

Valuing Whiteness: The Presumed Innocence of Musical Truth

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At times, it's as if people care more about music—and in particular about their own beloved music and musical ideals—than about fellow human beings (Cheng 2019, 4).

The start of the 2020s as a decade marks an unprecedented moment for musicology. In 2020 alone, the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of Black Lives Matter protests, and the increased spread of fake news leading up to presidential battle between Donald Trump and Joe Biden seemed like a call to action for the discipline. The week of the November 2020 USA presidential election coincided with the first virtual meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society of Music Theory (AMS/SMT). It felt like a newly positive moment for musicology: there were more panels discussing music and race than ever before, and an excitement about the incorporation of new decolonial buzzwords was palpable. Certain lingering questions remained, however: how can the international discipline of musicology sensitively and critically re-negotiate our understandings of what (and who) has traditionally been “valued” in musicology and music education? How can progress about systemic racism in music be achieved when the corporate structures that have upheld a white-dominated discipline for so long remain largely unchanged?¹

In the sections that follow I provide a musicological response to critical race and Indigenous studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's influential article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor” (2012). While a decade has now passed since the publication of this landmark essay, which launched the journal *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, their work has not (yet) been taken up by music scholars in a sustained way. One of the reasons why this may be the case is because Tuck and Yang fundamentally define decolonization as a radical process that is about *land* and power, rather than institutions or performed artforms (which can all-too-easily collapse into the kind of metaphors that they attempt to avoid). For this reason, I suggest that the idea of “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” is *particularly* challenging for music studies, but that this challenge is precisely what makes Tuck and Yang's work immanently useful as call to action: music scholars, in particular, are (or should be) attuned to the pitfalls—but also the lived necessity of—metaphors as a creative, critical, illuminating, if frustrating process that can in equal

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parts uphold systems of racism while also creating possibilities for decolonial resistance.² I therefore take Tuck and Yang's lead by proposing three "moves to innocence" that the discipline of musicology risks perpetuating (although I am by no means suggesting these "moves" to be in any sense totalizing or essentialist, as they occur in different modes, to different degrees, and by different mechanisms across academic musicology and music education as a whole). I contend that by recognizing our discipline's particular susceptibility to such defensive moves, we might broaden our ideas about de/colonial systems of musical value. But to do this is to suggest only the beginning of a decolonizing process: as Tuck and Yang conclude, the act of decolonization is an "unsettling one"; it is not an "and"; "[i]t is an elsewhere" (2012, 36). I therefore take the further "unsettling" step to go beyond Tuck and Yang's "moves to innocence" to propose a broader, "elsewhere," "move towards/alongside disruption." I offer these "moves" as a starting point for a greater call to action for our discipline, in order to place pressure on why musicology and music education have been relatively slow to engage with antiracist and decolonial debates.³

Perhaps one way to frame musicology's historical silences about race and decolonization—and this may also partly explain musicology's comparative belatedness to join other interdisciplinary conversations such as feminist studies, sexuality and gender, trauma studies, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, to name but a few—is to consider that music is an artform that is *particularly* vulnerable to presumptions of and pretensions to innocence, precisely because of its transient properties, its subjective possibilities for beauty in the face of ugliness, and the myriad subtle uses (and abuses) of music that can all-too-easily be brought to aid utopian fantasies.⁴ In making this claim I do not in any way intend to downplay the innovative and creative developments that were initiated by the "new" musicology movement of the 1990s; rather, I seek to question why musicology is—at it was three decades ago—so often "catching up" to new debates circulating in other academic disciplines. Part of the reason seems to be the historical proclivity for hiding behind ideas of aesthetic autonomy in the "music itself" ("music" that just-so-happens to be largely created by white composers and upheld by largely-white performers and academics). I propose, therefore, that one reason for this might be that *musical* "presumptions of innocence" are partially so easy to fall into because a score, concert or recording is more porous than, for example, a statue of a confederate soldier or slave trader.⁵ For this reason, too, music has the potential to be a transformative yet also particularly insidious artform—indeed, anti-utopian arguments about music have been well established by scholars such as Richard Taruskin (2009). In the sections below I would thus like to also take up William Fourie's recent challenge that musicology has been slow to embrace critical

decolonial analysis (2020), by outlining how fantasies about musical “truth” and “innocence” have been perpetuated in the Global North.⁶

Decolonization and Metaphorization: *Sounding* Tuck and Yang

Tuck and Yang’s decolonial critique has been instrumental in shaping the course of interdisciplinary academic literature on decolonization since its publication a decade ago, although it has had a slower uptake in musicology. Tuck and Yang take the bold track of arguing that decolonization—drawing on Frantz Fanon’s definition of the word as a chaotic, disruptive, untidy break from the colonial condition (1963)—is not, strictly speaking, possible in academia because the actual act of decolonization is about the repatriation of Indigenous land, and it is counterproductive to metaphorize and conflate the idea of decolonization with other social justice projects. As Tuck and Yang contend: “[d]ecolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools” (2012, 1). Their starting point is settler colonialism, which was “built upon an entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave, the decolonial desires of white, non-white, immigrant, postcolonial, and oppressed people,” and which lives on in projects of “resettlement, reoccupation, and reinhabitation that actually further settler colonialism” (2013, 3).

Tuck and Yang’s argument has been particularly helpful in challenging scholars who might otherwise view decolonization as a box-ticking exercise, and has been highly influential in disentangling definitions of decolonization from other diversity, equity and inclusion buzzwords. As they argue, “[w]hen metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (2012, 3). This innovative critique of the racially and culturally dangerous pitfalls of metaphorization is particularly useful for musicologists, who arguably deal with metaphorizations whenever we speak of or write about music.⁷ While Tuck and Yang’s definition of decolonization as land repatriation is self-consciously narrow, it does, and should, give academics pause about whether we can ever call our discipline “decolonized,” or (more productively) actively “decolonizing,” without the kinds of seismic disruptions and public recognitions of the effects of transgenerational trauma that are a necessary part of the repatriation of imperial and settler colonial theft.⁸ As they remind us, “[c]learly, we are advocates for the analysis of settler colonialism within education and education research and we position the work of Indigenous thinkers as central in unlocking the confounding aspects of public schooling” (2012, 3). Central to this process of “unlocking” educational systems, however, is that conversations about decolonization and

incorporations of Indigenous knowledge “cannot be too easy, too open, too settled” (2012, 3).

Indeed, the interdisciplinary response to Tuck and Yang has itself tried to resist becoming “too settled” (Andreotti et al. 2014, 36–37). Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino’s 2020 article “Slavery Is a Metaphor,” for example, argues that Tuck and Yang’s settler-native-slave triad reduces the definition of slavery to forced labor, and proposes a deeper analysis of the metaphorization of slavery and settler colonialism from the standpoint of Black Studies. Manu Samriti Chander (2020) has likewise provided a reply to Tuck and Yang from the perspective of English and linguistic theory, arguing that metaphorization has been endemic to literary Romanticism, and that literary scholars, in building their work alongside decolonial movements, could benefit from aligning their discipline with conversations about Indigenous sovereignty.

Tuck and Yang’s ultimate task for academics is the challenge to recognize and admit to their own “moves to innocence,” a term which they define, building on Janet Lee Mawhinney’s 1998 thesis, as consisting of tropes that “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). The six settler colonial “moves to innocence” that they outline are:

- i. Settler nativism
- ii. Fantasizing adoption
- iii. Colonial equivocation
- iv. Conscientization
- v. At risk-ing / Asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples
- vi. Re-occupation and urban homesteading (2012, 4).

