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ESSAY

Teaching Freedom Song as Antiracist Praxis

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In the teaching of history, oversimplification is, perhaps, unavoidable. In certain cases, however, that oversimplification can be deadly. There are some lessons that are too complex, some stories that are too nuanced, to be reduced in such a way. By their contours and particularities, they resist easy digestion. In the spirit of this particularity, my contribution to the colloquy is specific, but hopefully applicable to contexts beyond its specificity: I argue that the US Black Freedom Movement (or civil rights movement) and its music is a story that must be taught in all its complexity, for oversimplifying it does concrete harm to the ongoing struggle against white supremacy in the present. Teaching the US Black Freedom Movement and its music is also vital if we hope to enable our students to be forces of understanding, healing, and justice in the world, and should be an integral component of any undergraduate music curriculum that hopes to be antiracist.

Regarding Martin Luther King Jr. and his vision for US democracy, historian and activist Vincent Harding wrote, "It appears as if the price for the first national holiday honoring a black man is the development of a massive case of national amnesia concerning who that black man really was. . . . Clearly, we serve our scholarship and our citizenship most faithfully when we move ourselves and others beyond amnesia towards encounters with the jagged leading edges of King's prophetic vision."[1] In the same vein, historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall argues that:

> By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement. It ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative, yet it undermines its *gravitas*. It prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time."[2]

What Harding and Dowd Hall are describing and writing against here is the master narrative, the consensus history, of the US civil rights movement. This master narrative begins in 1954 with the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, recounts watershed moments usually connected to King's activism, and concludes in 1968 (at the latest) with the passage of the Fair Housing Act, the assassination of King, and the ascendency of more militant forms of Black protest, including Black Power and the Black Panther Party (BPP). The centrality of a misrepresented King within this narrative does a disservice to the complex, nuanced, and thus overlooked interweaving of various local movements that labored away from the spotlight to facilitate the victories that are attributed to the national movement with its towering (male) leaders. This short timeline also treats the events of 1954–68 as if they emerged from a historical vacuum and as if no vestiges of the Movement continued into the 1970s. This consensus history treats King and the coalition with whom he worked as far more monolithic than they were and dismisses the activism of less celebrated participants and ideologically divergent strands of the Movement. This narrative has also been used to suggest, somewhat ironically, that the Movement

[1]Vincent Harding, "Beyond Amnesia: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Future of America," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (September 1987): 469, 474.

[2]Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1234.

both accomplished its goals and also that it disintegrated around 1968. As the master narrative tells the story, this "disintegration" was triggered not by the insidious combination of US law enforcement and white vigilante violence, political adaptation, and retrenchment, but by the challenge brought by divergent strands of the Movement.[3] The narrative posits what historian Peniel Joseph terms a "good and bad 1960s," a false dichotomy between the optimism, interracialism, and nonviolence of King and the pessimism, separatism, and violence of the BPP.[4] "If they had only stuck with King's 1963 dream," the moral of the story goes, "everything would be better by now."

With a few exceptions, the historiography of freedom song has reinforced this false dichotomy between the "good" and "bad" 1960s. Freedom song, similar to the whitewashed image of King, is often remembered and taught only in conjunction with an oversimplified version of the nonviolent end of the Movement spectrum.[5] On the other hand, this historiography connects the rise of Black Power and the BPP to funk, jazz, or even silent rage. Jon Michael Spencer put it this way:

> What the historical record of song indicates is that the height of the civil rights movement corresponds with the height of singing as a means of expression (ca. 1960–1964), and that the move toward black nationalism was registered in the lyric and ultimate decline of singing as a mode of protest. From "We Shall Overcome" to "We Shall Overrun," SCLC to the Black Muslims, nonviolence to violence, singing to silence—the history of the movement is documented in the music, with appended footnotes perpetuated in the oral tradition.[6]

By giving the false dichotomy between a good and bad 1960s a soundtrack, we enable it to persist within the consensus history, even though the historical record shows that popular music *and* singing accompanied all varieties of protest during the Black Freedom Movement. It is a misrepresentation to argue for a hard break between "a southern, church-based nonviolent civil rights movement and a secular, violent black power era centered on the cities of the North."[7] The dissemination of this misrepresentation has its genesis in the mainstream US media reaction to Black Power and the uprisings in many US cities in the mid-1960s. The media trained "a hostile eye on those developments, ignoring the southern campaign's evolving goals, obscuring interregional connections and similarities, and creating a narrative breach between what people think of as 'the movement' and the popular struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s."[8] Now, when historians and pedagogues repeat this narrative, we are reinforcing a flawed history that arose out of racial anxiety and fear, rather than giving our students the tools to interrogate this and other flawed but popular narratives they will encounter.

