Musical Voices from an Urban Minority Classroom: Disrupting Notions of Musical Literacy Through Critical Popular Music Listening

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1 Introduction: Unpacking Listening

What do we mean when we talk about *listening*? Jim Garrison (1996) suggests that true listening "involves risk and vulnerability" (433); that "listening is dangerous" (450). What a curious adjective to conflate with listening: danger. The theme of listening features centrally in the research presented in this chapter. First, it is an exploration of how a group of children listen to the popular music that they love and find their musical voices through listening. Second, it is about how I, as the teacher/researcher, listened *with* them and *to* them and how that listening challenged me as a music educator and as a person. Finally, the story I share highlights how listening to Others' voices (and the subsequent telling of Others' stories) is highly charged with issues of privilege and representation. I am reminded of Ruth Behar's (2014) powerful questions for the ethnographer and what those questions mean for us as listeners to the voices of others:

> Who is this woman who is writing about others, making them vulnerable?
> What does she want from others?
> What kind of fulfillment does she get – or not get – from the power she has?
> What, as she blithely goes about the privilege of doing research, is the story she isn't telling? (p. 20)

Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016) explores the dynamics of what she calls "the listening ear" (p. 13). According to Stoever, our *listening ear* is the result of how we have been socialized to hear both music and the voices of others; how we judge what we hear aesthetically; reconcile it, reject it, or normalize it within our known conventions. As trained music educators, the potential for our *listening ear* to exclude other

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musical worlds holds enormous power over the musical lives of our students. This chapter, then, is about how the children in this study revealed their unique musical voices to me and how I learned to listen differently in order to hear those voices and create a space for them in my classroom.

2 Opening Spaces – Inviting Students' Voices

This study grew out of a deep concern for issues of social justice. As music educators, we recognize the need to interrogate inequities in what we do and how we do it. We advocate for more inclusive programs in our K-12 settings (Allsup 2004). Our scholarly journals brim with articles questioning our discipline's ingrained ideologies, situating us within a global educational crisis of representation (Bowman 2007; Bradley 2007; Vaugeois 2007).

And yet, there is one thing missing, for the most part, from this vast and impactful soul-searching: the narratives of the urban minority children we hope to serve. Spruce (2015) proposes that "the engagement of young people's voices as reflective, thinking musicians and as equal participants in the construction of pedagogy and curriculum" is crucial to moving our discipline toward a more just and equitable foundation (p. 299).

And so, I wondered: How do young urban minority children listen to the music they love? What are their stories of music in their lives? How does music inform their vision of who they are and who they hope to be?

To answer these questions, I embarked on a participatory action research study that lasted for 3 years. The first 2 years, the eighteen participants were in fourth, then fifth, grade. We met weekly in their school classroom. In the third year, myself and eight of the original participants (now in sixth grade) met on weekends at a youth center. The research site was envisioned as a democratic space in which sharing, inquiry, and negotiation informed an emergent sense of pedagogy co-constructed by the children and myself. Our repertoire was *The Playlist*, compiled by the students from songs that were impactful to them. Each week for 3 years, individual students brought to class their favorite songs. And we listened together. Then, the presenter facilitated a dialogue around the meaning and themes of their song and the emergent questions of the group. What follows is a glimpse of what happened. All names are pseudonyms.

3 Part I: Hearing Musical Voices

With the open and fluid design of pedagogy determined primarily by the children themselves, I began to witness expressions of musical voice and musical literacies that fall outside of our discipline's normative paradigm of reading, writing, and performing music. These expressions were revealed through such activities as listening, dialogue, digital composition, and written and graphic design.

3.1 Critical Listening and Dialogue

From the outset, I was intrigued by the question: What do these children mean when they talk about *listening* to a song? The first thing I noticed was that each student, when their turn came to share, asked me to download the music video of the song and bring it to class the next week for our sharing session. The children naturally assumed that "listening together" meant engaging with a music video. Many music educators consider this affinity for music videos an unfortunate distraction to focused listening. Yet, for these children it was integral to the musical experience.