Such “moves” have been perpetuated by a “long and bumbled history of non-Indigenous peoples making moves to alleviate the impacts of colonization” (2012, 3). I propose that intentionally naming a discipline’s “moves to innocence” can be a powerfully decolonial (and entirely indispensable) action. To recognize, and to sound, musicology’s “moves to innocence” may therefore be a crucial step towards exploring not only how decolonization risks being metaphorized into a liberal-elite catchphrase that still perpetuates racism, but also that musical decolonization might constitute a more reflexive and intersectional means of considering how the history of metaphorization within discussions of western art music has been fundamentally tied up within systemic acts of privileging whiteness that limit the possibilities of critical global knowledge.

Such a radical and self-reflexive process is, I suggest, often particularly challenging for music studies because of the quasi-spiritual, neo-Romantic connections that many musicologists and educators feel to the repertoires they

engage with: something that William Cheng touched on when he proposed that one can love music so much that it becomes anthropomorphized (2019, 2). While Cheng does not focus on decolonization, the danger of metaphorization is still central to his argument. As he suggests, we often defensively safeguard the music that we study and play as if there could not possibly be anything wrong with it: “[w]e feel called to love and protect music, as parents would defend their young, or as lovers would guard each other” (2012, 2). Yet, as Cheng provocatively asks: “[i]s it possible for our love and protection of music to go too far? Can such devotion ever do more harm than good? Can our intense allegiances to music distract, release, or hinder us from attending to matters of social justice?” (2012, 2). Innocent blindness, justified by aesthetic love.

One of the reasons for the lack of a larger musicological response to Tuck and Yang might, indeed, stem from the fact that decolonization *as* land repatriation might seem *especially* paralysing for music academia. As noted in a recent discussion of decolonization by Carina Venter, William Fourie, Juliana M. Pistorius, and neo muyanga, Tuck and Yang’s argument about the necessity of land repatriation, or “giving back to the dispossessed” risks alienating our discipline: “[a]s musicologists, this reminder may feel, on a number of levels paralysing. After all, what have we to give back? (Not much land, for sure)” (2017, 144; see also Froneman and Muller 2020). In his article on musicology in the age of Brexit, Fourie awards a footnote to Tuck and Yang to contend that he disagrees with the definition of decolonization as land repatriation because “decolonization, especially in the context of the African continent, has always been bound up with the psychic condition of coloniality and thus must to a certain extent always be metaphorical in its double reality in the human experience and in place” (2020, 201, footnote 5). Relatedly, Glen Coulthard has used Fanon to explore the transgenerational psychological impacts of settler colonialism in North America, where systematic racism and white ownership of land (and, by extension, cultural property) become engrained. Helpfully, Coulthard’s reading of Fanon focuses not only stolen land but also privileges a “subjective sphere—namely, the rehabilitation of the colonized subject based on a revaluation of black history and culture” as having “transformative potential in the structural sphere” (2014, 141).

Many of these decolonial explorations, as does my own article here, on the one hand risk canonizing Tuck and Yang. On the other hand, their admittedly narrow definition of decolonization has sparked important debates about where the term “decolonization” ends and other social justice projects begin. Garba and Sorentino (2020) have reminded us that the slippage between discussions of race and decolonization cannot be as easily separated from one another as Tuck and Yang first implied. And for the discipline of musicology, it is incumbent on us to ask what sort of aesthetic discourses revert to ideas about decolonization-as-

metaphorization, especially since we deal with a constantly metaphorized artform. Helpful here is David Lloyd's work on the "racial regime of aesthetics." In a similar vein to the idea of moving to "innocence" through metaphorization, Lloyd reminds us that the "alibis of the West's racial ordering of the world may have been reconfigured, but the fundamental discriminations that divide those who can claim respect, rights, and personhood from those reduced to mere disposable existence remain in place" (2019, 2).

I suggest that a structural "move to innocence" within music studies, which has historically constituted diving straight into the analysis of specific musical works or genres without first framing *why* a process of western canonization happened in the first place (or *why* the story of music history has often been told chronologically, starting in Europe), can benefit from a decolonial and repatriative process. To recognize such a move to innocence—one that privileges the canon above a history of colonial violence—is not necessarily to shy away from the almost unavoidable importance of metaphors in music history. The more pressing question is *who* has created the metaphors, who has benefited from the process of metaphorization, and whose metaphors are privileged institutionally. Katherine McKittrick notes, for example, that radical, subversive forms of decolonial metaphorization have been central to academic discussions of Black life, Black bodies, and Black musical traditions. The totality of Black texts, narratives and aesthetic traditions, therefore, requires a fundamental dismantling of the white aesthetic systems that have always metaphorized race, and instead necessitates "reading practices that reckon with black life as scientifically creative ... a way of being where black is not just signifying blackness but is living and resisting—psychically, physiologically, narratively—the brutal fictions of race (we do not just signify). Reading black this way demands a different analytical frame" (McKittrick 2021, 51).

In embracing McKittrick's idea of pursuing a "different analytical frame," I would like to go beyond Fourie to propose that Tuck and Yang's article is actually an *especially* useful challenge for musicology because music, like the process of decolonization, is also systemically over-metaphorized: the question, now, becomes one of *who* gets to "sound out" and negotiate the power of musical metaphors so that constructions of whiteness in historical musicology are less privileged. And while on a surface level musicology does not have much physical "land" to repatriate, it is worth bearing in mind that universities themselves often sit on stolen land (Chatterjee and Maira 2010), or are funded by financial donors who have links to neo/colonial forms of exploitation: the same can be said for many of the institutions that hold musical archives, both oral and textual. The theorization of settler colonialism by la paperson (an avatar of K. Wayne Yang) provides a helpful framework for approaching the complexity of settler colonialism within such educational institutions and academic systems. The settler, argues la paperson, "is

not an identity; it is the idealized juridical space of exceptional rights granted to normative settler citizens and the idealized exceptionalism by which the settler state exerts its sovereignty” (2017, 10). Dismantling the institutional systems that have literally and figuratively re-centered whiteness is therefore vital in order for our discipline to embrace more productive forms of critical thinking that do not silence voices outside of a traditional white racial (and aesthetic) frame. On the one hand, Hegelian teleological concepts of the art of music as culminating in “the absolute” have become a sinister metaphor for western music’s non-culpability for (innocently) replicating anything other than itself.⁹ On the other hand, applications of decolonization to musicology also run the risk of decolonization becoming a tokenistic metaphor for other diversity projects simply because it is the latest buzzword, a trending term that alleviates the guilt of predominantly white institutions such as AMS, SMT and the RMA.¹⁰

Where can a post-2020s decolonial musicology go next? If, as Tuck and Yang propose, the act of settler colonial metaphorization “recenters whiteness” (2012, 3), then it is imperative for musicology to consider how its own proclivity for metaphorization has long accompanied and perhaps reinforced the (predominantly white) racial makeup of our discipline. As Juliett Hess points out, received musical standards are set according to “specific Western constructs for expressing meter, dynamics, and articulations,” so that even when so-called “diverse” examples are added to repertoire lists, “Western music in music education [still] acts as a colonizer” (2015, 337). In this way, academic music studies actively behaves as a white settler-colonizer through the preservation of aesthetic and philosophical systems that perpetuate a veneer of objective innocence in the name of critical thinking. As Steve Garner argues in his study of whiteness, one of the reasons why the systemic legacies of whiteness are often so difficult to see is that whiteness, as an epistemic default, is a “kind of absence” and is powerful *because* it is largely invisible, while at the same time being *extremely* visible through its exercises of power (2007, 34). Garner’s work is applicable to the place of western classical music in academic musicology: “nineteenth-century music” tends to be metaphorized as an *invisible* (innocent) product of whiteness, whereas “Black Slave music” is metaphorized as racially marked (and by implication, is constructed as being less innocent). At the same time, following Garner’s definition, the presence of whiteness in studies of music arguably becomes so heavily marked that even many of those attempting to embrace musicological decolonization have tended to “colonize” decolonial discussions from within largely white, elite institutions.¹¹

