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## Performing the “Exotic?”: Constructing an Ethical World Music Ensemble

By

Juliet Hess

### Abstract

*The Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble was a Ghanaian music ensemble that focused on Ewe music. I founded this ensemble in the elementary school where I taught in the Toronto area. From the time of its founding, one of the overarching goals I had for the group was a disruption of images and stereotypes that the students held of Africa in general, and more specifically, of Ghana. How did the students perceive Africa? Did the ensemble change their perceptions at all? How did my own positionality, as a white, Western woman enter the picture? How did students' ensemble participation affect them politically? During the ensemble's fourth year, I conducted a qualitative study to investigate these questions. I interviewed nine students from age 9 to 13 for their perceptions of the effects of their ensemble participation. This article examines the ways in which participation in the ensemble sustained stereotypes and media images as well as other images that commodify and exotify the Ghanaian culture. This article also investigates the ways in which music may disrupt these images. I conclude with implications for the place of the world music ensemble in music education, exploring both the political caveats that come with implementing such a program and potential ethical ways of creating world music ensembles in the public school system.*

*Keywords:* music education, world music ensemble, sociopolitical awareness, multiculturalism

The world music ensemble entered the discipline of ethnomusicology in the 1950s at UCLA. It came from a desire initiated by ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood to bring the fieldwork and academic study of ethnomusicology into the realm of practical musical experience. It began, literally, as a study group—musicians coming together to learn to perform a music that they were perhaps studying in another capacity (see Solis, 2004 for further information on the genesis of the world music ensemble). Since then, many institutions have incorporated an array of world music ensembles into their course offerings. In September 2003, I founded the Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble at the elementary school where I taught. Sankofa focused on Ewe music from Ghana. The school was located in the Greater Toronto Area and consisted of a diverse student population. The program housed between 50 and 90 students, depending on the year, and included an advanced ensemble as well as one or two beginner ensembles. At the time, the program was one of the few world music ensembles in the school board run by a music teacher, as opposed to being directed by outside musicians.

One of the overarching goals I had for the group was a disruption of images and stereotypes that the students may have held of Africa in general, and more specifically, of Ghana. I also wondered about the effect of my own positionality, as a white, Western woman on the students' perceptions. Primarily, I was specifically interested in how the students' ensemble participation affected them politically. As these questions were all political in nature, I looked for a definition of the political to help me consider the students' perceptions. For the purposes of this paper, I looked to David Elliott's (1995) definition of politics: "To the Greeks, the word politics meant whatever involved people in human concerns beyond their own individual needs" (p. 130). Elliott embedded this notion of "political" within music making.

In keeping with this definition, I sought to explore if and how the students were developing concerns beyond their individual needs. In other words, I questioned whether or not the students were becoming more globally conscious as a result of their music making. In 2006, during the fourth year of the program, I undertook a qualitative study that explored the political effects of “performing the exotic.” I wanted to understand what occurs when students perform the music of the so-called “Other.”

This study had two primary concerns: first, it examined the ways in which participation in the ensemble sustained stereotypes and media images as well as other images that commodify and exotify the Ghanaian culture. Secondly, it investigated the ways in which music may disrupt these images. I conclude this article by discussing the place of the world music ensemble in music education, exploring both the political caveats that come with implementing such a program and some of the hopeful possibilities. I ultimately aim to construct, by drawing on my own experience and that of nine ensemble members, guidelines for ethically developing world music ensembles in the public school system.

### **The Sankofa Drum & Dance Ensemble**

I initiated the Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble in 2003 based on four years of Ghanaian music study that included intense study in Ghana during the summer of 2003. There were only a handful of world music ensembles in the school board and even fewer available to students in the public school system at the elementary level. In 2007, the year of this study, the regional music festival, with over 500 entries and more than 10,000 participants, listed Sankofa as the sole participant in the category of *Ethnocultural Music*.<sup>1</sup>

The elementary school was almost 30 years old and housed students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. Located in the Greater Toronto Area, the school population reflected the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the anonymity requirements of the board ethics committee, I cannot offer the citation of the festival.

highly diverse demographics of Toronto. This school was a “performance plus” school within the board; this label identified the school population as “at-risk”—a designation that pointed to factors such as the lower socioeconomic status of the school population, the large number of single parent families, and students from high-density housing situations. The performance plus program provided support to the performance plus schools through initiatives such as free busing to provide field trip co-curricular opportunities at a low cost. The school also had a gifted program for students from Grades 4 through 8. Many students spoke two or more languages and the school celebrated its diverse population.