As we "listened" to their songs, the children explored the often-complex designs of multimodal *musical* "texts," uncovering and synthesizing multiple storylines, and offering thoughtful "readings". The multimodal quality of their listening experiences encouraged sophisticated meaning-making in a way that purely aural listening does not (Kress 2003). Shirley Brice-Heath (1983) proposes that children engage in constant *acts of literacy* outside of institutional spaces and that these 'outside literacies' are often under-exploited in the classroom where more limited conceptualizations of literacy and how it is acquired are favored. As we listened together, the children engaged in *acts of musical literacy* of a different sort than acknowledged by more traditional conceptions of musical literacy. The children talked about topics and ideas inspired by their musical meaning-making that grew naturally out of the multimodal listening. Each time we listened to a new song, I watched as they critically navigated the narratives expressed through words, images, sounds, and music and how they interact to tell a story (Kress 2003). Then, through interweaving their personal and sociocultural narratives, the children constructed new narratives that integrated their world, the music, and the ecology of our unique classroom space (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2005).

In year one, for example, we listened to "Drop It Like It's Hot" by Snoop Dogg. At points, in this "mature" music video, the camera cuts to a young boy playing a bass drum similar to marching band. I asked the children what they thought about the boy in the video. Below is an excerpt from the dialogue:

Laynie: I think that they put the kid in the song to make sure that parents think, 'Oh, the kid [is] in the song, so it must be appropriate for a child to watch it, even though my child's only one years old. And then the babies are gonna' be like "Drop it like it's hot, drop it like it's hot" or something like that.

Daniel: I don't think it's weird that the kid was in the song, because it's not like he was in through the whole song and like those parts that weren't for children. He was just in the part where he was playing drums.

Safiya: Yeah. It's not like he was in the inappropriate scenes. He's just playing the drums and having fun!

Brionna: [concerned] But, he looks like he's eight or nine. Like about our age.

Nathifa: I think that, you might hear these bad words in your life but you should just start hearing them now to get used to them when you grow up cause that's how everything is. I know they have a little kid … so like if when he grows up he thinks everything is nice and all, he hasn't have no reason why things are not nice.

For an hour, the children debated the representation of children, like themselves, in this popular song. An attention to their role as children in the promotion of popular

culture narratives became a theme throughout the 3 years of the study, catalyzed by this first watching of the Snoop Dogg video.

This theme surfaced again in the second year when we listened to "Formation" by Beyonce. This song addresses the events of Hurricane Katrina and the racial disparities in the aid response. The opening scene of the music video shows Beyonce on top of a police car in the middle of a lake. The final scene shows her sinking, and ultimately drowning, while on top of the same police car. Throughout the video, children are highlighted. Below is a short excerpt from the dialogue:

Elijah: I think that when Beyonce was singing her song with the children, I think it was educational because now the kids know that sometimes if there's something tragic happening cops are not always gonna save you. You can get left behind and die.
Destiny: The police saw they were black people and they didn't help them. They're racists.
Safiya: I agree. I think that some policemen are racist.
Rhaelyn: The song and the video are talking about racism going on. And stuff like police brutality. If you really think about what it says, "Come on let's get in formation" like we need to stand up and fight against police brutality and racism and stuff.

We interrogated this song over the course of 3 weeks. The children discussed the themes of white privilege, racism, and self-esteem and how they impact them as children. They shared their own personal stories related to those topics and their takeaways from this interaction with popular music.

In the third year our group pared down to eight of the original participants (now 11 years old) who were willing and able to meet on weekends at a local youth center. By now, the listening-dialogues attained a level of maturity, openness, and social consciousness that surprised me. On one occasion, one of the boys brought to class the song *Rolex* by the Hip Hop duo, Ayo and Teo. A lyric in the song reads: "I pull up to the mall and I'm flexin' on your hoe." This catalyzed a dialogue about misogyny and the representation of women in Hip Hop music. Below is an excerpt from that dialogue:

