

ESSAY

## Whose History?: The Americas and Music Curricula in the United States

M. Leslie Santana

Department of Music, University of California San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA  
Email: [mleslie@ucsd.edu](mailto:mleslie@ucsd.edu)

One moment from the much-discussed 2017 curriculum reform in the Music Department at Harvard University has stuck with me and transformed the way I approach teaching music in higher education.<sup>1</sup> In one of the meetings leading up to the revision, graduate students in the department led an activity in which attendees—who included undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty alike—got into small groups and discussed the relative merits of three hypothetical models for the new undergraduate curriculum. Each of the models involved decentering to some extent the existing curriculum’s emphasis on the history of Western European music and dominant music theoretical approaches to it. After a short while, we all gathered back together and one person from each group shared a bit about what had transpired. From the circle of desks nearest the door, an undergraduate student rose to speak and expressed enthusiasm for a broadening of curricular coverages. But, they said, their group also had some reservations about jettisoning the overall focus on Western European concert music altogether. “We still need to learn about our history,” they said, while a faculty member nodded behind them.

The simple statement brought up a host of questions for me: Who are “we?” And what is “our history?” Why was it that this student, standing in a room half as far from Bwa Kayiman as it is from Leipzig, on a campus built on stolen land and enriched by the labor of enslaved African people and their descendants,<sup>2</sup> felt more affinity with European history and culture than with that of, for example, Massachusetts people or descendants of the enslaved in Haiti? Still, the statement was merely reflective of the reality that undergraduate music curricula in the United States continue to imagine that “history” refers to the history of Europe and Europeans.

In this essay, I want to consider what might be accomplished by centering the Americas in our music teaching in higher education in the United States. I do not suggest that merely turning to the Americas will magically accomplish the work of antiracism, decolonization, abolition, or trans/queer liberation. I am curious, however, about the ways that the histories and cultures of the Americas might offer meaningful windows into each of these possibilities. In order to ground my observations in pedagogical practice, I will articulate my position through my own approach in a class I teach at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) called “Worlds of Music: Las Américas.” I conclude by turning to some of the shortcomings or failures of this approach while also wondering how it might contribute to broader efforts toward unsettling some of music academia’s investments in white supremacy.

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I would like to thank my students in Worlds of Music: Las Américas; the students, staff, and faculty involved in the curriculum review in the Harvard Department of Music; and Kerry White for their feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>1</sup>I served as one of two graduate student representatives on a committee that worked toward the Harvard University Department of Music curricular reform while I was a PhD student there. For more information on the process and responses to it, see Valia P. Leifer, “Music Department to Adopt New Curriculum Beginning Fall 2017,” *The Harvard Crimson*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/3/22/music-concentration-changes/>, and William Robin, “What Controversial Changes at Harvard Mean for Music in the University,” *National Sawdust Log*, April 25, 2017, <https://nationalsawdust.org/the-log/2017/04/25/what-controversial-changes-at-harvard-means-for-music-in-the-university/>.

<sup>2</sup>See Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, “Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History,” *Harvard and Slavery* (website), 2011, <https://www.harvardandslavery.com>.

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## Las Américas

I brought this memory from Harvard with me as I began to plan a course I was going to teach as a new assistant professor in the UCSD Department of Music in January 2020. I was tasked with teaching a lower-division, high-enrollment course geared toward non-music majors that emerged out of the history of “world music” surveys. Some years prior, my colleagues had revamped the course from a three-quarter sequence that divided up the world geographically to a topics-based series called “Worlds of Music” in which professors could choose the theme of any quarter they taught. Nevertheless, given that I had just been hired as a Latin Americanist ethno/musicologist, I was encouraged to offer some version of a class that focused on the Americas.

I took the opportunity, then, to reflect on what an introductory music studies course that focused on the Americas might need to cover. What would my students need to know to begin to apprehend cultural production from this hemisphere? Given that Black and Latinx students are dramatically underrepresented at UCSD relative to local populations, I wanted the course to elaborate the histories of settler colonialism, slavery, and racial capitalism that have shaped the Americas. Knowing that such a class taught by a trans/queer Latinx professor would undoubtedly draw racially and sexually minoritized students, however, I also wanted to maintain a focus on the various ways dispossessed people have performed their own freedoms and generated other systems of value in these contexts. Here, I will consider three moments in the course that illustrate how this approach enabled discussions about the relationship between racial, sexual, and economic formations; the importance of performance in historical transformations; and the liberatory possibilities that such performances have imagined.

