

If Colors Could be Heard

Narratives about Racial Identity in Music Education

Edited by Christopher Cayari, Jason D. Thompson, and Rekha S. Rajan



Introduction:

Painting Wondrous Tunes with Stories by People of Color

Christopher Cayari, Jason D. Thompson, and Rekha S. Rajan

If Colors Could Be Heard: Narratives About Racial Identity in Music Education is a platform of, by, and for People of Color who are music educators, artists, activists, and students. For this book, we asked authors to consider their race and ethnicity as an intimate and essential part of their music learning, making, and teaching. The narratives in this collection include tales of being a music student, stories of growing up and finding one's place in musical worlds, and accounts of teaching students about race, ethnicity, culture, and identity. The chapters in this book are not research studies unless explicitly stated by the author. Instead, the chapters in tandem represent a stunning mosaic with shades of melanated skin that will serve as a scholarly picture that represents a portion of music education in the United States. Here, you will find self-told stories by people who are part of the Global Majority—a term used to describe Black, African, Asian, Brown, Latin, dual-heritage, and Indigenous people. Our book's title is inspired by Harlem Renaissance author Richard Bruce Nugent's (1926) "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade":

the night was so blue . . . how does blue feel . . . or red or gold or any other color . . .
if colors could be heard he could paint most wondrous tunes . . . symphonious . . .
think . . . the dulcet clear tone of a blue like night . . . of a red like pomegranate
juice . . . like Edith's lips . . . of the fairy tones to be heard in the sunset . . . like rubies
shaken in a crystal cup . . . of the symphony of Fania . . . and silver . . . and gold . . .
(p. 35, ellipses in original)

Hear our stories! Find the music and inspiration in them. Challenge your world-view, and be the change your Students of Color need in this vibrant, beautiful, musical world.

The Power of People's Stories

Stories about people's lives are powerful and can empower those who read, tell, and hear them. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1994), one of the pioneers of educational and cognitive psychology, as well as legal scholar and one of the founders of critical race theory Richard Delgado (1989) both argued that stories can foster understanding, unity, connection, and meaning. Undoubtedly, stories can bring complex issues to light and introduce new perspectives into the worldviews of audiences and storytellers alike. Storytelling's power stems from its ability to bring listeners and storytellers together around shared experiences. This can even be true when realities experienced by the storyteller vastly differ from audiences' experiences. For example, counter-storytelling emphasizes the stories of individuals—often those from minority or disadvantaged groups—whose experiences are rarely shared in the dominant or popular cultures. Counter-narratives can be powerful because they offer an alternative perspective that subverts dominant discourses and challenges the status quo in music education. Telling the stories of marginalized people leads to the normalization of the experiences of those people whose stories are often untold or not brought to the forefront because the voices of the majority have drowned them out.

At the turn of the century, critical race theorists and educators Daniel Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002) called qualitative researchers to be proactive for the inclusion of counter-storytelling in educational scholarship and identified that the stories of People of Color are less prevalent, not because these perspectives do not exist but because they are frequently hidden due to self-preservation by those who are oppressed or forcibly displaced by oppressors. For example, Joyce McCall discussed how she was dissuaded from researching and writing about race and racism in music education:

My professors' rationale included that I would be perceived as "the one who only talks about race," that I would ruin my chances of finding employment in higher education, and that I would make my doctoral experience difficult because no one talks about these things, especially focusing them into a dissertation. They advised me to wait until I was established in the field or until I had tenure.