Isadora: [sarcastically] So, how do you know if somebody's a hoe or not? Is it like "damn she fine" or how?
Elijah: She rachet!
Jamal: I think it's in a good way.
Isadora: Well, how is classifying someone as ratchet or something a good way? If he calls me a *hoe* I don't care what his intentions are. That's a disrespectful word. If I said *hoe* to Jamila how would she know to take that as a compliment and not as an insult?
Raul: She [the girl referred to in the song] got money so in a good way I'm gonna call her a hoe.
Isadora: So… if I buy myself a house 'cause I have money, I'm a hoe?
Raul: In a way, in this song…yeah.
Isadora: How? You think *hoe* is a compliment? Would you call your mom that?
Raul: No.
Isadora: Then, how is that a compliment to anybody?
Raul: Because in a way they sayin' like…let's say we in the hood they'll just say you a hoe, you a girl, you look fine.
Jamila: So, if a girl gets good grades and works hard, just cause she lives in the hood you're gonna call her a hoe?
Isadora: What a stereotype.

Elijah: They [the artists] just wanna sound cool. They wanna sound gangsta. But they're not talking about a specific person. It's a song they made up from their minds.
Raul: Yeah, it's just a song. It sounds cool in a song.
Isadora: It doesn't matter if it's a specific person or not. If I called anybody a *hoe*…if I called Ms. Judy a *hoe* that would be disrespectful. Calling anybody a *hoe* is degrading and disrespectful. It still hurts people.
Jamila: Men kinda got used to it. They've been saying it for decades.

During this dialogue, which at times got quite heated (though amicable), the children grappled with the power of language, ingrained gender stereotypes, and the power of popular music to impact identity and cultural norms.

3.2 Critical Composition

Throughout the 3 years, the children also composed original songs in groups of three or four students. These musical compositions grew out of and reflected the themes and topics that surfaced during our music listening. Scholars in the field of critical media literacy conceptualize critical literacy as two intertwining processes: critical consumption and critical production. That is, students are encouraged to build on their meaning-making experiences from media engagements to become producers of media and, as such, of cultural meanings (Kellner and Share 2006). This act of production reflects the participatory nature of twenty-first century digital culture (Jenkins 2006) and is tied to the concept of radical democracy (Kellner and Kim 2010).

In this study, critical listening and composing were reflective of this notion of critical literacy. The simultaneity of listening and composing encouraged a uniquely critical relationship to the compositional process. My own focus was not on teaching but facilitating. The children wanted to create *beats* and so I briefly introduced them to a variety of beat-making apps and then set them loose to create. When they hit an impasse, or the work stalled, I suggested that they listen to their own favorite songs to get ideas. Musically, the final compositions ranged from simple to highly complex. And, while the children clearly enjoyed the beat-making process, it appeared to me that their main focus was on the message of their song, thoughtfully conceived and executed in music and lyrics.

The themes of inequality and racial inequity were persistent in the songs we listened to and these same themes surfaced in the children's compositions. Below is a song composed by three girls in fourth grade. The girls use their composition to critically explore aspects of their world outside of school. The performance of the song included background dancers doing synchronized movement:

All the other kids with the pumped-up kid
lookin' at another kid gettin' beat up by a cop.
Police brutality. Police brutality.

All the other kids with the pumped-up kid
lookin' at another kid that's gettin' shot.
This just ain't right. This just ain't right.

All the other kids with the pumped-up kid
lookin’ at another kid whose makin’ a sale.
Sellin’ drugs ain’t right. Sellin’ drugs ain’t right.

All the other kids with the pumped-up kid
lookin’ at another kid gettin’ teased about his color.
Racism isn’t right. Racism isn’t right. (*Rhaelyn, Bethany, Ella, age nine*)

One girl used her composition to confront codes of power in the school setting and to highlight her own talents and literacies that go unrecognized:

Two times two is eighty-four. I’m not that good at math.
But I try my rhymin' with words.
My rhymes are like thunderstorms.
I’m just tryin' to be cool, but I hate to say I’m not that cool.
I’m like a nerd. Just lettin' you know. (*Nathifa, age nine*)

Still others, like Jayden, took the opportunity to show off superior language literacies that can be expressed in the Hip Hop/Rap genre and yet may go unrecognized in normative institutional codes and practices of literacy:

I go by “Jo-Sef” but you can call me “Jazz.”
It’s hilarious what these groupers be tryin’ to grab.
I’m the killer rapper
The Milly rocker
With these skills I’m ‘bout to rape the beat
And then throw it after.
I’m not chewin’ on no reefa
Speeding like a cheetah
Try to walk in my shoes
No, you can’t stick your feet in Adidas.