Such violent instances of musical and musicological metaphorization, of course, limit room for nuance between the binaries of white vs. Indigenous or Black musical agents. Helpful here are Indigenous studies scholars such as Jodi Byrd, who explores how the settler is not exclusively a white subject, and that studying the

shifting power dynamics within settler colonial constructions of race is important for recognizing an *active* historical world of “relational movements and countermovements” (2011, xvi–xvii). Within music studies, Dylan Robinson’s decolonial work on the idea of “hungry listening” as a reflection on “sonic encounters between particular perceptible logics” (2020, 2) is highly applicable here. Drawing on such relational reflexivity, the process of exploring metaphorical “moves to innocence” thus becomes a powerful way to navigate the past, present and future of music studies.

Move to Innocence I: Musical truth equals aesthetic good

In a post-truth world, it makes sense to cling to ideas about what truth is. But the start of the 2020s also presents an opportunity to interrogate how ideas of truth have been constructed, and how they might be decolonized. Thus, retreating to the “truth” of Great Works by Great (white) Men as a beacon of stability resists doing some timely antiracist work¹² One of the most fundamental moves to innocence made by musicologists, music teachers, and performers of western art music alike is to fall into the nineteenth-century European Romantic trap of framing the western canon as aesthetically “good” and “valuable” because of a loosely-defined nostalgia for a complex artform that reveals aesthetic “truths” in its very materials. The stakeholders in this idea—upholding neo-Romantic concepts about instrumental music as the carrier of the “absolute”—include music educators who have based their vocational existence on the notion that there is something “valuable” to be decoded in the musical material itself. One of the issues with this idea is that it has historically turned the focus of academic music *inward*, to an introspective search for the seeds of a “valuable” aesthetic within a musical score. But what, exactly, is being valued—and who is profiting? Insular analysis distracts and excuses us from engaging with many of the white supremacist origins of western academia, as has been astutely outlined by Levitz (2018) and Ewell (2020). Musical value, confused with aesthetic good, thus becomes, like Tuck and Yang’s discussion of decolonization itself, metaphorized. Western art music then becomes a metaphor for truth, and also for (valuable) moral good. And, as many students of western art music are taught, if you are doing something fundamentally “good” by playing “classical music,” then why expend your energy on “real world” social justice projects, when what you do—your great “service” to the world—is by its nature inherently valuable? By that logic, stereotypes about classical musicians as stuffy, white, racist, elitist and snobby can be ignored or rationalized away, because anyone saying that simply doesn’t understand the “value” of the music.¹³

Indeed, part of the allure of musical truth equalling aesthetic good is that it excuses the bulk of classical music's participants (performers, teachers, academics) from naming either their white privilege, or, in more global contexts, the aspects of classical music education that replicate a white, middle-class, Victorian, form of respectability (Bull 2019).¹⁴ In East Asian contexts, too, Roe-Min Kok (2006) has written about how the fetishization of the exported British standardized music testing systems in postcolonial Malaysia requires viewing the western canon *as* a performance of white Britishness. In terms of the migration of Asians and Asian Americans in classical music, moreover, Mari Yoshihara identifies some of the systemic binaries of us/them, East/West, that continue to block Asian classical musicians from inhabiting their own identities, poignantly pointing out the paradox that while on the one hand western culture puts forward the idea of a "purely aesthetic position" that implies that "great art transcends social structures," there is also the ongoing implication that "musical understanding indeed has cultural specificity and a connection to [a western] social context" (2007, 13). Yoshihara notes that Asian classical musicians are often therefore constructed as emotionally repressed subjects in need of a western "master who frees the Chinese musicians' emotions and expressions that had been suppressed by political and cultural norms and then teaches the students about the true meaning behind the music" (2007, 14). A further implication here is a deeply engrained transgenerational and often coercive privileging of western modes of hearing across the post/colonial globe, to which I would like to invoke Robinson's immanent call in *Hungry Listening* to explore a "listening positionality" where the subject is aware of their "listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability." These biases and listening proclivities are not wholly positive or negative: rather, Robinson suggests, such critical positioning will help us to be "better able to listen otherwise" (2020, 10–11).

Without such reflexive positionalities, and under the pretensions that classical music is a universal language, many music students in practice are still subject to and caught up within salvationist discourses about how, in reality, this "universal" language still really belongs to a dominant culture that can only "truly" be accessed through western (white) expertise, and, by default, through a white body. William Mpofu and Melissa Steyn's recent book further exposes the appearance of western "humanity" to assume the shape of a human body that looks (and by extension, sounds) a certain way: as Mpofu and Steyn argue, the European Enlightenment construction of "*Man*, as a performative idea, created inequalities and hierarchies usable for the exclusion and oppression of the other," and, moreover, the "status of the *human* was self-attributed to dominant people powerful enough to name themselves and define others" (2021, 1). The material legacies of such dehumanizing processes are shown in the imposed teaching of "civilized / civilizing" western music as a means of stripping Indigenous children in many

settler colonial contexts—including, for example, the residential school systems in Canada, the United States and Australia—of their own languages and musical traditions (Johnson-Williams 2022; Young 2017; Diamond 2015).

The realities of such violent histories are, of course, extremely uncomfortable. Yet a sustained discussion of these issues, particularly as exemplified in sociological work on music and class (Bull 2019; Scharff 2017), suggests that the educational structures upholding western classical music today still haven't come very far from many nineteenth-century Romantic ideologies about the transcendental qualities of music as existing *beyond* race, which, as appealing as they may be, are still rooted within the racist and imperialist cultures of nineteenth-century Europe. Indeed, if the flip side of Romanticism is an escapism from the rapidly changing world of industry and commerce, then the orientalizing of Indigenous peoples also reinforces nostalgic fantasies of static cultural "authenticity" (Collier 2009). What is less discussed, particularly where the classical musical canon is concerned, is an escapism in Romantic aesthetics from the realities of an ethnically-diversifying Europe and a context of global imperial expansion. Critical race theorist Marlon B. Ross has noted, with reference to nineteenth-century literature, that studies of Romantic aesthetics more broadly need to take into account the extent to which Romanticism "cannot comprehensively or comprehendingly be read outside the context of contemporaneous controversies concerning the nature, condition, and elevation of 'the African' as a distinct, if problematic, subject of human classification" (2016, 26; see also Thomas 2000). As Ross notes, however, this broader context of slavery and imperial capitalism was not systematically applied to Romantic aesthetics at the time; rather, the insidious racism that grew out of imperial and settler colonial cultures was inherently "sloppy," which made it more effective because it was "fungible, pliable, [and] seductive in a way that shields it from both the niceties and the outrages of moral, polemical, and artistic discourses even as such discourses are mounted as heavy weapons of partisan attack stemming from the harms of racism" (2016, 27). In this way, Ross holds that European Romanticism, through the incoherence of overlapping ideologies about "biology, religion, genealogy, warfare, nationalism, and geography" has "authored" modern racial discourse, which worked "powerfully through and within its own incoherence" (2016, 28–29). Romantic incoherence-as-esoteric-value arguably plays out in music history at the level of contextualizing the incoherent emergence of the idea of "absolute music," which gained traction precisely at the time when, through "progressive" genres such as the tone poem, newer genres of instrumental music worked to reflect, and even to challenge, narratives about the past and present.¹⁵

That the rise of "absolute music" was concurrent with the height of slavery in the transatlantic world, and with the silencing of Indigenous musical traditions

through teaching western hymns at Indigenous residential schools (Johnson-Williams 2022), is a fact of music history, is therefore an issue that ascriptions to the “absolute” will not solve. Of course, as Marianna Ritchey has recently argued, critiquing the idea of absolute music is not new (nor do I pretend to be the first to have these concerns). Musicologists, she argues,

wanting to contribute to the social good as well as to explain the relevance of our work to the public, have argued passionately against the ‘autonomous ideal’ that music theorists from the nineteenth century to the modern era have deployed as a means of insisting that certain kinds of music transcend the tawdry social plane (2021, 35).