The Sankofa Drum & Dance Ensemble program achieved success upon its initiation and continued to grow throughout my tenure at the school. The ensemble expanded to include a beginner and an advanced troupe with the criteria that students had to be in the beginner ensemble for at least one year before they became eligible to be in the advanced ensemble. At the time of the study, each group consisted of approximately 35 students. Due to the limited number of instruments, students in the advanced group were selected by audition. The groups were diverse in age range and also consisted of students in both the regular and gifted academic streams.

The program focused on Ghanaian traditional music, specifically from the Ewe culture. Drumming, dancing, and singing are so integral to the Ewe tradition that they actually share one word in the Ewe language; the three elements are inseparable. I taught Ghanaian music through aural transmission, as it is taught traditionally. Maintaining the integrity of the oral tradition was important to me, and I found the students were extremely responsive to this teaching approach (see Hess, 2009 for further discussion).

The ensemble had many unique performance opportunities over the six years it existed. They performed frequently in the community, toured local schools, and played at community functions, including a number of events related to AIDS awareness in Africa and the city's bid for the Commonwealth Games. In addition, the ensemble performed and led workshops for preservice teachers for four consecutive years as part of an arts event at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Over the course of the six years in which I taught at the school, the ensemble had the opportunity to perform both for the Minister of Education and the Premier of Ontario.

### **Methodology: A Qualitative Study of the Sankofa Drum & Dance Ensemble**

At the beginning of the fourth year of the program, I realized that I had very little evidence as to whether or not I was achieving my goal of reducing stereotypes. I began this qualitative study to investigate the students' perceptions of the effects of this ensemble on their political awareness related to race and culture. I felt that a qualitative research design utilizing interviews with students would provide insight into the students' perceptions. Students, after all, "may have insights into perceptions of a data site that are considerably different from those of the adult music teacher or administrator" (Phelps, Ferrara, & Goolsby, 1993, p. 165).

The use of interviews as a method for this qualitative inquiry allowed for narrative study of the "educational experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19) in order to reach a deeper understanding of the effects of ensemble participation. Interviewing, according to Merriam (1998), "is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 72), as it allows insight into that which cannot be seen. Bradley (2006b), Dodd (2001), and Powell (2003) all used interviewing as an aspect of their doctoral investigations of world music ensembles. Their use of interviewing allowed them to gain insider

understanding of the varying effects of the ensemble on its participants. In addition, a number of other studies that investigated ensembles (Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Conway & Borst, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; King, 2006; Willingham, 2001) utilized interviewing to gain insight into the ensembles from the members. Although all of these studies varied in intention, their common use of interviews to study the sub-culture<sup>2</sup> of the ensembles significantly influenced my choice of method.

I interviewed nine students between January 24, 2007 and February 12, 2007—seven from the advanced ensemble and two from the beginner ensemble. The students were diverse in ethnicity and ranged in age from 9 to 13. Seven of the nine students were born in Canada and most students spoke at least one language other than English. Four of the nine students participated in the gifted program at the school. I selected these students randomly from the pool of students who returned the consent form. Merriam (1998) found that random sampling can address validity, which was my intention in using random selection. My original intention was to interview six students from the advanced ensemble, but due to a death in the family, one student returned his consent form the day after the selection process. Because of the extenuating circumstances and the fact that he was one of only three boys in the advanced ensemble of 30 students, I selected him as the ninth participant.