(2017, p. 19)

McCall went on to write, "The music education profession must take every effort to break the silence in our music spaces to illuminate those voices that encounter racism and other injustices daily" (p. 25). Indeed, music education scholars (e.g., Bradley, 2012; Hendricks, 2021; Hess, 2016; Talbot, 2017) have attested that counter-narratives and counter-storytelling are necessary to normalize and

uplift the voices of people who are not part of the majority in which White, cisgender, patriarchal, upper class, heterosexual, and Christian ideologies abound. By hearing the stories of People of Color, music educators can recognize and uphold viewpoints that do not all conform to majoritarian ideologies. Kakali Bhattacharya (2009) encouraged educators to pursue “multiple de/colonizing discourses” (p. 105). Embracing such diverse knowledge systems is a fundamental step toward fostering an inclusive approach to music learning. The historical marginalization, dismissal, and ignoring of certain viewpoints, particularly of People of Color, within music education have perpetuated social inequities. Yet, by acknowledging and valuing the richness of diverse perspectives and practices, we may better be able to dismantle these entrenched injustices. The ideas presented in this book extend the conversation by amplifying marginalized voices and incorporating their experiences into music education discourse. While pedagogical, theory, research, and policy literature are crucial tools in this endeavor, narrative scholarship like what is in this volume can ignite public discourse and foster dialogue that ultimately informs such literature.

Educational reformer Geneva Gay, who popularized culturally responsive teaching, serves as an inspiration when thinking about ways we can support People of Color in music education. Gay (2018) ruminated:

Educators need to organize their conceptions and experiences in working with students of color into meaningful “tales of important happenings,” as much as individuals need to do so with their personal encounters [...] This is why I want to create a “story” of power pedagogy in the form of culturally responsive teaching.

(p. 4)

By telling our tales of important happenings, and in turn, equipping our students to do the same, we hope to harness the power of our experiences to inspire innovative approaches to using music, teaching, and learning to empower People of Color.

The Inspiration Behind This Book

We desire to see a change in music education where People of Color have more opportunities to tell their stories and explore what it would mean to have our voices, our music, and our lives at the center of the spotlight in music education, not just at the fringes of the stage or highlighted for a finite period when our races correspond with a history month. Thus, we turned to the Harlem Renaissance for inspiration. Nugent’s “Smoke, Lillies, and Jade” brought attention to the intersectionality of

his race, gender roles, and sexuality. Nugent's short story was combined with other works in the 1926 publication *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*—the first and only issue of what was planned to be a quarterly periodical—

promoted itself as a youthful rebellion against a stodgy patriarch [...] [that] dared to print a portrait of a prostitute, tale of interracial affair, a play about poisonous jealousy among women of color, and a bisexual love story—all works that presumably would have little chance appearing [elsewhere].

(Churchill, 2010, p. 65)

While the content of the collection was considered by many readers to be too racy, Nugent and fellow authors including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman challenged the norms and ideologies of their time, boldly presenting parts of their identity through art despite the prevailing respectability politics. “Respectability politics” were the result of the Black sub-culture conforming to dominant standards to better position themselves to advocate for change. However, the authors in *Fire!!* as well as others who were part of the Harlem Renaissance challenged this approach to advocacy, speaking truth to power and inspiring young negroes of the day to reclaim the power and authenticity of their own perspectives and experiences.¹ During its renaissance in the 1910s through the mid-1930s, the Harlem neighborhood in New York City became a Black cultural mecca amid a social and artistic explosion. This period is regarded as a golden age in African American culture, with manifestations in literature, music, stage performance, and the arts. Race scholar Jon Michael Spencer (1997) drew on folklorist Samuel A. Floyd's (1990) description of music during the Harlem Renaissance to emphasize the critical role music played in influencing and mediating the movement, noting:

[T]he Harlem Renaissance used and was supported and accompanied by music. The music of the black theater shows, the dance music of the cabarets, the blues and ragtime of the speakeasies and the rent parties, the spirituals and the art songs of the recital and concert halls all created an ambience for Renaissance activity and contemplation.

