this discussion but would also encourage readers to refer back to Chapter 7 while considering what curricular harms and violence can look like.

The curriculum at Foster is highly Eurocentric. There are additional patriotic undertones for the music repertoire selected specifically due to the orchestra functioning as a cultural ambassador in a European music festival in the coming summer. Additionally, there is an essentializing aspect to the programming by the selection of Coleridge-Taylor's music. Mr. Buck shows his lack of criticality through the inclusion of music from someone that he erroneously refers to as a Black American to an audience during a concert. Not only did he not mention Coleridge-Taylor's identity to students until the night of the concert, Mr. Buck also failed to realize that the composer was born in the United Kingdom. Moreover, he demonstrates an overall lack of care through the limited time he engages in the music with students. He uses the music of this Black composer as a form of cultural capital that creates the impression of a socially-conscious orchestra.

Lack of Intentionality

Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner both cultivate harm through their lack of intentionality. I believe this lack of intentionality is most clear in Chapter 7 when Mr. Buck believes he has been sufficiently inclusive when he commissioned a piece from Viv Martinique, a Black queer woman who attended Foster for piano. While this decision was meaningful, the lack of follow-up caused the effort to lack impact. Students need consistent exposure to various role models that do and do not look like them, but it is important to note that a singular Black role model or example can essentialize a group. This process of essentialization, or the construction of homogenized

characteristics, based on race and ethnicity ultimately creates a simplified Other that lacks richness or complexity (Bannerji 1996; Walcott 1997).

This lack of intentionality also extends into how the music is selected. Most of the diverse selections are “fun” and “cute” while the “serious”, often white and Eurocentric, selections are often outside of the grasp of a majority of the students in the ensemble. Robinson (2020) has discussed a similar colonial phenomenon and the various ways Indigenous musics are consumed through a Western epistemology. He describes this “hungry listening” as one that tries to classify, control, and appropriate Indigenous music. A similar phenomena occurs through the trivial selection of diverse musics. This approach implies a lack of substance in the music from other cultures and highlights an indiscriminate hunger that exists for music from “Other” groups. Meanwhile, the “proper” music that the directors program is often outside of the grasp of most of the players. A few will have the chops to play it. Many will “drill and kill”, a term I use intentionally to showcase the way these expectations can kill spirits, the orchestral music in their lessons. And some will just fake it, falling further behind. The other students ultimately suffer so the top performers enjoy challenging music, and the school receives accolades.

Stephan notes in Chapter 6 that there is too much power in the band/choir/orchestra (BCO) ensemble paradigm. Stephan is a composite of many of my own beliefs and represents some of the sentiments I shared in my kitchen table talks. This control manifests through the ability to choose repertoire, make interpretive decisions, and structure how rehearsals are led. Additionally, there is a symbolic level of control the director has, being at the center of the ensemble and leading the students musically. This thought was further solidified when Ariel and Jackii mentioned that they do not even see Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner as teachers. Part of the power in this paradigm is that it allows teachers to un/intentionally forget their roles as

educators. Some may even go so far as serving the craft of music making before their responsibility of educating youth. This reality is particularly alarming for students that are unable to receive private instruction. Jackii specifically noted the frustration they felt in their inability to confidently shift on the viola because Mr. Buck only provided a cursory overview of the necessary technique. These directors are able to live out the delusion of directing professional ensembles at the expense of the less “talented” students.

How Do Black Youth Navigate/Make Sense of These Reflections

Speaking to Ariel and Jackii was a deeply emotional experience. Despite navigating a similar high school environment to theirs, I felt a deep sense of despair when I considered the larger sociopolitical context of their schooling. I believe that the school and life environment both participants navigate is more volatile and overtly harmful than my own experiences. I believe this environment is largely due to stark increase of conservative advocacy parent groups in schools and the increasingly adversarial nature of news and political discourse.

I was additionally moved by the various approaches they took to navigate this environment. I hesitate to deeply explore how they have been able to navigate Foster; I feel it would be a violation of participants’ trust by interpreting every emotion, reaction, and tactic they shared. To say it differently, some of these tactics need to remain secret to ensure they continue to exist outside of the white supremacist gaze (Toliver 2021). I will not violate that trust. Many of the tactics, however, are present throughout the narrative. It was my attempt to make them clear enough for the right people to notice them immediately. I ask these scholars and educators to be careful with what they make plainly known. I will, however, identify several moments to demonstrate how I came to interpret Jacki and Ariel’s stories.

Both participants demonstrated a spectrum of approaches in response to the assaults they regularly navigate. There were many instances where participants faced the assaults directly. Other conflicts pushed the participants to resist or outright refuse the realities they were navigating. This refusal was evident when various students formed a protest after Mrs. O'Hara called a student a slut for wearing a skirt. Both participants also needed to cultivate moments where they could safely make sense of the harms to begin to heal. These healing moments often compelled Jackii and Ariel to become physically and/or mentally stronger.