My passion for correcting the master narrative of the Black Freedom Movement and its music is rooted not only in a concern for setting the historical record straight, but also in a concern for its ramifications on contemporary political life. I believe, and have argued extensively elsewhere, that most people and commentators in the United States read this flawed master narrative onto contemporary struggles for liberation.[9] As it stands, only collective actions that perfectly recall the sterilized memory of civil rights activism—down to the songs themselves—are acceptable and deemed safe; any perceived

[3]To see this narrative at its most obvious, see Daniel Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelly, *A History of the United States* (Needham, MA: Prentice Hall, 1996), which is one of the five most popular secondary school textbooks from the 1990s.

[4]See Peniel Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[5]For an excellent example of an intervention in this historiography, see Tammy Kernodle, "'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free': Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 3 (August 2008): 295–317.

[6]Jon Michael Spencer, "Freedom Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Sacred Music* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 16.

[7]Jenny Walker, "A Media Made Movement: Black Violence and Nonviolence in the Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 47. For a discussion of the complexities of different musics and their roles during the Movement, see Stephen Stacks, "Headed for the Brink: Freedom-Singing in U.S. Culture After 1968," PhD diss. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019).

[8]Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1236.

[9]See "Introduction" in Stacks, "Headed for the Brink" for a detailed theorization of this process.

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deviation is immediately associated with the post-1968 "breakdown" and deemed unacceptable, violent, and deviant. Any negative outcomes from such collective actions are blamed not on systemic causes but on the uprising's failure to live up to this flawed memory. At the same time, because protests and actions that effectively recall the sanitized aesthetic of King's activism are deemed safe, those who are committed to radical change sometimes ignore, downplay, or denigrate the resources of freedom song, further accentuating the dichotomy that has worked to the advantage of the status quo.

For an example of this process at work, I turn briefly to the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and its aftermath.[10] On Friday evening of August 11, 2017, white supremacists descended on Charlottesville. They marched through the center of the University of Virginia's campus carrying tiki torches and chanting Nazi slogans ahead of a planned demonstration on Saturday. On the other side of town, clergy and activists gathered for an interfaith mass meeting in preparation for their counter-protest. Before their mass meeting was over, torch-bearing white supremacists had surrounded the church, already threatening the counter-protestors by holding them hostage. In the morning, the two groups met again at Emancipation Park—the white supremacists carrying firearms and continuing their chanting while the counter protestors marched, linked arms, and alternated between silent defiance and the singing of freedom songs. After police dispersed the rally, white supremacists attacked counter-protestors, killing one woman and injuring several others, despite the counter-protestors' efforts to recall the nonviolent activism of the civil rights movement.

In the aftermath, we can see the flawed master narrative at work shaping the interpretation of the event. First, before any other framing of the event had taken place, President Donald Trump tweeted out a call for "unity" that is undergirded by "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of protest. In the aftermath, many media pundits and Trump himself coalesced around the narrative that both sides were at fault for the escalation and violence because of the presence of some self-identified antifascist protestors who defended the others.[11] Responding to criticism of his response, Trump doubled down on his position and said "I think there is blame on both sides. You had a group on one side that was bad. You had a group on the other side that was also very violent."[12] In a remarkable segment on Fox News reflecting on the violence in Charlottesville, Martin Luther King Jr.'s niece Alveda King asserted that King would have supported Trump's call to unity and nonviolence.[13] In an article for *Time* magazine, David Kaiser explicitly drew the comparison between Charlottesville and protests in 1968 saying "Though 50 years have passed the pattern that emerged in 1968–70 could be the template for what we are about to witness. . . . Just as in the past, protests and counter-protests can escalate each other. The experience of the late 1960s does not hold out much hope for how this cycle might end."[14]

Four of the clergy who were present in Charlottesville penned a response to all this, arguing that this "both sides" narrative springs from "sanitized images of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement" that have led to "paralyzingly unrealistic standards when it comes to what protest should look like."[15] Widespread application of these paralyzingly unrealistic standards continues to hamstring liberation movements in the United States, and will continue to do so until the master narrative is disrupted and a more nuanced understanding of the Black Freedom Movement is achieved.[16]

[10]This process can also be clearly seen in the reception of the uprisings in the summer of 2020 after the white vigilante killing of Ahmaud Arbery, and the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

[11]Dr. Cornel West claimed that Antifa protestors "saved his life" at the rally. See "Clergy in Charlottesville Were Trapped by Torch-Wielding Nazis," *Democracy Now!*, August 14, 2017, https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/14/cornel_west_rev_toni_blackmon_clergy.

[12]Michael D. Shear and Maggie Haberman "Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again Blames 'Both Sides,'" *New York Times*, April 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/trump-press-conference-charlottesville.html.

[13]"Alveda King Responds to Charlottesville Violence," Fox News, August 13, 2017, http://video.foxnews.com/v/5539940160001/#sp=show-clips.