In the first week of the course, we read an essay by the trans Afro-Indigenous poet and artist Alan Pelaez Lopez that emphasizes the various linkages between race, sex, and empire that animate much of the course material. In “The X in Latinx is a Wound, not a Trend,” Pelaez Lopez suggests that the “X” in Latinx could be thought of as marking four wounds of *latinidad*: “settlement, anti-Blackness, femicides, and inarticulation.”<sup>3</sup> The essay helps undergraduate students appreciate the connections between settler colonialism and slavery as systems, and between blackness and indigeneity as racial formations, while also holding up their distinctions and particularities. It exposes students to the reality that “[t]he largest population of Black people outside of Africa lives in Latin America,”<sup>4</sup> challenging the white-washing that characterizes national narratives in Latin America. And it dwells on the sexual components of settler colonialism and slavery as processes, describing femicides as “a technology of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Pelaez Lopez gestures gently toward the liberatory strategies of the dispossessed, describing *femmes* as, among other things, “those of us who chose adornment as a reminder that we are worthy.”<sup>6</sup>

This subtle turn to aesthetics foreshadows the fact that, as a music course, “Las Américas” attempts to deepen and enliven students’ understanding of ideas like those of Pelaez Lopez’s essay through engagement with cultural production. Students often hesitate to appreciate the relationship between performance and broader social transformations, and Jill Lane’s influential essay “ImpersoNation” helps to underscore the central role performance has played in the unfolding of national cultures in the Americas.<sup>7</sup> “How shall we face,” she asks, “the enormous evidence of impersonation as a central cultural practice in the development of national discourses in the Americas?”<sup>8</sup> Performance, then, is not a frivolous or immaterial site from which to ask these questions; it has instead been central to the ways that oppressive forces have accumulated power *and* the ways that dispossessed people have articulated their own freedoms in such dehumanizing contexts. Moreover, Lane’s engagement with

<sup>3</sup> Alan Pelaez Lopez, “The X in Latinx is a Wound, Not a Trend,” *Color Bloq*, September 2018, <https://www.colorbloq.org/the-x-in-latinx-is-a-wound-not-a-trend>.

<sup>4</sup> Pelaez Lopez, “The X in Latinx.”

<sup>5</sup> Pelaez Lopez, “The X in Latinx.”

<sup>6</sup> Pelaez Lopez, “The X in Latinx.”

<sup>7</sup> Jill Lane, “ImpersoNation: Toward a Theory of Black-, Red-, and Yellowface in the Americas,” *PLMA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1728–31.

<sup>8</sup> Lane, “ImpersoNation,” 1728.

racial impersonation as a technique of performance offers a bridge between the kinds of historical and cultural divides that typically inform music curricula. She narrates blackface as a structure of performance that was central to national formations in the nineteenth century, shaped the ways various performance complexes have been and continue to be expressed, and remains widely in practice throughout the Americas and globally.

These histories of dispossession and racial impersonation form a necessary backdrop for understanding and appreciating the ways that oppressed people have always created realities, epistemologies, and systems of value that imagine otherwise. In order to elaborate these possibilities, we spend time discussing—for example—women’s music in the Mexico–US borderlands, work made by trans and queer people in Latin America, the role of Afrodiasporic religious and ritual performance in the Americas, and contemporary Indigenous and decolonial performances from Canada to Bolivia.

Our week on hip hop in particular offers a window into these liberatory possibilities. I rely especially on the work of Cuban diasporic Black/queer hip hop group Krudxs Cubensi as a living example of the kinds of revolution that “Las Américas” tries to demonstrate are possible. I close the term with the words of Odaymar Cuesta, who tells us:

[E]n estos momentos, donde hay tanta miseria, tanta explotación, tanta hambre, tanta desigualdad, tanta inequidad, tanto abuso, tanta opresión, y ellos siguen con el mismo privilegio, ser feliz es un acto revolucionario. . . . [M]i gente tiene una carga. . . genética, ancestral de hace 500 años de sufrimiento, de violaciones, de maltrato, de trabajo pesado; hemos sido personas esclavizadas. . . . Pero, ¿cómo curamos de eso? Gozando. Pasándola bien. Reconociéndonos como seres humanos plenos, como personas importantes en este mundo.<sup>9</sup>

I suggest to my students that the work of Krudxs Cubensi demonstrates the ways that marginalized people have generated realities, ways of being and knowing that go beyond the logics of settler colonialism, slavery, and racial capitalism.