(Spencer, 1997, pp. xviii–xix)

It is within this context that African Americans across the country gained a new sense of self-determination and pride. This was joined by a new social awareness and commitment to political activism. These changes laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It is our belief as editors that there should be a new renaissance in music education through which People of Color are

given the chance to speak up, be heard, and share their experiences. We hope this book will be looked back upon as one of those steps. In the spirit of *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*, our stories in this book speak loudly for themselves, and we put the responsibility of change on the reader to challenge their conception of what music education is. Let these stories inspire you to act, move, and change music education within your sphere of influence to uplift People of Color, their stories, cultures, and experiences. This will further a renaissance in music education in which People of Color's experiences are told, featured, celebrated, and used to exemplify the diversity our profession claims to desire.

As we editors pondered Nugent's text, we believed the phrase could be a symbol of inspiration for us. "If colors could be heard, they'd paint wondrous tunes," became our mantra for necessary truth-telling by People of Color in our profession. Each of our stories represent a beautiful color that paints a tune that deserves to be heard. Instead of our stories being repeated, repurposed, and examined through the work of White colleagues, we desire as People of Color to bring our own stories to the forefront of our profession. Unfortunately, many of the writers in this book have found themselves in a similar situation as Darrin Thornton (2017), who previously wrote, "I have actively attended professional conferences and wondered 'why just me' or 'so few others' in regard to people of color in general and Black men specifically?" (p. 58). Similarly, we ask a similar question regarding scholarly literature in music education, wondering why so little research was written about People of Color by People of Color. This book is an actionable response to that question. Most of the writing in music education has been done by White people, and Authors of Color have been underrepresented in music education texts, especially prior to 2020 when this book was conceived. Therefore, the vision for this book was to serve as a gathering place for People of Color to converge and write their own stories about their experiences in music education and provide us music educators with contexts, ideas, and experiences that might benefit our Students of Color.

During the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the murder of George Floyd sparked a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. In December 2020, we editors gathered for the first time as visionaries for this project. We wanted this volume to give People of Color a place to share their lived experiences and show how their race and ethnicity influenced how they learn, made, and taught music. We also wanted to acknowledge that a person's race and ethnicity may, at times, result in oppressive barriers that result from systemic issues in music education institutions and society, while at other times, may be a source of empowerment as they persevere through the margins that invariably cause adversity.

As we discussed how to recruit authors for the project, we toyed with the idea of focusing on autoethnography, autobiography, counternarratives or something

else. Instead, we chose to focus this book on narrative storytelling—whether they be counternarratives in our minds or not—as People of Color in music education and considering how our race and ethnicity have shaped our lives. Rekha’s experiences as a children’s book author made her privy to inequalities in the book publishing world outside of music education. The children’s book industry was dominated by White male authors in the 2010s and earlier, leaving little room for emerging diverse voices to find a way to share their lived experiences. Few books featured Children of Color on the cover, and women authors and illustrators accounted for a small percentage of published works. Many children’s book publishers and writing communities supported a movement for change that would provide opportunities for underrepresented and marginalized authors to publish their stories on a variety of platforms. This included the conception of the #OwnVoices movement that was later disbanded to inspire the creation of We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) and an open call from publishers with a commitment for “moving towards focusing on the specific descriptions authors use for themselves and their characters, and not on forced representation” (Macchia, 2022, para. 2).

Stories about various Communities of Color and marginalized populations had been written by White authors who have not spent considerable time living in the communities about which they wrote. Something had to change, and people from marginalized communities were given platforms in the form of writing contests, special series at major publishers, and buzzworthy forums on social media to share their stories. We saw parallels between the children’s book publishing industry and music education scholarship. This book mirrors the children’s literature renaissance, which inspired our concept for *If Colors Could Be Heard* by providing a platform for People of Color telling stories from their culture.