Ritchey’s defense of a new kind of anarchist autonomy that privileges the value of “uselessness” as an antidote to capitalism offers an interesting opportunity to critique the tokenism inherent in many decolonial projects (2021, 46). Ultimately, Ritchey posits a kind of creative collective uselessness through musical autonomy as a powerful gesture that can “actively threaten capital” (2021, 49). This compelling argument offers a welcome and timely reminder that ascriptions to, and critiques of, musical autonomy are indeed not new—and that there are ways in which musical autonomy itself can be a form of resistance to the *status quo*. My lingering question then becomes whether there can be a future where the material violences done to Indigenous peoples can still be “heard” through so-called “useless” musics—and whether issues of access, privilege and violence can be exposed and critically discussed, when much nineteenth-century music history is still taught within an older framework that actively silences enslaved and displaced peoples.

In applying such interdisciplinary decolonial questions to what could arguably be called the “violent” autonomy of nineteenth-century western music, we might conclude that race as a critical category was allowed to slip through the cracks of musical discourses because Romantic music could metaphorize and/or autonomize itself whenever it needed to. In one of the largest studies of the Romantic idea of “musical truth,” Mark Evan Bonds identifies that the nineteenth century’s “new paradigm of listening” created the need for “a new kind of didactic discourse about music, aimed at those members of the public eager to elevate their knowledge and tastes” (2006, 44). It is worth noting that race does not explicitly appear in Bonds’ book, aside from one brief footnote, despite the centrality of race to the rise of German nationalism, an ideology that also fuelled nineteenth-century musical aesthetics (2006, 86).¹⁶ That said, nineteenth-century idealism, as Bonds identifies, gives “priority to spirit over matter,” positing a “higher form of reality in a spiritual realm” (2006, 12). Effectively, in moving away from the importance of physical matter, nineteenth-century idealism performed a “move to innocence” that was bound up a larger culture of silencing the violences of racism, classism, and global capital.

Historically, not only did ascriptions to the “spiritual realm” of nineteenth-century instrumental music, exemplified in works like Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony,¹⁷ excuse Romantic music aestheticians from talking about race, these ideals also elevated those who understood western art music as having primary access to the “infinite”—which, in terms of access, doesn’t work out in practice to be so universal after all. This is also the paradox of German Romantic ideas about musical truth: if, as Hegel argues, truth can only be glimpsed through the process of unfolding, and if, as many Romantics determined, this kind of unfolding was best exemplified in an abstract musical works like symphonies (2006, 55), then the so-called democratic “abstraction” of the symphony as a vehicle of universal aesthetic truth was still only constructed according to western musical and philosophical principles.¹⁸

The idea of absolute music has been developed in academia by scholars such as Daniel Chua, who, following Dahlhaus, argues that “absolute music can only have a history when it is no longer absolute music,” which reinforces the longstanding anti-historicization of the concept (1999, 3).¹⁹ Bonds is critical of this kind of anti-historicization, claiming that, “conflating an idea and an object ... commits the fallacy of reification,” and that, Chua, like Dahlhaus, “tends to treat absolute music as a monolithic concept, minimizing the profound differences between the aesthetics of 1800 and 1850” (2006, 13; 15). Arved Ashby, moreover, has produced an innovative study of the ongoing commodification and commercial reproduction of the idea of absolute music in the twentieth century, where he notes that the modern recording industry has capitalized on the allure of absolute “truth” for paying listeners. Just like other nostalgic social concepts like the “nuclear family” and “the sanctity of marriage” (or, following Garner, whiteness itself) Ashby argues that “absolute music has gained rhetorical force by virtue of its empirical absence” (2010, 7).

Without the commodification of the idea of absolutism, absolute music as a concept would not have been so pervasive—and one wonders whether the idea that western music possesses aesthetic values that are above and beyond contextualization (racial, financial or otherwise) would have become so prevalent. As Ritchey has argued in her larger study of music and neoliberalism, the nineteenth century is to blame for ongoing assumptions about how western music can still somehow imply that it exists above and beyond the political and financial world that sustains it. Throughout the nineteenth century, Ritchey states, “when the rising financial power of the bourgeoisie was opening concert audience attendance to anyone who could afford to purchase a ticket, some music lovers tried to argue that certain types of music resisted commodification” (2019, 8).

The lasting impact of Romantic thought on music has therefore lived on in the implication that it provides a so-called universal access to an aesthetic “truth”

that is of *value* (this is then conflated with a moral presumption to being “good”), but this form of value is only accessible to those who understand it, not least because they are “free.”²⁰ A helpful framework here is the impulse Michel Foucault has described in his “Discourse on Language” as the “will to truth”: “[t]rue discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power, is incapable of reconciling the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself on us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it” (1972, 219). To decolonize Foucault, we might add to this that the “will to truth” in western music history has also been a disciplinary move to, and presumption about, innocence, and that the concept of absolute music, liberated as it usually is from desire and power, has never been reconciled with that which it has sought to escape culpability from.²¹ In the context of critical race theory, Dwight A. McBride has argued that in the nineteenth century the “will to truth” masked the overdeterminacy of Romantic abolitionist discourses, and that, “in using the very terms of the institution of slavery to talk about these human beings as ‘slaves,’ ‘Africans,’ and later ‘Negroes,’ one supports and buttresses the idea that the slave, if not subhuman, is certainly not of the same class of people as free Europeans” (2001, 7). This overdeterminacy, in turn, masks the ability of Black subjects to be able to access and tell truth, which profoundly complicates slave testimonies, and, as is implied in the title of McBride’s book, renders Black subjects “impossible witnesses,” because it was still the white abolitionists, white reporters and white lawmakers who got to define what “truth” meant, or didn’t mean, at the time (2001, 7).

As Irish Romantic poet William Butler Yeats wrote in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “‘Beauty is truth, truth Beauty.’ That is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (quoted in Ferris 1998, 122). And yet, as critical race theorists have shown, Yeats’s statement was written within a context where the kind of truth he wrote of was also inscribed with silencing narratives about slavery and other social brutalities. “Truth” about the nineteenth century, indeed, involves admitting to violences that were certainly not beautiful, and were undeniably pervasive: such omnipresent colonialism is remembered as an “un-beautiful” reality by many Indigenous writers as, in the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “part of our story, our version of modernity” (2012, 20). Nostalgic appeals to beauty-as-truth and truth-as-value do not fully distance us from the degree to which nineteenth-century western idealism continues to pervade academic disciplines.²² The racial violence of the idea of absolute music is that it subsumes all other definitions of musical truth under its wing, which does not leave room for Indigenous truths that, as Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes remind us, rest instead on the “empowerment of Indigenous land and sovereignty, not needing any legitimization from colonial states or modernity” (2013, ii). I argue that this constitutes a move to innocence that has long been hidden

behind justifications that art music equals aesthetic and social good: a line of thought that silences Indigenous voices while sounding the self-righteous tone of Great Music. As Juliet Hess concludes in her article on decolonizing music education, “I envision a curriculum fraught with tension and critique and rich with dialogue and learning possibilities ... Thinking relationally allows us to offer our students so much more” (2015, 346). The more complex, and indeed, revealing, “decolonial truths” that might be revealed through a large-scale decolonization of aesthetic value systems will surely be more useful to the creative study of artistic canons than the more limiting systems that are currently in place.