All these mental mind states.
All these instruments
I’m never gentle.
I’ll kill this track like there’s bullets in my pencil.
Fully automatically
Rapidly
Shouting accurately.
Check how this rapper be naturally.
Run my mastery.

Lately I be barkin’ heat,
Hate just ain’t my recipe
I’m makin’ money easily and I’ma perfect treat.
Look just how my word be.
Oh, it just occurred to me
I always split the truth
Although I’m not commitin’ perjury.

Lyrics formed perfectly.
I express soul verbally.
I’m not even a doctor
And I just performed surgery. (*Jayden, age ten*)

3.3 Critical Writing and Graphic Design

Throughout the study, I made efforts to explore a variety of non-traditional ways for the children to express their musical literacies. In years one and two the children designed portfolios using the theme *What Music Means to Me.* In decorating their portfolios, they chose to highlight their favorite artists, show off their musical knowledge (drawing traditional notation symbols), or create graffiti-like designs that spoke to what music is in their lives. They also wrote a number of short music reviews of favorite songs, artists, or bands.

In year three, the eight participants decided that they wanted to have an end-of-program Gala for parents and friends. In preparation, the children wrote synopses of dialogues from our meetings and op-eds about current issues in social justice inspired by their favorite songs. Op-ed topics included, among others: Starbucks & Refugees, Nike Sweatshops, and pro athletes giving back to their communities. These writings were compiled into a program booklet, accompanied by original artwork, and handed out to audience members at the culminating event.

What stood out to me in all of these writing and art-based projects was the enthusiasm that the children exhibited. The children in this study were learning in a district where many students read and write below their grade level. As a result, they were often reticent to read a lyric or other text out loud in class. And yet, when given the opportunity to write about a topic close to their hearts—their music—they jumped right into it (spelling and grammar be damned!). By the third year of the study, the children were volunteering to write and were designing their own writing-based projects.

4 Listening as Powerful Pedagogy

For 3 years I listened to music with these children. Slowly, I began to hear their musical voices coming through in the stories they told. I began to recognize the rich and complex literacies that constitute those musical voices. And, I came to realize that these literacies are, at best, overlooked in normative music education and, at worse, disparaged and deprivileged because of our discipline-centric notions of musical literacy.

Many in our field still view listening as the most passive of musical engagements. And yet, for the children in my study, listening to popular music that they love is an active, critical, and multimodal experience, a platform for deep meaning-making. Paul Woodford (2005) suggest that, as music educators, we envision listening as "discipline-centric" (95). In this circular process, we begin with a teacher-chosen musical repertoire, then strive for deeper student understanding of the musical elements of that music through focused listening. We view the outcome as *critical music literacy* (Gault 2016; Campbell 2005).

However, the children in this study exhibited a different paradigm of listening. They revealed to me a dialogic relationship between listener and music. They positioned themselves as critical meaning-makers, synthesizing music, self, and world, and visions of the self in that world. Student-chosen music is the starting point and the process is not circular but *outward-expanding*. It is a critical literacy of music and self. As such, the experience of listening together creates spaces of empowerment and agency; spaces in which children can begin to recognize themselves as "speaking subjects" (Marren 1993), as "designers of social futures" (New London Group 1996, 64), and active participants in the task of critical citizenship (Jenkins 2005).

5 Part II: The Destabilized Music Educator

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, my own narrative became woven into and was confronted by that of the children. As such, it constitutes a second aspect of this research project. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) draw a distinction between narrative inquiry that tells others' stories and narrative inquiry that lives alongside the participants. One result of the latter is that the researcher becomes a storyteller of her own, studying herself within and against the context of the Other (Barrett and Stauffer 2009). And so, my own story as a music educator became intimately entwined with the stories of my students. On the one hand, I discovered new and exciting ways of 'being in the music classroom' that my students' literacies demanded of me – a co-traveler, if you will. On the other hand, my own emerging story brought me face to face with painful realizations about my own positionality as a white female educator in an urban minority setting.