I chose a semi-structured interview design, both because I had already established rapport with the students and because I feared that “rigidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow [me] to access participants’ perspectives and understandings of the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). The semi-structured interview design provided liberty to mix more- and less-

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<sup>2</sup> I draw on Swanwick’s (1988) definition of sub-culture: “Any group of people sustained by a common interest or a set of shared values—religious organizations; social clubs; occupational tribes of hunters, farmers or accountants—will develop customs, conventions and conversational manners of a more or less specialized kind, creating a sub-culture.” (p. 3)

structured questions. Although I was looking for specific information from all of the students, I constantly reworded questions in an age-appropriate manner for each participant so the interviews flowed conversationally. Shiner and Newburn (1997) found that semi-structured interviews

minimised the extent to which respondents had to express themselves in terms defined by the interviewers and encouraged them to raise issues that were important to them. It was thus particularly well suited to attempt to discover respondents' own meanings and interpretations. (p. 520)

I based the interview questions on those used in Bradley's (2006b) study. The interviews lasted between 15 and 40 minutes and took place in the music room. I recorded the interviews with permission. Students received a transcript of their interviews within five days and I asked them to make any changes, deletions, or additions they felt were necessary.

My insider knowledge of these students and Oakley's (1981) theory that there is "no intimacy without reciprocity" (p. 49) led me to the decision not to maintain an entirely neutral stance throughout the interviews. At the time of the study, I had taught some of the students for four years. Teachers interviewing their students can be awkward for students and can reinforce the researcher/subject hierarchy, which did not seem appropriate as it would further exaggerate the power relation already at play. I allowed instead for the "development of a closer relation between interviewer and respondent, attempting to minimize status differences and doing away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 370). I acknowledge that students may have been trying to please me as both their teacher and the director of the ensemble during the interviews. The first source of error is respondent behavior, where the respondent "may deliberately try to please the interviewer" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 702), and despite the fact that I encouraged the students to speak openly, I am aware that this element may have influenced students' responses.



Finally, in order to maintain the students' right to confidentiality, students chose their own pseudonyms. Ethics requirements of the school board required that the board and the school remained unidentified and I have changed the ensemble name because it has an internet presence. The following sections examine the students' perceptions of the political effects of participation in the Sankofa Drum & Dance Ensemble. I explore the students' views of Africa in general, and Ghana specifically, by looking at some of the changes in these perceptions identified by the students during their time in the Sankofa ensemble.

### **Images of the Other**

When studying an unfamiliar culture, there is the potential for creating an Other or relying on a stereotyped perception of that culture. Drawing on an Other that is "already and always waiting" (Meiners, 2001, p. 214) allows for the perpetuation of stereotypes and misunderstanding between cultures. Students' perceptions of Africa often draw on the poverty-stricken images they see in the media. In Miezan's (2000) work on the images of Africa presented in the media and the ensuing attitudes of African Americans toward the continent, he found that the media represents Africa as "a place of primitivism where civilization has eluded humanity, and where crises fester day in day out" (p. vii). The students' impressions at this elementary school were consistent with this grim image.

As my primary goal for the ensemble was for students to deconstruct their mental images of the Other, I hoped to disrupt the stereotypes and preconceived notions that the students may have had about both Africa in general and Ghana in particular. My inspiration for this goal draws from Morrison (1990) and Meiners (2001), who examined the function and presence of the Other in Western literature. Morrison (1990) in particular explored the role of the Africanist presence in American literature, where readers are typically positioned as white. These authors provided a

pre-cursor to Said's (1993) exploration of literature in *Culture and Imperialism*. They explored similar questions of how white readers encounter the so-called "exotic" in Western literature. Meiners (2001) posited that the image of the Other is "*already and always* waiting in the imaginations of Western readers" (p. 214, emphasis in original). She argued that literature sometimes utilizes that image of the Other to prove a specific point. Bradley (2003) brought this discussion into the realm of music. She worried that leaving the context of multicultural choral music to the imagination of the students and teacher would encourage stereotyping of that culture and would not provide opportunities for discourse about important contextual issues. She was also concerned with the type of multicultural programs being administered. Bradley (2003) stated:

When we choose to deliver a smorgasbord of musical diversity, rather than carefully considered programs of cultural concentrations that allow for deeper learning and understanding, we continue to consume the Other under the euphemism of providing 'broad experience.' At the same time, we allow both our students and our audiences to invent their own versions of Otherness, thus perpetuating stereotypes, misinformation, mistrust, racism. (p. 18-19)

Like Bradley (2003), I worried that the students in my ensemble operated with an invented version of the Ghanaians behind the Ghanaian music we studied. What were the students' images of the Other? The following passages indicate an impression of the exotic woven within the students' images of Ghanaian people.