Move to Innocence II: Musical truth is above decolonization

Having established that nostalgic and escapist appeals to musical truth constitute a primal move to innocence that privileges whiteness by hiding it in plain sight, the second move to innocence—where musical truth is defended as being above decolonization—is an unfortunately logical step. Paradoxically, Tuck and Yang’s argument that decolonization is really about land repatriation might even be used in service of this argument, as it would be all-too-easy for a musicologist to claim that studying Classical sonata form has nothing to do with the actual slave trade or the stealing of Indigenous land. The argument might even be made that you can’t see imperialism inscribed within the voice leading parts of a Bach chorale, so how could an undergraduate counterpoint and harmony class be decolonized?²³ But to argue this would be to use one of the techniques of distraction discussed in the first move to innocence: that perhaps you can simply get out of discussing the uncomfortable aspects of decolonization and race by changing the subject, reminding everyone just how complex the musical material is, and reassuring yourself that it really has nothing to do with a history of racism because, aesthetically, it is above that.

Many of these themes resonate with the 2020 controversy of the special issue of *Schenkerian Studies* that was put forward as a response to Philip Ewell’s keynote lecture, “Music Theory’s White Racial Frame.”²⁴ The viral outrage that followed the *Schenkerian Studies* issue, and the complaints that eventually resulted in its redaction from the journal’s website, are a credit to the work of the Black Lives Matter movement in helping a new generation of music scholars recognize that the act of not only ignoring but wilfully excusing the western art music canon from decolonial and antiracist conversations simply because of its aesthetic qualities is an inexcusable move to innocence. This backlash has led to broader conversations about curricular reform across a range of online conferences and research conversations.²⁵

There is, however, a long road ahead for music academia at large to engage with decolonial theory on a *structural* level of *value*. While many were quick to criticize the racist elements of the attack on Ewell, it remains to be seen whether all of those who came out to support Ewell online have been able—despite the best of intentions—to initiate decolonial conversations within their respective universities and areas of research. Institutional change is difficult, particularly for educational traditions that have long hid behind aesthetic autonomy. As Lisa C. DeLorenzo has noted with regard to school education, universalist claims about “music for all” make it particularly challenging to actually help students from diverse backgrounds to feel included (2015, 5). DeLorenzo identifies a crucial link between the utopian ideas of “music for all” and the lived experiences of racial and social inequality: learning a musical instrument requires an investment of time, parental support, and money (even in finding quiet places to practice in a home that has enough rooms), not to mention the social issue of parents feeling that their children might be bringing home alien, oppressive repertoires that silence their own musical traditions. A more democratic form of music education might include Indigenous perspectives, but when the educators making the decisions about how to define “music for all” are primarily still basing their definitions on western neo-Romantic aspirations to aesthetic truth, this form of diversification struggles to really be inclusive, and will remain unequal until it is more actively disrupted.

Similar questions have been raised by political theorists about decolonizing the notion of democracy. Just as our understanding of who can own property, vote and be elected to leadership has changed since western democracy came into being, so is it time for claims about “musical democracy” to be re-evaluated. Geoff Baker has made a similar point when studying the Venezuelan music education program El Sistema, which exploits western European presumptions about musical democracy to claim that classical music will elevate children from poverty. Baker encourages us to question whether this “serves as an effective model for social development in the present day, and to ask whether it may actually be counter-productive in the fight against poverty” (2016, 19). Rachel Beckles Willson has also considered how Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra has promoted orchestral music as a “model of social harmony” (2009, 319). Beckles Willson warns that “proposals about coexistence that draw primarily on aesthetic theory leave the practicalities of music in conflict unaddressed” (2009, 320). Through interviews with the orchestra members, she concludes that the experience of playing in the Divan orchestra at times enabled transcendent escapism, but this did not translate to social democracy or to the realization of music as political salvation that the orchestra promised. Drawing on Suzanne Cusick’s work on music as violence and torture (2006 and 2008), Beckles

Willson concludes that playing western classical music *as* democracy produces “an emotional violence, rather than a life-threatening one, but it is extremely powerful and potentially manipulative” (2009, 347). Barenboim took the young musicians “out of their war, to be sure,” but then “enveloped them in something else, namely the commercialized world of aesthetic experience” where they “practiced and propagated the types of coercion, domination and submission that are endemic in the musical museum” while “audiences celebrated the ‘harmony’ they appeared to offer to the Middle East” (2009, 347). As a “move to innocence” in the context of decolonization, moreover, such pretensions to harmony end up limiting music’s potential to expose and work through social problems because the metaphorization of music as a form of utopian peace-making is conspicuously one-sided: it activates social uplift only if its students uncritically perform a version of western elite discipline at the authoritarian mercy of their conductor (Bull 2019). Not only are Indigenous musical traditions sidelined, but the agency of the classical music student is erased too, creating successive generations of victims from a larger move to innocence.

Move to Innocence III: Musical “Authority” is justifiable in the context of settler colonialism because white settlers were victims of imperialism too

Any music student who has lived in Britain or the Commonwealth knows that to be taken seriously as a classical musician, you have to take standardized graded music exams. Emblems of social authority—and, indeed, “musical truth”—the commercial fetishization of the British graded examination certificate gives access to not only a very narrow musical repertoire, but also to an in-club of elite prestige that enables the performance of upper-class (aka white) respectability (Bull 2019). What is less acknowledged about this system of “imperial musical authority” is that the British musical examination system was a direct product of late-Victorian imperial capitalism, and that the companies that set up the testing boards in nineteenth-century London could rely on settler colonial societies to fuel their financial success (Kok 2006 and Johnson-Williams 2020). Moreover, the musical cultures in Britain that still uphold these same exam boards have largely shied away from decolonizing conversations because of a “presumption of innocence” that, really, all they are doing is benevolently providing access to a Great Repertoire. In this third “move to innocence,” I propose that settler colonial moves to innocence-through-victimhood, particularly through the establishment of institutions for colonial music education, have systemically silenced Indigenous musical repertoires, even as they have attempted to undermine imperial authority. In turn, entrenched systems

of value-as-educational-standards reinforce allegiances to imperial systems of knowledge in settler colonial contexts (Vaugeois 2013).

As broader studies of standardized testing have shown, “high-stakes testing cannot dismantle racial inequality because it fundamentally and materially advances the project of increasing racialized injustice” (Au 2015, 41). The inevitability of the modern neocolonial “standardizing” of music education, therefore, should not be taken for granted, particularly given that the very idea of standardized music testing—as in creating a universal musical standard that is “valued” by those (men)²⁶ “who know”—is an intrinsically Victorian one, and only took off in other countries in relation to British imperial models.²⁷ Bull has referred to British exam boards as the “standardizers” of the idea of the western canon “due to their role in prescribing and credentializing musical standards of ability” (2019, 30), who together created a “commercial infrastructure [that] grew up to credentialize ... aspirations towards gentility” (2019, 40). There emerges, then, a systemic and insidious link between the Victorian context that first reified the idea of a musical standard, and the empire that provided the latitude for the exportation of these standards as a commercial, “valued” product. Above all, it was not just proficiency in western music that was being examined in this process, but also a performance of a white-Victorian version of the human that erased the possibility of Indigenous agency.