The participants in the study were able to seek out and curate spaces that could be considered fugitive in nature. Givens (2021) has considered how Black learning, specifically literacy acquisition, was illegal in the United States. He further explicates a history of the suppression of Black learning. Givens' (2021) work focuses on the efforts of Carter G. Woodson and other Black teachers to deliver transgressive and subversive instruction to Black children, calling this a fugitive pedagogy. Woodson's contributions are considered fugitive because he would function outside of the construct of schooling and published his own work and created independent institutions (Givens 2021). His scholarship, along with foundational scholars that have considered the role of fugitive spaces (Bambara 1980; Love 2019), note the opportunities that exist for healing.³⁶ Ultimately, these fugitive moments allow the participants to heal and move forward. They can be slight moments of "wayward living" (Hartman 2019) where the participants resisted the realities they were expected to navigate. Examples include Ariel's tenacity to Mr. Wagner's onslaught of demands and more established structures such as Jackii's Zesty besties. They regrouped in these moments and made sense of the realities around them.

³⁶ While Love's work focuses on abolitionist teaching, I contend that there is an alignment to fugitivity. I have argued in past work (Sánchez-Gatt 2023) that fugitivity and abolition exist on a spectrum. Fugitivity functions as a reprieve from oppressive structures while abolition is the ultimate breaking down of those structures.

Facing Assaults Head On

Jackii and Ariel both faced interpersonal, curricular, and environmental assaults head on throughout the fabulation. They faced these moments intentionally, at times. Such as Ariel meeting the white wall face on and maintaining the tenacity to walk past them and their looks. Other moments were forced upon them, like Jackii sitting through rehearsals where they were consistently overlooked and dismissed. The moments that forced the participants to tackle harm took a psychic and, at times, physical toll on them. Ariel mentions various times throughout the fabulation that she is tired and worn out. I also believe that the repetitive use injuries Ariel was navigating were a result of being forced to interact with Mr. Wagner daily. Further, I believe the tension Ariel feels around Mr. Wagner, is a manifestation of racial battle fatigue that exacerbates her injuries. Smith et al. (2011) noted how Black males in predominately white institutions (PWIs) navigated psychological, physiological, and emotional/stress responses as a result of the constant barrage of microaggressions they faced. Ariel's rehearsal environment mirrors the assaults found in PWIs because she is constantly compelled to question her abilities and capacity to become a musician.

Participants, however, expressed overtly positive feelings when they shared stories about the various ways they intentionally pushed through discomfort. I believe these moments speak to Dumas and ross' (2016) third framing of BlackCrit. Jackii and Ariel took great joy in ignoring the signs and hints that they were not welcome, they were able to assert their humanity and freedom by taking up the space they rightfully deserve. This experience was particularly invigorating for Jackii, which is evident in the opening of Chapter 7:

[Ariel speaking] I can do that. Can I ask a real ass question really quick though? How are you not super worn out from always having to fight? Or always having to explain stuff to people?"

[Jackii speaking] I honestly... I know what you're talking about people feeling. But I think that I've experienced the opposite. I think that the more that I'm around this kind of environment, the more I want to try to stop it, the more I want to try to change it. I am tired, but that tiredness is kind of fueling me to make the source of the tiredness stop. Because I mean, it's not going to stop until people try to stop it. (see 128)

This exchange occurred during the final collective kitchen table talk I had with the participants of the study. I wanted to include it in its most direct form because I was simultaneously inspired by their tenacity and heartbroken because of the need for this level of sustained resilience and tenacity. Diprose (2015) argues that resilience narratives can often be isolating in the sense that collective struggle becomes something that requires an individualized solution. To say it differently, resilience has become a salve for inequality and oppression for Jackii and Ariel, but it does nothing to target the source of that inequality and oppression.

Resisting and Refusing Violence

Defying Expectations

The participants both discussed instances where they intentionally resisted and refused the expectations that others made for them. This resistance specifically occurred when these expectations were gendered and/or raced. Ariel noted in our kitchen table talks that she often felt like she would win in situations where she contained her tears. This form of refusal and resistance showcases how Mr. Wagner and the dance students pushed Ariel to the point of expressing overt emotional strain. It is true that bullies exist within schools but, in the case of Black girls, those bullies are often teachers trying to make a point. I believe that this tension occurred because antiblack racism manifests through sub-human tropes (Wilderson 2020) that Black people are more resistant to pain and harm, and the desire those that are human have in testing those limits. These conceptualizations are made most salient when considered through an Afropessimist lens that positions blackness outside of what can be categorized as human. This phenomenon has been conceptualized as a lack of racial empathy (Forgiarini et al. 2011).

Implicit racial biases were described in the study, specifically that white participants perceived Black people as being more resistant to pain when a similar stimulus was applied to white people. Ariel refusing to cry may then seem confusing, but it is an act that reaffirms her own strength and is an act of resisting the larger implications of her being.