[14]David Kaiser, "What the 1960s Reveal about What's Next for American Protestors," *Time*, August 25, 2017, http://time.com/4915622/protest-cycle-1960s-charlottesville/.

[15]Michael McBride, Traci Blackmon, Frank Reid, and Barbara Williams Skinner, "Waiting for the Perfect Protest," *New York Times*, September 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/civil-rights-protest-resistance.html.

[16]This narrative disruption is similar to what critical race theorists have alternatively called "counter storytelling" against "majoritarian narratives," and what George Lipstiz theorizes as an act of "counter memory." For "counter-storytelling," see

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In an essay on the importance of teaching the history of the Movement, Vincent Harding argues that "properly located in the context of humankind's best movements for personal and social transformation, the Black-led freedom movement provides great opportunities for creative and healing teaching."[17] Similarly, I am convinced that teaching the Movement and its music properly is an integral part of any antiracist undergraduate music curriculum—but only if the teacher is committed to moving beyond amnesia.

By way of conclusion, I will offer some ideas for how to effectively integrate the music of the US Black Freedom Movement into the curricula of university music departments.[18] If your department is overhauling its curriculum in an attempt to decolonize or make antiracism more central to its mission, advocate for the inclusion of an entire course on the music of the Black Freedom Movement, beginning with abolitionist music, and proceeding all the way through the music of the Black Lives Matter Movement. If a standalone course is not possible, there are myriad ways to include a nuanced discussion of freedom song as a unit in other topical courses such as Music in the Black Experience, Music and Politics, World Musics, or Popular Music. For example, when I taught World Musics in Spring 2021, I used the African diaspora as one of three anchors for the content, returning to it via various soundscapes throughout the semester, which allowed my students to connect threads that are often left separated. When I taught on freedom song, I was able to place it in conversation with the music-making of African slaves in the United States, with blues, with rap, with Black string band music, with jazz funerals, with youth music-making in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with gospel, etc. Our discussion of freedom song included not only the canonic songs of the 1950s and 1960s, but also Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn," Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick and Jimmy Collier's "Burn, Baby, Burn," Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout," and a protest chant adaptation of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." This array of examples broadened my students' understanding of what counts as freedom singing, and how they understood the continuity of the Black Freedom Movement.

Another option would be to include an in-depth examination of a figure such as Bernice Johnson Reagon, whose musical career and activism deconstruct the flawed dichotomies about the Movement discussed above.[19] Reagon began her musical career as a church musician turned activist, who joined up with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and became a founding member of the Freedom Singers. But she went on to form the lesser known Harambee Singers, who were active in the Black Nationalist/Black Arts scene in Atlanta, Georgia, in the late 1960s. She collaborated with a white folk singer named Anne Romaine to form a group of white and Black folk musicians who toured around the South in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the goal of demonstrating the political potential of roots music. She organized countless exhibits and festivals at the Smithsonian in her role as director of Black American Culture and as curator of music history at the National Museum of American History. She went on to found Sweet Honey in the Rock, a group that was active and vocal in many of the struggles of the latter 20th century, including the anti-apartheid movement. Her career puts the lie to an oversimplified, truncated narrative of the Black Freedom Movement and the ways musicians and listeners have interacted with it.

Lastly, I would like to offer up a practice that is foundational in my own pursuit of antiracist pedagogy—we must learn to teach with our own racial identities clearly articulated. I always find a way to explain to my students how passing as white even though my father is Lumbee has affected the way I approach scholarship and music-making.[20] Students will come into your classrooms at various stages

M. J. Matsuda et. al, *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993) and K. Crenshaw et. al, "Introduction," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995). For counter memory, see George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

[17]Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 5.

[18]These suggestions could also be adapted for primary and secondary music education contexts.

[19]See also ch. 2 of Stacks, "Headed for the Brink."

[20]The Lumbee are an American Indian tribe, the largest concentration of whom live in southeastern North Carolina. For a more in-depth discussion of my racial identity, see "Headed for the Brink" 44–46.

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in their journey towards understanding their racial identity and confronting how that racial identity impacts their life, their approach to their studies, their relationships, etc. Demonstrating for your students what it looks like to analyze one's own racial identity will accomplish several things: 1) it will dispel the myth of colorblindness and give them language with which to confront and embrace their own racial identity, 2) it will signal that your classroom is a space in which training a critical eye on our racialized world is invited and expected, generating much more productive conversations around race, and 3) it will help you guide your students to the conclusion that racial constructs have sonic textures and that we must be attuned to those textures as musicians and scholars.

In whatever course you teach, becoming aware of the ways the narratives you impart to your students affect their potential for flourishing is of utmost importance. Antiracist pedagogy requires that we teach with our senses acclimated to the real-world consequences of our instruction. Reexamining the way we teach the US Black Freedom Movement and its music offers one pathway for such an endeavor.

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