Odaymar’s words are not meant for all of us, but they do call us all to think about our own ancestors. I try in “Las Américas” to be transparent about my ancestors and to encourage my students to be curious about theirs. What histories gave us the world we have inherited? How are our own lineages caught up with the transnational flows, aesthetic traditions, and social transformations we are examining? What other kinds of futures are possible?

## Our History

In addition to courses like “Las Américas,” I teach part of the music history sequence at UCSD and have been involved in efforts toward reimagining its content and scope. When I was asked to think about what kind of a course I might offer in the context of a new history survey, I realized that it would not look so different from “Las Américas.” A question that I have often heard professors ask in the context of curricular reform is, “What do our students need to know in order to graduate from our program?” Why couldn’t a class like “Las Américas” be part of a core requirement or even a history survey that answers such a question?

Fellow music scholars have already discussed the shortcomings of courses like “Las Américas” and the place they wind up filling in music curricula. Loren Kajikawa has pointed out that such courses tend to exist on the periphery of music departments and curricula, content to attract large enrollments and the tuition dollars they bring in while failing to transform much about the core of the discipline.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “[I]n these moments, where there is so much poverty, so much exploitation, so much hunger, so much inequality, so much inequity, so much abuse, so much oppression, and they still have the same privilege, being happy is a revolutionary act. . . . [M]y people have a . . . genetic, ancestral burden of 500 years of suffering, of rape, of abuse, of hard work; we have been enslaved. . . . But how do we heal from this? *Gozando*. Having a good time. Recognizing ourselves as full human beings, as important people in this world.” Krudxs Cubensi, “Gozaaaa,” *Highly Addictive*, 2016. (Translation by the author.)

<sup>10</sup> See Loren Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music,” in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019): 165–66.

Alejandro Madrid has warned that merely including more Ibero-American examples in existing music curricula “could only work to further reify the very problematic configurations and ideologies we identify as the canon.”<sup>11</sup> And Tamara Levitz has generatively demonstrated the ways that the Society for American Music’s own expansion into the Americas has failed to address the imbalances of power that marginalize scholars from Latin America and those of us of Latin American descent.<sup>12</sup>

Given these realities, could a focus on the Americas help to unsettle music curricula? What would it accomplish, for example, for a survey of European music to center representations of Native Americans in Lully’s musical productions in seventeenth-century France? Or the history of slavery in the Americas in an account of how the baroque dances of Bach made their way to Europe? Of Harry T. Burleigh’s voice and the English horn solo in the slow movement of Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9 “From the New World,” or of the blues musicians who inspired the middle movement of Ravel’s second violin sonata?

Regardless, I agree wholeheartedly with that undergraduate student from Harvard: We absolutely need to learn about our history. We just have to agree first that “our history” in the United States is not the history of Europe and its descendants, perhaps especially in the context of departments of music. The thinkers and writers of the Black radical tradition, for example, have demonstrated the extent to which cultural production has been central to the unfolding of their own history and, in turn, how the resulting structures of Black music and performance have indelibly shaped cultural production in the Americas. Consider, for example, Cedric Robinson’s suggestion that it was *culture* that preserved “the ideological and phatic ingredients of the radical tradition of the slaves” in the Caribbean, and the fact that Angela Davis turned to blues musicians to take her pathbreaking look into Black working-class female sexuality in the twentieth-century United States.<sup>13</sup> In these texts, we see how, through performance, the enslaved and their descendants imagined ways to be free racially, sexually, and economically during eras of dispossession and racial terror. What would a music department look like that placed these histories, actors, and insights at its center?

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**M. Leslie Santana** is an interdisciplinary writer, teacher, and performer from Miami, Florida. Their work focuses on the relationship between performance and racial, sexual, and economic transformations in the Americas, and they are currently writing an ethnography of gender performance in Cuba. Leslie Santana has contributed to *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) and *Queer Nightlife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021). They are currently Assistant Professor of Music at UC San Diego.

<sup>11</sup>See Alejandro L. Madrid, “Diversity, Tokenism, Non-Canonical Musics, and the Crisis of the Humanities in U.S. Academia,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 7, no. 2 (March 2017): 125–26.

<sup>12</sup>See Tamara Levitz, “Decolonizing the Society for American Music,” *Bulletin of the Society for American Music* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2017), <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.american-music.org/resource/resmgr/docs/bulletin/vol433.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 245–46; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

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