Both participants also resisted the tropes and images they were expected to fulfill. Jackii expressed deep pride in their fashion choice, and how it pushes against the gender binary. Jackii was intentional about curating outfits that more closely represent hegemonic masculine ideals when people expected them to be feminine. Inversely, they would choose more feminine presenting ensembles when individuals expected them to present in a masculine manner. It is also important to note that both participants and I spoke about the symbolic nature of our hair and how we exist in the world. All three of us chose to cut off the majority of our hair after moments that reminded us of our marginalized identities. Such a moment would be described by Pérez-Huber (2010) as one where our masks were ripped off. These masks are the methods and tools marginalized folks use to protect themselves from the harms of white supremacy, and the masks being removed represents reminders that one does not belong to the hegemony. Jackii and Ariel then used their fashion choices as armor and hair as crowns to remind themselves of the space they deserve to occupy.

Resisting Interpersonal Violence

There were limited opportunities for Ariel and Jackii to exercise their ability to resist or refuse the expectations made upon them. The participants felt constrained by the curriculum and environment and were often unable to consider alternatives. One area where they did have some control was with the interpersonal interactions they had during class. Ariel and Jackii resisted participating in any of the racist, sexist, and otherwise marginalizing humor that was common

within the orchestra and jazz departments. The participants were specific in noting that they felt that participating in that culture changed people. They particularly believed that Black students like Barry participated in antiblack, homophobic, sexist, and otherwise harmful humor to approximate whiteness and ultimately had a low self-efficacy and diminished racial literacy.³⁷ It is especially important to note that whiteness is not ontologically situated and is, instead, a construct that defines itself through what it is not (Dumas 2016). This construct, then, exists as a spectrum with white cis-heteropatriarchal upper-class being the closest to the ideals of whiteness. Mr. Wagner particularly embodies many ideal qualities, when examined through this framing of whiteness, so it is no surprise that some minoritized students appeal to his humor for their own protection.

Metabolizing Harm and Healing

Both participants had stories that consisted of stark juxtapositions of harm with moments of healing and understanding. These moments of healing often consisted of supportive friend groups and guidance from their families. Additionally, both participants highlighted the importance of stolen, fugitive moments like those before class and concerts. Those moments allowed them to further cultivate their communities.

Supportive friend groups were essential for both Ariel and Jackii. Ariel was able to depend on her rock band friends in a way she could not in the jazz department. The members of the rock band appreciated her skills, leadership qualities, and sense of humor. This degree of trust and appreciation helped Ariel feel validated during a time when her mother was constantly worried about her sleep schedule and health and Mr. Wagner imposed unrealistic expectations. Ariel needed the reminder that she was doing everything she could, and that it was enough.

³⁷ I utilize the term racial literacy to refer to the ability to identify, understand, and respond to instances of racialized harm. See Oto et al. (2023) for additional understanding.

Jackii felt a similar sense of support with the “Zesty besties”. Jackii’s support network, however, was comprised of all the seniors in orchestra, who happened to also be queer. While this group’s predominately queer identity was a coincidence, their friendship was intentional. The Zesty besties valued Jackii for existing authentically as a queer nonbinary individual. This connection is different from the one Ariel feels from her rock band friends. Jackii and their friends were able to share upsetting experiences, vent, and seek advice in a small community that supported them and understood what they were navigating. Ariel stated in our interviews that she could be herself amongst her friends, but that seeing Jackii interact with their friends was powerful because of their unapologetic queerness. This friend group inspired others to come out because of their courage and authenticity. Further, Jackii and their friends often helped younger classmates learn more about aspects queer culture and identity. It is important, however, to note that Jackii did not feel like their blackness was affirmed in the same way with their Zesty besties. They often had to explain things to the Zesties when racialized harm occurred, and while they often understood and supported Jackii, they were unable to fully relax into the blackness of their being with that friend group.

Jackii and Ariel both received guidance and support from their families. Ariel’s family is deeply steeped in the traditions and culture that are cultivated in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Her family asserts themselves with pride and a critically conscious awareness of race, as evidenced by the Malcolm X quote Ariel’s grandmother shares. Additionally, Ariel learned her astute ability to play guitar with her grandfather, making the instrument something that is deeply personal to her. Jackii has a similar support system with their mother whose lived experience in nursing allowed her to give Jackii guidance. Jackii and Ariel also deserve recognition because they had to willingly accept the guidance and support they were

offered. Characters like Barry represented classmates that resisted or lacked ancestral support and internalized oppression. I personally believed that denying certain aspects of my own identity would push me to greater heights when I was younger, largely because I believed that my hard work and the connections I was curating would lead me to greater success.