5.1 Transformations

I quoted Garrison at the beginning of this chapter and his proposition that authentic listening involves risk and vulnerability on the part of the listener. In that same article, Garrison argues that to listen we "must be willing to live with confusion and uncertainty about ourselves and the other person we are attempting to understand" (p. 433). Living with risk, vulnerability, confusion and uncertainty during the course of this study catalyzed some unexpected transformations in how I perceive myself as an educator and how I am in the classroom.

A Pedagogy of Vulnerability and Faith Finding my place in this setting was an ongoing challenge with many missteps along the way. I found myself occupying a position of extreme vulnerability. I did not know what any given day with the children would bring, making it nearly impossible to prepare. Being prepared could not be answered by a lesson plan. However, through offering my own narrative as

performer, educator, listener, mother, white, and female into the space, along with the narratives of my students, I became a different kind of teacher. I relished the feeling of vulnerability and the attendant surprise, spontaneity, intimacy, and even “being caught off guard” that it offered. The seemingly empty space left by my lack of a pre-determined lesson plan was filled by a supreme faith in my students’ ability and desire to carry us forward on a critical journey. The new roles I encountered and the methods I employed were not addressed in my years of university training.

Democratic Pedagogy I was unfamiliar with the majority of songs the children brought to class. Remembering Delpit’s (1995/2006) directive to “keep the perspective that people are experts in their own lives,” I embraced a different dynamic: I let the children be the experts, individually and collectively. My lack of familiarity became an opportunity to learn and my role as an equivalent member of the group became an opportunity to both learn and contribute from my own knowledge.

Dialogic Pedagogy In the context of this study, “dialogue” means more than open conversation, or the give and take of ideas. Being in dialogue with my students meant becoming a fellow inquirer and acknowledging the contingency of my own ideas and opinions. It meant hearing and embracing the personal narratives of the students and integrating them into the learning process. It meant resisting the urge to open my mouth and “teach them.” Perhaps most unconventionally, being “in dialogue” meant being emotionally invested in the stories the children told and in my own story. Cultivating this vulnerability and openness was an ongoing task.

Emergent Pedagogy I needed to allow pedagogy to emerge. Ladson-Billings (2002, quoting Habermas, 1995) writes that such a position means continually asking oneself: “I wonder what I do next?” (118). I would argue that it also means using that question as a pedagogical framework. It was a question that I asked daily and most often found the answers in the children’s own words and ideas. As the children uncovered and explored their own generative themes I attempted to respond pedagogically in a way that built onto those themes.

5.2 Struggles

The reader will remember that Garrison (1996) also claims that true listening is *dangerous*. I did not understand this idea until a few months into the study when, along with these unexpected transformations, I was brought face to face with a number of realizations about myself as an educator and as a human being that deeply disturbed me. I recount a few below.

The Politics of Whiteness Scholars have begun to address the issue of normative whiteness and its implications for music education (Benedict 2006; Vaugeois 2007; Gould 2008) Bradley (2007) writes “Our music education curricula continue to

validate and recognize particular (white) bodies, to give passing nods to a token few "others," and to invalidate many more through omission." Howard (2006) charges that music educators "articulate their accountability and experiences of grappling with whiteness" (p. 59).

As the study proceeded, I became aware of my institutionally ingrained "ways of knowing music" and began to confront my own stereotypes of what constitutes a "critical" reading of popular music. I came face to face with the ways I may essentialize my young students, their lived realities and their possibilities. I came to recognize the subtle ways in which I continue to view my white experience as normative and that the potentially divisive and distortive nature of my own whiteness was a "border" I was continually constructing.