Juliet: What have you learned about Ghana and the Ghanaian culture since you've been in the group?

Siona: I learned that they, they love to dance and they're really different from other people. They're very active and, um, they enjoy lots of things like dancing and music.

Juliet: And how does it make you feel about Ghanaian culture?

Siona: It makes me feel that everybody... That all cultures are different and, um, the Ghanaian culture is really, it's different from others 'cause it's really, um... They have a different way of dancing and doing things.

Ten-year old Siona, a Grade 5 student born in Mumbai, emphasized difference—this radical "difference" from herself. She had a real sense of the exoticness of Ghanaian culture and

saw it as somehow apart from her own experience. Siona's reference to the fact that Ghanaians are "really different from other people" indicated that she had at least partially constructed an Other in her mind. Although she could not articulate the ways in which she felt Ghanaians were different, she repeated the idea several times.

Suzie, a 12-year-old of Guyanese background, indicated a similar line of thinking to Siona:

Juliet: Has doing this music changed any opinions that you had about people from Ghana or people from Africa?

Suzie: Well, I didn't know about Ghana, and stuff, so like you're trying to teaching us how to do it and it's really cool, because I never knew that they had stuff like that.

Juliet: Mm-hm. So what have you learned about Ghanaian culture?

Suzie: Like the way they dress when they're dancing, the way their culture is and stuff.

Suzie's commentary on Ghanaians having "stuff like that" perhaps indicates she held stereotypes of primitivism about Ghanaians. The drumming and dancing was perhaps more complex than she had imagined, revealing another thread of the exotic in this discussion. Both Siona and Suzie gave evidence in their speech of "us and them" thinking.

The two youngest participants in the study, Sarah, a 9-year-old Portuguese Canadian, and Obi, a 10-year-old Ukrainian and Polish Canadian, made a number of statements indicating evidence of stereotyping and generalizing. Sarah expressed the thought that Ghanaians learn music by instinct.

Sarah: I actually think they [Ghanaians] learn music just by instinct.

Juliet: Okay. What makes you think that?

Sarah: 'Cause like they just drum and when they get together at night they just listen to like the lead drummer and then they just drum.

Her statement that "they" learn music by instinct revealed a generalization that she believed all Ghanaians are musical, which is certainly not the case. At the age of nine, she was the youngest

of all the participants in this project and this was her first year in the group. Musing about some of the differences between Canada and Ghana, Sarah spoke to the lack of technology in Africa:

Sarah: Um... It does make me wonder like why we [Canadians] have all these different things and why we do things so differently.

Juliet: Like what?

Sarah: Why they can't have the technology we have and like why they have so many different... Um... Different ways of doing things. Like it's more like how everything's not right at their fingertips they have to go and get it.

Juliet: Mm-hm.

Sarah: And we have everything at our fingertips.

Her statements provided a strong indication of what she perceived the technological situation in Africa to be. Although her concept was a generalization, it is true that in certain places, computers are sometimes less accessible than in some places in North America, and internet access can be limited. However, cell phones are ubiquitous and many places are highly technological. Sarah's generalization, in other words, falls short of the reality in many places. Obi's responses also included generalizations, though his ideas drew on representations of Africa in the media.

Juliet: Has doing this music changed what you think about people from Ghana at all?

Obi: Yeah. I think that they are, like, playing a lot of music and not just, like, sitting around trying to work on the farms and stuff.

Juliet: Mm-hm.

Obi: Before I thought all they do is work on the farms, but after I came here I knew that they played drums more than they work on the farms.

Juliet: Okay. And why did you think they work on the farms?

Obi: Because, um, I was, um, watching some show and I saw them working on the farms and that's all they did. They didn't play drums.

Juliet: And was it a show about Ghana or another country in Africa?

Obi: It might have been another country.

Juliet: Do you think differently of Africa than you did before?

Obi: Um... Yeah. 'Cause before I thought, um, that they were poorer, but when I watched, like, the films of it, I see that they're, like, they're pretty rich because they can buy like drums and jewels and stuff. And they all, like, have, like, lots of fun... But before... I saw some, like shows and I saw

them, like, dressed up in rags, trying to get money, but when I saw the shows [Armstrong, 2002], they seemed, like, very rich.