Fugitive Healing

The support and advice Jackii and Ariel receive had to be discovered or found before they could choose to accept it. Many of these healing moments were fugitive in nature. They were never meant to take place during class, but they happened anyway. This fear towards Black folks organizing and learning is not new (Givens 2021). While Jackii and Ariel did not have support from a director who was a fugitive pedagogue or co-conspirator, they were still able to learn from one another. What is observed, then, would more closely align with Hartman's conceptualization of wayward living. This conceptualization of fugitivity is embodied in the moments the participants were able to slow down and chat briefly, a resistance to the constricting nature of school and the overbearing presence of the educators and staff. These moments occurred in hallways, afterschool, before concerts, and on field trips. They are fugitive because folks like Mrs. O'Hara and Mr. Wagner choose to enforce restrictions on these interactions. These were the moments that allowed the participants to better understand their own identities and the context within which they exist, yet these moments were consistently policed and suppressed. They were suppressed because fugitive learning compels its learners to make sense of the harms to which they are regularly exposed. Bambara (1980) specifically highlights the immense healing power of fugitive communities. Ariel was clear in sharing that Jackii and the Zesty besties created a community that was able to nurture and affirm the queerness of the folks in and around the group. Jackii felt this same level of communal support from the GSA group on

the Greenlake campus before it was dismantled because of the “don’t say gay” bill³⁸. This pattern of suppressing the organization of marginalized people is not new nor is it confined to music education, it is a symptom of the endemic nature of antiblackness.

How Do Black Youth Conceptualize the Future of Music Education

The participants in this study expressed significant difficulty in imagining a future where music education reflects their desires and needs. I constructed Chapters 6 and 7 in a manner that represents the wishes and hopes both participants had for an improved music education that reflects and considers their identity. Additionally, I intended for Chapter 6 to more closely approximate the final kitchen table talk I had with the participants of the study and how I participated in these discussions. It is worth noting, however, that this was not my hope in constructing the dissertation. I wanted to have the participants imagine a radically different music education. One that included daring modalities outside of the band (jazz), choir, and orchestra paradigm. I pushed and asked questions related to implementing things related to their interests and heritage. Both participants expressed interest, but also expressed that this was outside of what they thought was possible. Jackii particularly would often refrain with “Well wouldn’t that be nice?” when asked to consider new perspectives. Ariel, on the other hand, was a bit more daring. She was able to imagine a multidisciplinary approach where the students at Foster stepped outside of their assigned programs and into others. She ultimately pushed the idea away, however, because of Mr. Wagner’s demanding nature.

³⁸ As discussed in footnote 23, it is vitally important to note that the Equal Access Act Federal law, passed in 1984 protects students' right to form clubs at any high school receiving federal funding. GSAs are almost always considered non-curricular. Policy such as the “Don’t say gay” bill functions, in part, through fear mongering that compels districts to behave reactively. Educators and caregivers must push against any reactive initiatives proposed by school administrators or district-level personnel. Please see <https://eqfl.org/know-your-legal-rights> for additional information

A necropolitical framing provides additional insight. Evans-Winters (2017) uses a necropolitical framing to consider various deculturization policies and tactics that “attempt to strip African American children of their culture and replace it with the culture of the White middle class/oppressor or what is considered normative” (22). She describes how forms of deculturization manifest in white supremacist curriculum, including through the over-correction and erasure of African American English dialects. These forms of deculturalization are present throughout the narrative whenever Mr. Buck and Mr. Wagner pathologized certain pieces and practices as unprofessional. The effects of the various policies and tactics are exacerbated through environmental and interpersonal assaults to create an environment that murders Jackie and Ariel’s ability to dream. The impact of this assault against their ability to dream extends outside of the classroom environment; both participants were unable to imagine a different future when I encouraged them to do so.

While necropolitical analyses often contend with death and other forms of physical violence, scholars can engage with this theoretical lens ontopolitologically. Boni Wozolek (2023) explores this more mundane and insidious death-world in their book *Educational Necropolitics: A Sonic Ethnography of Everyday Racisms in U.S. Schools*. Wozolek highlights the destructive effects of neoliberal practices, deculturalization efforts, and the overt policing of Black youth in a predominately white high school. Wozolek states that “at Milford, for students of color, school is a place where their ways of being are so devalued that they either changed how they were in the world in order to gain wiggle room or they played into pervasive social images as a means to create any safe spaces possible” (170). Wozolek (2023) emphasizes that Black students' emotional health is disregarded, and the system appears to purposefully neglect and disregard them. Wozolek asserts that Milford High school, which shares parallel to Foster,

performs a type of “ontoepistemological choking and lynching” (2023, xiii) through the disciplining of Black boys and the high instances of Black girls that are forced to assimilate whiteness that forces them into a death-world (Mbembe 2003). These students navigate their days as the living dead.

This ontoepistemological choking and lynching is experienced by Jackii and Ariel throughout the narrative. These ontological harms manifested in the tasing of Da’vonte in Chapter 4 and, albeit less conspicuously, evident in the pain Ariel navigates in her wrists. This epistemic death is most characterized by the inability both participants had of imagining a radically different paradigm but manifests in their overall demeanor.