As I began to acknowledge the impact of my white normativity on our intimate community, I also began to recognize my own subtle subscription to what scholars in the field of Cultural Studies refer to as 'the myth of childhood innocence' (Buckingham 2000). That myth promotes a view of children as potential victims and passive consumers of popular culture, as such, denying the possibility of childhood agency and critical reflexivity (Jenkins 1997). The design of the study invited the children's world into our classroom space through their choice of songs and their dialogue topics. We censored neither. Yet, as I listened with them and to them, I was often uncomfortable. I had entered the study believing (or perhaps wanting) children to be innocent, as most white educators do. These children were not innocent, and they did not wish to be viewed as such.

Whose Social Justice? My recognition of the ways in which I may have essentialized the children forced me to unpack my understanding of social justice as a music educator. I thought of the many initiatives to get music into the schools of underserved children, to give them access to instruments and opportunities to perform Western Classical music. I thought of our tendency, as music educators, to use "salvivic" language when discussing our role in urban minority children's lives (Koza 2006, 25). I questioned a commonly held view that social justice equates with equal opportunity and access to normative conceptions of "the good." I questioned who determines advantage and disadvantage.

I came to see that my vision of social justice was constructed by *my* definitions of disadvantage and what *I* thought advantage looks like. I came to understand that the urban minority children in this study are advantaged or disadvantaged based on the lens with which I choose to examine them. Using a lens of critical and sociocultural theories of music literacy, the children in this study prove highly *advantaged* in both their ability to critically engage with popular music *and* in the rich and sophisticated relationships that they form with music in their lives. I admit that when placed side by side with these children, I perceive myself as disadvantaged. Through their own example, they have made me a more courageous and more critical teacher.

The Politics of Language Through this research I came to acknowledge, as well, that language and social justice converge in the minute details of my classroom, in the way I "talk music." Giroux (2005) writes, "The choice of language and the use to which it is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (p. 11). Throughout this research I was forced to confront my own complicity in subtle subjugations through the language I use when I talk about music and about the children's experiences. Language is never innocent. As music educators we construct both the object of music and the subject of music student through our language, and hence, run the risk of circumscribing the *possible* within the parameters of a prescribed *given.*

6 Music Education and the Question of Musical Literacies

The type of critical music literacy that the children in this study reveal stands, at this point in time, outside of normative conceptions of musical literacy. It is a literacy through which children are invited to interrogate themselves, their world, and the music that constructs and is constructed by that world. Luke (1994) calls this "a critical literacy of the cultural present - not the canonized past". Through acts of critical consumption and production, the children talked with and back to the narratives of popular culture, pushed back against representations of who they are and who they might be, and constructed a sense of shared community. They discovered their own individual and collective agency, their musical voices.

In closing, I am left with questions: Might urban minority music programs based on white normative conceptions of appropriate musical repertoire and musical activities disavow the urban child's lived experience to which her music speaks? Might such initiatives be rooted in attempts to protect the children from the very culture in which they live rather than engage them in acts of critical music literacy? And finally: How much of our view of urban minority children as musically disenfranchised comes from an essentializing of their sociocultural environment and their experiences? As a result of my 3 years with these children, I fear that by construing such perceived musical lackings we may essentialize their own rich musical voices right out of them and out of music education.

And yet, on the other side of these 3 years, I am also left with an audacious hope: for the children we serve like those in this study, for our field of music education, and for myself as an educator and a person. I am left with a belief in our ability (and desire) as a profession, to learn to 'listen differently'; to explore *with* our students their rich musical worlds and to create spaces of empowerment and agency for all of our students through music. I have witnessed the power and possibility of this firsthand.

7 Postlude

Jayden (whose extraordinary rap you read previously) is a small and energetic boy. Every week, he would wait for me outside our 'music room' long before class started. I came to realize that he was continually getting kicked out of other classes for disrupting and on the days that I came would search me out. He liked to help set up our space, to sit with me before the others arrived, to ask me questions and tell me about the things he did in his life outside of school. The week after he performed his rap in class I found him, as usual, waiting for me when I arrived. We set up the room and sat down to chat. I turned to Jayden and said, "You know, I read through the lyrics of your rap again and I wanted to ask you: What's the message in your song that you're trying to get across?'" Jayden looked at me shyly then lowered his eyes to the floor and answered, "I want everyone to know that I can do more than what you think I can."

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