The leading nineteenth-century British music exam boards (all based in London), such as the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM; founded in 1889) and Trinity College London (TCL; founded in 1877) that enacted imperial accreditation across Britain and the colonies were not immune to misgivings about the legitimacy of British musical “standards” in their own day (Wright 2005 and 2013). TCL had already established around 200 examination centres across Britain in 1879, and by 1891 overseas centres were opening in South Africa, India, Ceylon and Australia (Banfield 2007, 74; and Rutland 1972, 15), while the ABRSM, after having instituted exams in South Africa in 1894, was already developing exam centres in Malta, Tasmania, New Zealand, British Columbia and Gibraltar by 1896 (Johnson-Williams 2020, 327). The ABRSM’s website now boasts that over “650,000 candidates now sit ABRSM exams each year in more than 90 countries around the globe” (ABRSM 2020), and TCL, which now offers a more diverse array of qualifications in music, drama and dance, offers “over 850,000 candidates a year in more than 60 countries worldwide” (TCL 2020). These numbers beg the question of who, exactly, is making institutional decisions about musical value, and who is awarded the authority to bestow degrees: in the case of both examining boards just mentioned, the institutional structures have not greatly changed from the nineteenth century, and the examiners are still flown out from the UK to oversee performance exams, in much the same way as they travelled to the colonies by ship in the 1890s.²⁸

In researching whether there were any colonial disruptions or protests against imperial music testing boards during the nineteenth century, I came across a controversial public “Protest” issued against the ABRSM by a group of music educators in Toronto in 1899 who complained that “... under the Associated Board’s regime in Canada, the Canadian musician is clearly outlined and well defined as a musical ‘Colonist,’ and as such as expected to humbly submit to the imperious dictate of the Board” (Canadian Protesting Committee 1899, 4). The grounds for protest against the ABRSM by Canadian music teachers, and the backlash of the British press against these objections, discloses broader anxieties about the legitimacy of examinations and the establishment of musical capital in a settler colonial context. Copies of the *Protest* were forwarded to the Prince of Wales and a long list of British aristocrats, as well as to the most prominent musical authorities and leading newspapers of England and Canada.²⁹ Shortly thereafter, a response entitled the *Case of the Associated Board* was published by ABRSM Honorary Secretary Samuel Aitken, rebuking the Toronto musicians as unfair (Aitken 1899).

The entire examining scandal, as well as the body of academic literature that has discussed it (Wright 2013; Jones 1989), ignores the fact that the Canadian music teachers were themselves from a white, settler colonial culture, and that their examining systems still perpetuated (and assessed) a performance of “valuing” white culture while violences against Indigenous peoples were being propagated across Canada. It seems no coincidence that the only large-scale complaint against the ABRSM during the nineteenth century came from within Canada, which had one of the largest white settler populations of the British colonies, rather than from the any of the colonies in Africa or East Asia (Johnson-Williams 2020). Thus, the white Canadian settlers assembled their *Protest* by playing the role of the colonial victim, while all the time disregarding the fact that their imported European-based musical traditions were silencing Indigenous cultures.

The Canadian *Protest*, therefore, amounted to a settler colonial “move to innocence” where, beneath the surface, the Toronto musicians still had examining authority because they were white. Using the work of la paperson (2017) as a framework for interpreting the Toronto *Protest* is helpful in understanding the colonial examination board to be a “technology” that reinstates and maintains settler supremacy, while all the while claiming colonial victimhood. As la paperson implies, this is not to say that these settler moves were entirely intentional or conscious, but he notes that “[e]ven if it isn’t always to their advantage, individual settlers tend to uphold settler supremacy because of its relative advantage (over immigrants yet-to-become settlers) and its promise of unending advantage over Black people, Indigenous people” (2017, 10, footnote 12). Thus, I propose viewing the Toronto *Protest* to be a both a move to colonial innocence, justified by a

portrayal of colonial victimhood, as well as the upholding of what la paperson calls settler “technologies of indigenous erasure” (2017, 11).

Today, Canada’s leading music exam board, the Royal Conservatory Examinations, still runs music exams based on the nineteenth-century British model. They have a statement on antiracism on their website, although less is clear about how this statement will help to facilitate curricular or institutional change (Royal Conservatory 2020). This brings us back to the question of who musical truth and musical value is constructed *for*. Today, the graded musical exam continues to be upheld and marketed as a seemingly utopian goal, as if the music examined and the privilege of affording the fee really existed outside of a broader capitalist, neocolonial reality.³⁰ By clothing their debates in terms of colonial victimhood, the aura of democratization that was pushed by the Canadian Protesting Committee against the ABRSM in 1899 thus strategically disguised the structural whiteness that upheld their own colonial music exam boards.

Moving Away from Innocence

Music, despite all of the moves to innocence discussed above, is inherently disruptive. And I’m not just talking about Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (Chua 2007). Musical sound disrupts silence, and as such can be used for torture and social protest, as well as, more positively, a means of experiencing beauty, and a way to process complex emotions; a reason to dance, flirt, laugh, worship, cry and wonder. Music can be a deceptive form of escapism, as well as a call to action. But whenever music is played, it also disrupts anything that was already being sounded—silencing that which was there before it. In this way, music can be uncompromisingly imperial, yet also productively, if not unsettlingly, decolonial.

Thinking about music’s disruptive potentiality in terms of race and decolonization, it is imperative to remember that the arrival of western music in settler colonial societies actively blocked out Indigenous and other minority ethnic traditions. By offering a final “move towards/alongside disruption,” I suggest that musicology restructures itself *along* the lines of “truth-telling” critical enquiry.

Moving Towards/Alongside Disruption

In the introduction to the 2020 IMS Newsletter, Chua reflects on the unprecedented challenges of the year, noting that “[i]n the past, seeking the common good was simpler. But this was only because knowledge was simpler—it was less inclusive” (2020, 4). In a divided world, Chua reminds us, “[d]ivision makes thinking simpler—in fact, you hardly need to think” (2020, 3). As Chua

maintains, we need to be extra careful now of wishing to return to the “normality” of a time where knowledge was simpler, because musicology pre-2020 was also less inclusive.

Musicology is thus at a turning point. If we recognize and accept the privilege of our disciplinary moves to innocence, building decolonial trust may yet be possible. The first step, however, is to disrupt and re-contextualize ideas of musical truth and value that are all-too-easy for people in positions of privilege to take for granted; the second is to intentionally and dynamically incorporate marginalized, minority and Indigenous perspectives. On the latter point, I fully admit that this article falls conspicuously short, revealing the limitations of the institutions in the Global North that I have been affiliated with. Yet there are inspiring emerging models of how this change might happen; Robinson’s (2020) powerful publication *Hungry Listening*, for example, is the first book to consider listening from both Indigenous and settler colonial Canadian perspectives. Robinson’s approach paves the way for the kind of reflective, dialogic potential of Indigeneity when studying the longevity of western art music in postcolonial contexts.