The participants were ultimately unable to imagine a radically different music education, but they were able to consider various ways that the classroom could better affirm their identities. It is not from a lack of wanting a radically different future. They were both quite clear with their displeasure with the current state of music education. What I did, instead, was to write the suggestions they made into the fabulation. Additionally, readers will see that Chapter 7 is organized in a manner that utilizes curricular, interpersonal, and environmental interventions that I describe as affirmations. This framing is an extension of the work of Warren and Coles (2020) I have cited previously.

I came to understand how the music program at Foster affected the ability both participants had of imagining a radically different future. They often spoke about the past of the program, and how it has remained the same or become increasingly volatile. Jackii could imagine a life full of music, but it was not attached to music education. Ariel was more apprehensive, something that may be attributed to only being half-way through the program or the community they found in rock band.

Implications

The orchestra and jazz departments at Foster thrive on the denigration of Other musics and people. Both teachers utilized the coded language (Marom 2019) of professionalism to make disparaging comments about music from marginalized composers, when they even allowed it to be played. I am led to wonder what these educators deemed professional. Was it only what they learned in school? Or is it just the things they themselves understand deeply? Or is it the directors' goal to create the narrative that their students need them to become musically cultured, so they continue to be relevant? Student bonds, and the bonds they have with Mr. Wagner and Mr. Buck, are then further enforced through racist, sexist, homophobic, fatphobic, and otherwise marginalizing statements and actions. This behavior begins with the directors, and students become enculturated into the behavior as well. This behavior is permitted, and essentially encouraged, by policies and laws that restrict any affirming intervention. The orchestra and jazz departments become sites that encourage harm and prevent healing. Further, I believe that the program at Foster thrives by murdering the ability youth have to dream. I specifically believe that these programs create environments that facilitate spirit murder (Love 2019; Love 2023). The directors actively suppress any divergent form of musicianship meaning that students are forced to choose a future as a music educator, performance major, or for their final musical experience to be their high school graduation. While I believe that this program negatively affects a large number of its students, I am most concerned for the students whose identities consist of various facets of marginalization. Even Ariel, who wants to be a professional guitar player, has had her dreams of what that future could look like shaped by Mr. Wagner. These dreams have been shaped in a way that reflects his own experiences and makes no consideration of her own lived-experience and desires.

High-stakes music ensembles can be the site of various psychological and epistemological assaults that manifest in the environment, curriculum, and interpersonal interactions (Warren & Coles 2020). Foster is one of several high-stakes performing arts schools in Florida. Additionally, these programs exist in a variety of states and contexts. I believe that these two specific departments will continue to be the site of suffering unless both directors were to retire within the same year. Otherwise, a new educator would likely become enculturated into the dynamics, which took place for Mr. Buck who joined Foster around 2010. Mr. Wagner has been at the school since the mid-1990s. Programs such as these, in other words, are irredeemably harmful. They exist through creating a musical in-group. The process of creating this in-group are varied and various. However, this process is a racist act that is upheld through colonial means, in the sense that it imposes a hierarchy that is established and maintained through any means possible. I believe this is one such manifestation of white supremacy that creates a binary of good, often meaning white, and bad, which is often pathologized as Black. For this hierarchy to exist, however, there must be a fulcrum, something that serves as the counterweight that lifts whiteness. Blackness, and that which is aligned and pathologized as Black, becomes the out-group. Thus, Mr. Wagner and Mr. Buck have created an environment where it is acceptable to mock and harass the students that lack the talent, education, or the proper “look” in the program. They ensure this by pushing music that is “unprofessional”, meaning from someone with a marginalized identity, further into the margins.

Cultivating Sites of Harm

Music educators, specifically those in competitive Eurocentric secondary instrumental settings, can cultivate sites of harm in their classrooms. I believe many instrumental music educators have been guilty of this transgression, even if done inadvertently. I can recall a

moment in my own teaching career where a bright-eyed child told me she wanted to be the next Lindsey Stirling. I told her she needed to have loftier goals with her technique. I was ultimately much more concerned with that student's skill development, and less about their growth as a musician and member of society. I knew that something about her outlook changed that day. I realized years later that I injured her spirit in a way that altered her dreams. Because I believe that this paradigm is, in many ways, irredeemable, I choose to mourn and contemplate a way out. I argue that this paradigm is largely incapable of providing the future of which I and the participants in this study dream. Knowing that there will not be a morning where these dreams can be achieved in this current structure compels me to focus on minimizing harm and promoting the healing that is needed for marginalized youth, specifically Black girls and queer youth, to survive and thrive. It, additionally, compels me to consider the future of music education beyond the Eurocentric ensemble paradigm.