How to Use This Book

This volume is a platform in which People of Color interrogate how race and ethnicity influenced their experiences in music education. It is not a prescription for how to change music education. Rather, this is a collection of chapters that tells the stories and experiences of People of Color in music education. Thus, this book is intended to spark reflection and conversations about race, ethnicity, identity, culture, and music. We hope discussions take place in music education classes, conferences, reading groups, and dinner tables. The narratives, lives, and experiences of People of Color in this book can serve as catalysts for discourse, learning, and most importantly action. *If Colors Could Be Heard* could be used as a textbook when discussing the intersections of race, ethnicity, identity, culture, and music. However, the vision and purpose of this project were to challenge norms;

encourage critical thinking and dialogue; and provide an opportunity to reframe how music education can encompass a plethora of music learning, making, and teaching contexts. This book was also meant to gather teachers, students, parents, friends, coworkers, artists, and musicians together so they could talk about how race and ethnicity affects teaching, learning, and reflection. While the scope of this book is comprised mostly of authors from the United States, the discussions of how race, ethnicity, and identity influence music education in our country may have a broader appeal to readers from all over the world. We compiled this book with the same hopes of those who published *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists* (1926). We hope this book inspires Music Educators of Color and Students of Color who are looking for representation in our profession, want to feel empowered, and want to read the stories of other People of Color.

After reading and analyzing the chapters, we editors identified five categories the narratives fell into. After compiling chapters and considering them in tandem, we wrote orientations that prepare the reader as they consider the stories each section contains. Section I includes narratives about *intersectionality* and how race and ethnicity are only two parts of a person's identity and surrounding cultures. Section II features stories about People of Color in music education who are *forging new pathways* in their classrooms and performances. Section III shares *epiphanies* that have changed the way the authors have approached music learning, making, and teaching. Section IV considers how *triumph and excellence* can be achieved for People of Color in music education. Section V focuses on *reimagining music education* through the lenses of culture, race, and ethnicity.

Each section starts with an orientation written by one or more of the editors that draws on previously published research and scholarly writings to provide context for the topic and its relevance to music education. Each orientation is followed by five or six chapters authored by People of Color that discuss their experiences in music learning, making, and teaching. While the chapters can be read by themselves, they also fit in with the larger context of each section and the whole book. The chapters begin with a biography written in first person by the author and an abstract summarizing their chapter. These introductory materials give readers a sense of who is speaking and what they believe are the most salient parts of their chapter. Each chapter ends with three discussion questions: (1) the first can be used to help individual readers reflect on their own experiences; (2) the second focuses attention on the music education profession, requiring readers to think about discourse, trends, and the state of our profession; and (3) the third encourages the reader to identify actionable changes they can implement in their classrooms, ensembles, communities, and the music education profession. We hope that these shared stories and experiences inspire, motivate, and empower readers to act, effect change, and make their voices heard.

Discussion Questions

1. What role have your race and ethnicity played in your music learning, making, and teaching?
2. In what ways have you seen music teachers and the music education profession support or not support People of Color, and how has that impacted your own music learning, making, and teaching?
3. What are some activities you could do with your students to encourage them to think about the impact race and ethnicity have on their music learning and making?

NOTE

1. As editors, we are committed to honoring the historical and contextual language of the authors we cite. In our original draft, we used the term Negro—without quotation marks or substitution—to reflect the language of the young Negro artists whom the creators of *Fire!!* sought to inspire. We resisted replacing it with Black people or African Americans, believing such changes would dilute its historical significance. Following extensive discussions with reviewers and our publisher, we agreed to include this note. While some find the term Negro offensive, we draw on Alain LeRoy Locke's (1925) framing of the *New Negro* as central to the Harlem Renaissance, affirming the term's cultural and political power. Our publisher's policy, which is aligned with the National Association of Black Journalists (2025), flags the term if it is not clarified within quotes or with an endnote. While intended to uphold best practices, such policies can feel colonizing and rooted in White supremacy, as they may limit how Authors and Editors of Color want to express themselves. Robin DiAngelo's (2018) assertion in *White Fragility* is that White people often use quotation marks around terms like Negro to distance themselves from discomfort. We believe Negro can be a term of empowerment, especially when used by Black people to speak of their historical journey and for others who are committed to historical significance. This note is an invitation to reflect on language, power, and the ongoing struggle for equity in academic and publishing spaces.

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