Decolonizing music education and musicology is also not possible without disrupting the issue of institutional *valuing* (both aesthetically and commercially), as outlined above in reference to standardized testing and music pedagogy. In reference to the imperial exam boards discussed above, British music educator, writer and public speaker Nate Holder has commented on his blog that:

Given the longstanding history and reluctance to change, perhaps it’s time to think of alternatives. While myself and other black and brown people have benefitted from taking ABRSM exams and teaching others to pass them, perhaps it’s time to see where improvements can be made to existing models of music examinations. Perhaps in 2020, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the fear of another global economic crash, it’s time to move forward with alternatives, instead of waiting for systemic changes which may never happen (Holder 2020).³¹

One of Holder’s recent proposals has been to create a new kind of exam board, a decolonized institution that centralizes repertoires and perspectives that are non-western in origin (Holder 2020B). Yet a potential issue with this idea is the continued postcolonial fetishization of the exam board itself, which is a white structure that reifies the commodification of musical ability: to create a “new” exam board is to also reinforce the idea that a corporate institution necessarily bestows musical authority. To disrupt the primacy of standardized exam boards even more fully, perhaps it would be useful to question whether standardized performance exams can ever be decolonized because as long as they exist in the capitalist marketplace they will always (to return to Tuck and Yang) “metaphorize” musical performance as a form of (western, white) capitalist value. And market capitalism

will not welcome decolonial disruption. As Ritchey points out, “capitalism allows the expression of difference so long as that difference is never formulated in terms of opposition to the system itself. This kind of non-oppositional difference can then be scooped up by the system and used to continue propagating the fiction that capitalism generates equality and justice” (2019, 15). This includes “diversity initiatives” which communicate messages of difference without having to actually undo the systemic structures already in place.

These issues also extend to the context of the academic university. A prevalent concern is how to decolonize an institutional structure that provides employment and education, and has the research and outreach potential to do quite a lot of good for students and communities, both local and global. My proposal for disrupting ideas about musical truth is that as a discipline we actively work to become more aware of when, why, and by whom ideas about truth and value are created, and to be mindful of when we have taken such ideas for granted in our own teaching and research. As Tuhiwai Smith has written in the Foreword to the second edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, a lot of academic decolonizing work “is concerned not so much with the actual technique of selecting a [decolonizing] method but more with the context in which research problems are conceptualized and designed, and with the implications of research for its participants and their communities,” as well as the “institution of research, its claims, its values and practices, and its relationships to power” (2012, ix).

As one of the most powerful writers on decolonization within university contexts, la paperson proposes that academia might work towards a “third university” where Indigeneity, land repatriation (or rematriation), and anti-utopianism are actively engaged with to work against the dominant imperial narratives that have informed the academic-industrial complex of the first university and the pedagogical utopia of the second (2017, xv). The third university, coming out of the first two, is a *decolonizing*, rather than a decolonized, university. Effectively, la paperson encourages us to distrust the pedagogical myths that uphold the reputation of the first and second universities, as, in reality, “[u]niversities are land-grabbing, land-transmogrifying, land-capitalizing machines” (2017, 32). A prominent engagement with la paperson in musicology has been the work of Tamara Levitz, who asserts that most musicologists have been trapped in the first and second university:

We confuse decolonization with liberal critique, embrace utopian notions of inclusion that support the first university’s project of expansion and debt, create new curricula based on nostalgic notions of self realization, and remain intransigent about changing the material circumstances of our professional privilege and committing to radical action (2018, 47).

What would a “decolonizing university” look like for musicology? In light of the above moves to innocence, one place to start might be admitting to the potential of music to inhabit spaces of colonization. By metaphorizing and autonomizing music, we might be fooled into arguing that systems of imperial musical power—such as the colonial music exam, or the creation of settler colonial universities—don’t actually inhabit Indigenous land because music is an ephemeral art that does not take up physical space. But we, as people, do take up land, particularly through the institutions that support us.

Finally, I would strongly advocate that in seeking out *new modes of truth that stem from* the processes of decoloniality, music academics have the opportunity to embrace a positive, yet critical, approach to locating a new “decolonial value” in music that does not presume innocence. This process—i.e., the search for unsettling decolonial truths—has been seen in the kinds of work done by the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in countries such as South Africa and Canada, to name two of the most well-known examples.³² Through these systems, controversial though they may have been in some instances,³³ new structures were put in place where previously unheard voices were given space to be heard, thereby changing the narratives, the archives, and the written histories of the countries in question. As Annelies Verdoolaege has explained, “[t]hrough the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, perpetrators and victims of apartheid started to listen to each other and, to a certain extent, they also tried to understand each other” (2008, 2). Verdoolaege, further, devotes a section of her book to the idea, in reference to Foucault, of “constructing truth through discourse,” through which the process of the TRC constructed a “reconciliation-oriented truth” that could be “projected onto the future” (2008, 143). Rosemary Nagy (2020) has, furthermore, shown the benefits of “settler witnessing” to rounding out a more contextual history of Canada.

What would a process of decolonial repatriating and listening look and sound like? Of course, as political scientist Onur Bakiner has pointed out, one of the controversies and reasons for the lack of success of various TRC initiatives is that “truth commissions are *political*, that is to say, they are sites of contestation over material and symbolic resources.” (2016, 3). Given that music has always existed in political, ideological contexts (even revealing what Taruskin [1995] has described as “unspeakable truth[s]”), the social and institutional contexts of musical “moves to innocence” can themselves be a starting point for where we might create new disruptive spaces for listening.

Afterword

The decade of the 2020s is a crucial time to reflect on the challenges that lie ahead for decolonizing and disrupting musicology. The study of music, to be sure, contains incredible potential for reframing, reconciling, and repatriating. Yet, as I have proposed, a “presumption of innocence” about music’s neutrality (and its aesthetic “truth” and “value”) carries the serious risk of reverting to an “aesthetic innocence” to cover up the culpability of institutions that uphold the “greatness” of a tradition as a justification for racist practices. Music’s presumed innocence, then, is a compelling retreat from the realities of the “real world” of a particularly difficult start to this decade, fraught with lockdowns, police violence, the war in Ukraine, ongoing public health emergencies, and wide digital misinformation—but only for those who have been privileged enough to access or even conceive of music as a retreat in the first place.

The question now is: what do we do now with the rest of the decade—retreat, or engage? Going back to a term used by Tuck and Yang (2012, 36), what would a decolonial “elsewhere” look and sound like? Reflecting on the rising calls for decolonization across academic music studies in the UK, Shzr Ee Tan contents that

Decolonisation is messy and always situational. ... [it] is not a simple matter of returning to primitivism or a simplistic overthrowing of powers in the binary—whether of ‘the West’ by ‘the East’ or of ‘the North’ by ‘the South’—but about how a search for equal playing fields across the world necessitates the recognition of colonial trauma unevenly passed down (and sometimes unwittingly reified) through the experiences of multiple generations (2021, 8).

Where I find hopefulness in Tan’s statement is in the possibility that future musical moves to innocence will resist reifying binaries of East and West, North and South, and Self and Other that were themselves constructed by western imperialism. There may even be room, indeed, for a future where moves to innocence—which will continue to emerge in new forms—can be understood in a relational framework of self-awareness. This article, I hope, contributes to such a framework. While it is entirely logical that the first two years of the 2020s have caused many to see the understandable advantage of retreating, fantasies about music’s neutrality as a space of escapism will only increase if retreating is what we do as a discipline. The rest of the decade holds an opportunity to do something difficult and different, and to engage with a new kind of reflexive decolonial “truth” about what, and who, is *really* valued by musicology’s past, current and future moves to innocence.

Notes

¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos has reminded us that while “the university is one of the institutions that has most resisted the erosion of time,” a long history of the university as a structure over the last several hundred years has shown that it has a great capacity to adapt to changing forms of knowledge. The challenges that now lie ahead for the twenty-first century are that the university needs to likewise adapt to the new forms of knowledge that will be brought about through the processes of decolonization: “under the new conditions it is experiencing, the university may now be more aware of [the outside world] than in the past, and open itself up to the different kinds of knowledge circulating in society, particularly among oppressed social groups fighting against social domination, be it capitalist, colonialist or patriarchal” (2017, ix; xvii).