Recommendations

Music classrooms need to create environments that maintain and cultivate the ability youth have to imagine a better future. Music has played a central role in maintaining the spirits and dreams of Black and Brown folks, (e.g. Juke Joints) and this tradition should continue. For this to occur, however, educators must learn how the interpersonal, curricular, and environmental assaults manifest in classrooms. Undergraduate music education courses must incorporate topics related to microaggressions, antiblack assaults, and the various ways individual actions uphold systemic inequalities. Specifically, these topics should include content that explores the various types of microaggressions that exist, the effect they have on marginalized individuals, and guidance on how to minimize and stop their occurrences. Additionally, music education programs should provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to meaningfully engage with

trauma-informed healthy musicianship. It was a recurring theme that both participants felt that their mental and physical boundaries did not matter when they were in their classes at Foster. They also described their experience as a case of Stockholm syndrome.³⁹ Concert experiences should be rewarding, but they should not be used to justify volatile environments that are maintained through matrices of assault. The words, the slights, and the harms that occur in rehearsal and lesson place should never feel normal. It is important to teach youth, particularly minoritized youth, that they do not have to endure poor treatment to receive an education.

Preservice educators will also need to learn how to provide students with sense-making opportunities. These opportunities could likely consist of students doing individual projects with the central theme of expressing their identity through music. Jackii noted that they discovered a new passion in composing. They went on to share how the electronic music class provided a safe space to experiment with ideas and self-expression that was not available in either ensemble. The participants were constantly battling forces while also trying to maintain their spirits. These forces often compel them to question their identity and self-worth. There is a potential for music classrooms to be anti-oppressive spaces that focus on increasing the racial literacy of students through songwriting projects, novel approaches to musicking, and interdisciplinary projects. This increased freedom would allow minoritized youth to better understand how racism can manifest and how it is endemic to society (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Wilderson 2020) as they make connections between their experiences and the larger context they exist within. It is essential, however, for educators to play an active role in cultivating their own racial literacies and to be mindful of their positionalities. There is a danger, particularly for white educators, of reinscribing

³⁹ Stockholm syndrome is a psychological response where victims of assault and/or kidnapping develop positive feelings towards the aggressors and/or captors. The participants used this term to describe their experiences as Foster.

harm and oppression through activities that do not cultivate the full spectrum of needs that Black youth have. Educators must engage in their own learning and seek out community support to meaningfully engage in such projects.

These sense-making opportunities could also facilitate how youth interact within the context of their musical community. Participants also had to understand and combat aggressions that were based on gender, sexuality, physical appearance, and mastery of Eurocentric repertoire. Even in Ariel's jazz context, knowledge and mastery was often asserted through the understanding of a narrow, white-washed canon of jazz music (Baraka 2010) and the application of theory to solos and so on. Music classrooms must make space for these realizations to occur. Particularly when the primary modality of the course is Eurocentric in nature. Additionally, music classrooms should create opportunities for music-making outside of the Eurocentric ensemble modality. These opportunities compel educators to consider the various musical possibilities that could exist.

Ultimately, these sense-making opportunities may encourage youth, particularly minoritized youth, to contend with how they exist in a globalized context, even compelling action. Both participants cultivated skills through their family, amongst one another, and through their own self-improvement that motivated them to consider how global systems of oppression affected their daily lives and those of others. These skills compelled them to curate safe friend groups and to protest unjust dress code guidelines. Music, additionally, can provide multiple means of expression. Ariel shared her fear of showing her support of Palestine in our kitchen table talks, but music has historically made expressing political beliefs easier. Music may also make the expression of these views and beliefs more palatable. These skills would be valuable

across a variety of contexts and could serve to give youth the skills they need to be cunning in the ways they express themselves and make sense of the oppression they are forced to navigate.

Closing

The field of music education will need to have a reckoning for any structural change to occur. There is an immediate need to prepare teachers for the current state of music education that is failing to respond to the prescient needs of minoritized, and specifically Black, youth. This shift in preparation begins by acknowledging that classrooms that operate within Eurocentric ensemble modalities often lack the following: student-centeredness (O'Toole 1994), meaningful contextualization (Hess 2016), and interdisciplinary opportunities⁴⁰. Further it requires the acknowledgement that these classrooms often utilize Eurocentric hierarchical language, have an over-emphasis on skill acquisition, and operate through talent-based [read privileged] economies.

There is a need for music teacher preparation to demonstrate that these changes are possible. This happens, in part, through modeling student-centered learning opportunities in collegiate ensembles, pedagogy courses, and music education classes. Additionally, teacher preparation programs can collaborate with and showcase programs that are already doing aspects of this work. Additionally, there must be pathways that introduce educators to the skills and resources needed to research music to craft interdisciplinary lessons. These demonstrations would need to be bolstered through coursework that compels preservice teachers to increase their racial literacy and the centrality of antiblackness specifically to the hegemonic paradigm of Eurocentric music making. These changes need to occur for there to be any hope of music education to becoming relevant to the needs of multiply-marginalized Black youth.

⁴⁰ The concept of interdisciplinarity in music education is an under-researched topic. See Barrett (2016) for additional scholarship.

From Morning to Mourning⁴¹

I believe that the educators in this study failed the participants and this failure represents a larger, insidious problem. This problem is then exacerbated by educators who look the other way or only focus on their own classroom practices. Various scholars have called for change over many decades, with no meaningful change occurring (McKoy 2017). The time for hope has long ended.

The music education field has created and allowed a Eurocentric white supremacist reality to continue. Both Jackii and Ariel highlight a tradition of harm in secondary music ensembles. Further, this harm seems to be most salient in the instrumental ensemble paradigm. The need for pedagogical and curricular changes to respond to culturally diverse student population are not new. Music educators and scholars convened in 1967 for the Tanglewood symposia to discuss how the field could collectively change how music is taught, and teachers are prepared.⁴² There is an undeniable parallel between the calls made during the symposia and the ones shared in this discussion [*emphasis added*]:

We recommend that teacher education programs in music be modified or expanded to include the *skills and attitudes needed for specialized tasks required in the inner city*. These tasks call for (a) a person whose solid musical background is equal to that expected of all music teachers in schools; (b) a person with *positive attitudes toward himself, toward children* and toward society, with a commitment to his task and with a sense of responsibility toward music as well as *empathy for the social needs and conditions of other people*; (c) a person who possesses *the initiative and imagination* to relate the school and his skills to the *unique needs and resources of the families and traditions of the neighborhood* he serves; and (d) a person who is *informed by conditions and trends in the community, including those of minority groups*, and who has the skills to apply his insights in a flexible way to the societal problems he faces.

⁴¹ Chezare Warren's (2021) paper "From Morning to Mourning: A Meditation on Possibility in Black Education" reframes the concept of mourning, often representing involuntary grief, to being a space where possibility can be conjured. Warren specifically considers Black activists that have had children murdered by police, and how they have transformed their grief into organization and action.

⁴² The assertion I make joins a chorus of similar critiques. See McKoy (2017) for additional insight and critique of the Tanglewood Symposium.

We recommend the formulation of a new curriculum for teacher training institutions that will attract such persons and educate them in actual community situations during the pre-service period. This curriculum might include (a) *courses from the social sciences* that are most *relevant to community structure and change, group relations, and family life*; (b) direct experience in the application of music to the community during the training period, and especially in the student-teaching period; and (c) continuing experiences by teachers in the field along these directions to *meet problems of conflict and change in the community that will continue and perhaps become more pressing in the years ahead*. (Choate, 1968, 132)

Many of the pedagogical and curricular recommendations made at the symposium align with the recommendations I have made thus far. The recommendations made at the symposium would have responded to many of Jackii's and Ariel's desires. However, the most significant development in the 57 years since the symposium has taken place is the shift towards "politically correct" language. I believe that this shift in language reflects the fear white teachers have of being labeled "racist" by other white teachers and less to do with an investment in marginalized youth (Leonardo 2004).

I instead invite educators and scholars to wonder why they are not enraged by this reality.

Why do we look the other way when a colleague rehearses festival music for half the year to get a superior?⁴³ Why are teachers pressured to take students to these festivals in the first place? Music education is often framed as an opportunity that enriches the lives of youth through transformative experiences, but this notion has been the site of critique for decades. Samuel Gould asserted the following:

All of us are prone to think euphorically about the aesthetic effects of the arts and accept as an unquestioned fact that by adding new cultural dimensions they make for a more human citizenry. This can be true, but there is nothing sure about it, any more than one can be certain that more education generally always means more humanity. Great ideas and great works can sometimes be used for ignoble purposes. (Gould 1968, 53 as cited in McKoy 2017)

⁴³ A superior designation in the United States often reflects the highest level of distinction in music performance festivals and competitions.

There is only so much change that can be expected when the same needs have been reiterated for over 50 years.

Hope is too indulgent; we need action and the courage that compels it. Niknafs (2022) has similarly pondered how music education may not be good for anything, lacking any transformative potential. She then extends a metaphor of a burning house representing music education, using a keynote from Farzaneh Hemmasi, in an editorial for *Action, Criticism, and Theory in Music Education*. Niknafs states that “if that house is haunted, fire acts as the cleansing material conjuring away the colonial, the oppressive, the burdensome, and the ghostliness; just ‘walk away and let it burn’” (2022, 4). I assert that specters of whiteness, antiblackness, and death haunt music education, and that there is a need for cleansing before there is renewal. I hope this work serves as a call to anger and a call to action. My call is for those that, similarly, find that K-12 music education is largely an irredeemable tool for social justice and transformation. I urge you to recall the words of Octavia Butler, there is nothing new under the sun, but there are other suns.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ This quote is from her unpublished *Parable of the Trickster*. Please refer to Wilson (2020) for additional information.

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APPENDIX A: PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT AND STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Centering Black Youth's Resistance, Healing, and

Futurity in Music Education

Researcher and Title: Lorenzo Sánchez-Gatt

Department and Institution: Music Education at Michigan State University

Contact Information: [REDACTED]

Sponsor: Dr. Juliet Hess, dissertation advisor

BRIEF SUMMARY

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation including why your child may or may not want to participate, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You and your child should feel free to discuss and ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study that asks for their perspectives and stories regarding current music education practices and their representations of culture. Your child's participation in this study will take about 12 hours over the course of four weeks. Your child will be asked to participate in three interviews and three focus groups, each lasting no more than two hours, where they will be asked to share their opinions and experiences as a music student.