² For example, the recent online conference “Naming, Understanding, and Playing with Metaphors in Music: A Virtual Symposium,” held April 29–30 2022, organized by Nina Sun Eidsheim and Daniel Walden and hosted by the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music was a highly compelling showcase of current critical approaches to metaphors and music from a variety of academics and creative artists.

³ Indeed, many publications on decolonization (Tuhiwai Smith 2012; Land 2015; Gurminder 2018; Arday and Mirza, 2018; de Sousa Santos 2017; and Jansen 2001), were published before the buzzword “decolonization” began regularly showing up in musicological publications and conferences c.2020.

⁴ Susan McClary made a similar point at the opening of *Feminine Endings* when writing that: “[t]o be sure, music’s beauty is often overwhelming, its formal order magisterial. But the structures graphed by theorists and the beauty celebrated by aestheticians are often stained with such things as violence, misogyny, and racism. And perhaps more disturbing still to those who would present music as autonomous and invulnerable, it also frequently betrays fear” (2002, 4).

⁵ It is notable, that, in light of the toppling of statues in 2020 and debates around #RhodesMustFall, there has been no straightforward way to “topple” musical works, or practices of musical white supremacy. Music’s ephemerality, and its ability to be reframed, remetaphorized and recontextualized, should not suggest, however, that we don’t actively consider how musicology can interact with ongoing debates in education, museum and critical race studies about the removal of racially offensive monuments. See, for further reading: Enslin 2020; Chigudu 2020, and Rodrigues 2020.

⁶ I am aware of the limitations implicit in focussing mostly on the contexts of North American and British musicology in this article, particularly given some of the groundbreaking work on decolonization that is happening across Africa, South America, East Asia, and Australasia. My focus on the Global North here reflects my own experience (and biases) of studying and working in musicology within North America and the UK. While I am aware of the privileges that these experiences have given me, I am also mindful of the limitations that my work has in terms of reaching out to other postcolonial contexts, and I hope that future studies on music and decolonization will embrace more global dialogues. I am also aware that discussions around decolonization in the USA and the UK tend to run along markedly different lines, where American universities are often faced with acknowledging the fact that they take up literal spaces of Indigenous land, whereas in the UK the legacies of coloniality in education are more reflected in the exportation of knowledge values to the former colonies, and in the fact/fantasy that Britain is still an educational magnet for the Commonwealth. For critical work on diversifying North American music appreciation and introduction to music history courses, see Recharte 2019; Stimeling and Tokar 2020; Walker 2020; Silverman 2015; and Bradley 2012.

⁷ Discussing the role of music and metaphor in the context of nineteenth-century Britain, Bennett Zon has demonstrated that while the word “metaphor” “connotes a spectrum of meanings,” but one stable trend is that the metaphorization of music is prevalent throughout nineteenth-century scientific discourses (2016, 3). The centrality of metaphorization to music studies has also been discussed by Lawrence M. Zbikowski, who proposes that while metaphors have been useful for, if not central to, understanding and writing about music, “[m]usic, as an expressive medium distinct from that of language, can also offer interesting possibilities for thinking about metaphorical processes” (2008, 520).

⁸ A model study here is Schwab 2010.

⁹ As Marc Evan Bonds summarizes, despite the fact that Hegel saw instrumental music as empty and meaningless, and scarcely an art at all, by virtue of the fact that he treated instrumental music “as an art different in kind—nonrepresentational and nonconceptual—Hegel left the door open for it to do things that other arts could not” (2014, 88).

¹⁰ Levitz’s work on decolonizing the Society for American music could be a useful model for how to proceed, in terms of examining our institutions (2017).

¹¹ A refreshing exception to this is a refreshing, personal, and discursive roundtable on music and decolonization that has just been published in *Ethnomusicology Forum* (Tan 2021).

¹² At the time of writing this article, there has yet to be an explicit sustained musicological engagement with theories of antiracism as opposed to decolonization, and this is an area that is certainly in need of attention. There are, however, growing antiracist initiatives within many academic institutions, particularly in North America. For an overview of theories of antiracism, and the revival of the term in 2020 in the Canadian educational context, see Ladhani and Sitter 2020.

¹³ Anna Bull (2019, 27–49) has conducted extensive fieldwork research into the idea that, while British classical music education appears to promise lower-class students access to a bourgeois, utopian community, the structures that support classical music still create substantial barriers to those from the “outside.”

¹⁴ Bull (2016, 126) has referred to the perpetuation of nineteenth-century performative ideals in classical music education for children today as the performance of “Victorians in the present.” See also Baker 2014.

¹⁵ Indeed, when Richard Wagner first used the term “absolute music” in 1846 in relation to how Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was doing something different, he did so pejoratively, in describing instrumental music that lacked meaning. According to Sanna Pederson (2009, 241), the development and use of the term over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has seen many transformations and was by no means uniform.

¹⁶ Relevant here, in terms of the centrality of race to ideas about German nationalism in the nineteenth century, is the work of Gelbart 2007 and Fauser 2005.

¹⁷ Bonds, indeed, has characterized the aesthetic history of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony as “Listening to Truth” (2006, 44–62).

¹⁸ The insidious ties that were drawn between musical truth-as-democracy and white supremacy were reinforced in the writings of Richard Wagner, and later upheld by the Nazi party during the Second World War.

¹⁹ As a formative backdrop for Chua, see Dahlhaus 1989.

²⁰ A problematic implication here is that because the victims of slavery and other colonized and marginalized peoples did not have equal access to forms of western education, they did not possess their own systems of knowledge. On this topic see Williams 2005.

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- ²¹ On recent moves to decolonize Foucault, see Renault 2015.
- ²² On the performative implications of nineteenth-century European racism see Waters 2007.
- ²³ Michael Marissen (2016), notably, has provided an in-depth analysis of anti-Semitic elements in J. S. Bach's religious music, which illustrates the potential for further discursive work on negotiations of race within the canon.
- ²⁴ For more on this topic see Ewell 2020. The debates around the kind of questions that Ewell has raised have even been picked up on outside of academia, for example, see Ross 2021.
- ²⁵ Notable here was the weekly series of virtual events, leading up to AMS 2020, organized by Project Spectrum Music, a community of graduate students working to diversify music academia (Project Spectrum Music 2020).
- ²⁶ There were no female employees of the music examination boards until after the First World War (Wright 2013, 89).
- ²⁷ Canada and Australia are the only Commonwealth countries to have developed their own graded music examination systems.
- ²⁸ Most of these face-to-face exportations of examining authority were put on hold in 2020 due to Covid lockdowns (ABRSM 2021 and TCL 2021).
- ²⁹ These included many of the staff of the leading London conservatoires (Canadian Protesting Committee 1899), 7.
- ³⁰ There is a lot of critical work on the socio-economic histories of standardized testing in the USA, although not much focusing on music specifically. See, for example, Giordano 2005.
- ³¹ For further examples of "non-traditional-academic" commentaries on similar topics, see also Cheung 2021; Davids 2021; and Krohn-Grimberghe 2021.
- ³² There have now been over 40 different countries in the world that have adopted the model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Bakiner 2016).
- ³³ For example, Elizabeth Stanley has argued that the South African TRC process resulted in only creating a "partiality of truth" that resulted from "acknowledged truth" being neutralized by "governmental reticence to provide reparations" (2001, 527).

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