A potential risk of this study is that your child may experience emotional discomfort at times during interviews or focus groups. This discomfort may stem from recounting difficult experiences related to their experiences with culture in the music classroom. The potential benefits to you for taking part in this study are receiving guidance navigating the landscape of music from a professional musician and scholar of color, as well as community service hours. The findings of this study, of which your child will be informed of, may have far-reaching implications and benefits for music classroom practices. These implications may inform relevant and affirming pedagogical practices, leading to instruction that is engaging to youth today. Additionally, your child's participation may inform the field regarding the high attrition rate for Black students in music.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of how Black youth perceive and understand their experiences as music students. Black youth are largely underrepresented in music classrooms and there is very little research regarding their experiences. Gathering the stories of Black youth, and their opinions on the future of music education, will provide valuable insight into improving classroom practices.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO

You will be asked to participate in three interviews and three focus groups. The focus groups will consist of three additional participants. The first interview is intended to better understand your child's musical background and their experiences with culture in the music classroom. The proceeding focus group is intended to better understand the experiences discussed in the first interview. The second interview is intended to better understand how your child navigates and feels about the representations of culture discussed in the first interview and focus group. The proceeding focus group is intended to better understand the experiences discussed from the second interview. The final interview is intended to

provide a better understanding of how your child would like to see music education change in the future. The final focus group is intended to be a conversation where participants conceptualize the future of music education together. Your child will have the option to keep a journal, or however they choose to capture their thoughts, that consists of their reflections after each interview and focus group.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The potential benefits for your child taking part in this study are receiving guidance navigating the landscape of music from a professional musician and scholar of color, as well as community service hours. The findings of this study, of which your child will be informed of, may have far-reaching implications and benefits for music classroom practices. These implications may inform relevant and affirming pedagogical practices, leading to instruction that is engaging to youth today. Additionally, your child's participation may inform the field regarding the high attrition rate for Black students in music.

POTENTIAL RISKS

A potential risk of this study is that your child may experience emotional discomfort at times during interviews or focus groups. This discomfort may stem from recounting difficult experiences related to their experiences with culture in the music classroom.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All physical data will be scanned and destroyed promptly. All scanned data and audio recordings will be stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's laptop indefinitely. This consent form will be the only identifying document. All other recordings, memos, or participant-generated logs will have identifying information redacted with pseudonyms used. All data will be kept indefinitely to inform future research.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

You and your child have the right to say no to participate in the research. You and your child can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you or your child decide to stop, and you and your child will not be criticized. They will not lose any benefits that they normally receive.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

Your child will not receive money for participating in this study, but they will receive community service hours for the time they commit to the study.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Information that identifies your child will be removed from all audio recordings and journaling. After such removal, the audio recordings and journaling could be used for future research studies without additional informed consent from you [*or your legally authorized representative*].

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher [REDACTED]

or [REDACTED]

advisor _____

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

Signature of Assenting Child (13-17; if appropriate)

Date

Printed Name of Assenting Child (13-17; if appropriate)

Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

- I agree to allow audiotaping of the interview.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Initials _____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Guiding research question: How do Black youth see [their] culture reflected in music education?
BOLDED points are the actual interview questions. Everything else will be removed when I begin the interview process.

THE REMAINING INTERVIEWS AND ALL FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS WILL BE CONSTRUCTED FORMATIVELY. THEY WILL BE BASED ON THE DISCUSSIONS GENERATED BY THIS INTERVIEW

- Getting to know sociocultural background
 - **What part of the district do you live in and how long have you lived there?**
 - Will ask clarifying questions based on response.
 - **How would you describe your friend groups?**
 - May need to ask clarifying questions to understand how they exist within the art school/main school/community dynamic
 - **How would you describe your race?**
 - **Ethnicity?**
 - **Culture?**
- Knowing musical background
 - **Please describe your musical journey**
 - Questions below can be prompts if participant needs any assistance in what to consider
 - **What music do you like?**
 - **What music did you grow up hearing at home and how do you feel about it?**
- Interpersonal
 - **How do people at school perceive and engage with the music you like and/or find valuable?**
 - **How do you get along with your teachers and classmates?**
 - **How often do aspects of your identity come up in interactions?**
- Environmental representations of race, ethnicity, and culture [media, instruments, classroom org]
 - **How often do you see reflections of your race/ethnicity/culture in the classroom?**
 - **What about other identities?**
- Curricular [genre, modalities, pedagogies]
 - **What musical styles are you learning in ____[class]?**
 - **Do you see parts of your identity represented in class? If so, how?**
 - **How is the music you find valuable represented in class?**
 - **How much background and context is explored when learning music?**

- How much of your background and culture is explored when learning music?

Additional Probing Questions

- How much of your background and culture is explored when learning music?