Obi saw a documentary that depicted Africans working on farms and this became his whole impression of the way things are in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Having participated in the drumming group for two years, his view had shifted to include music in the daily life in Ghana. However, his view was still somewhat askew, as he believed that drumming was perhaps a larger part of daily life than working. He was unaware that less traditional drumming happens in urban centres; I had not discussed the difference between rural and urban areas with the group. He also spoke of programs he had seen that ask for donations to help alleviate poverty and hunger. Watching *Footsteps to Ghana* (Armstrong, 2002) during the year of the study showed him that there is more to Africa than starving children; however, his responses made me aware that there was much more to discuss with the group. As a 10-year-old, he was prone to generalizations and had replaced his ideas of working on farms and poverty with drumming and riches, unaware that he was moving between extremes.

These participants' responses indicated the presence of preconceived notions about Ghana and Africa held by some of the participants in the Sankofa Drum & Dance Ensemble. Their notions often persisted despite performing the music, listening to contextual information, working with Ghanaian master drummer Kwasi Dunyo, listening to musical examples, and watching a documentary about a similar ensemble from Ottawa going to Ghana. These students' images of the Other were not particularly disrupted by their work in this ensemble, leading to the question: how might a teacher interrupt the readily available image of the Other?

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to "Africa" instead of a specific country because Obi was unaware of specific countries.

### The Problematics of Sameness

The themes that emerged from the interviews included images of difference, stereotypes, and the “us and them dichotomy.” Students viewed Ghanaians as “apart” from themselves—as “different.” Shades of primitivism and the exotic were also prevalent underlying themes in the discussion. However, equally problematic was the colourblind notion of sameness: a number of students expressed the opinion that people are the same across all borders. They felt that their lives in Canada were not fundamentally different from the lives of children in Ghana. Based on her dissertation research, Bradley (2006a) suggested that, as her choir members were able to “recognize themselves in others, and recognize others within themselves” (p. 17), a potential for multicultural human subjectivity developed. I wonder, however, if something more complex develops—perhaps an unsettling element of “colourblindness”—a concern Bradley interrogated in her dissertation. If, as Morrison (1990) suggested, “the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (p. 9), this insistence of sameness across all borders, misrecognition of difference, and heterogeneity within difference works to reinscribe hegemony and erase the material effects of difference. Rachel, a 12-year-old Canadian of Sri Lankan descent, and Siona both demonstrated this graceful habit of colourblindness.

Juliet: Has doing this music changed any of the opinions you had about the Ghanaian people or culture? Do you think different things now than you did before?

Rachel: Yeah, like... Um... Maybe saying that they're like Ghanaian people might make you think that they're different, but you can see that they all do the same things as us, just in different ways, so... We're like playing instruments and stuff... They're doing the same thing, but with like different things. They're the same people.

Juliet: Has doing this music changed any opinions you might have had about Ghana or the culture or the people?

Siona: No, I always thought that they were like... Um... They did different things, so I thought that they were like similar, but now I think that

everybody's the same, except they like dance better and have different ways.

This commentary from both Siona and Rachel perhaps seems hopeful; after all, in many ways, it is a recognition across cultural borders. However, the lack of recognition of difference and its very real material consequences indicate a crucial missing piece to this equation. Without acknowledgment of how these power dynamics affect reality, recognition of humanity within Others, though a hopeful first step, is merely that. However, this first step is perhaps a realistic goal at the elementary level.

### **Interrupting “Exotic Difference” and “Colourblind Sameness”**

The data indicated stereotypes of both the “exotic difference” of Ghanaians and conversely, the colourblind sameness. Both extremes are situated far from my original intentions for the group. The potential for both exoticization and the elision of heterogeneity here runs rampant in the world music ensemble, but what are the other possibilities? Did any of the data indicate a vision for an *ethical* world music ensemble—one which would not exotify or commodify the Other *or* erase difference? The following passages indicate some suggestion of disruption.

Bob: I watched that video [Armstrong, 2002] and I saw that if someone passes away, they [Ghanaians] celebrate. But they don't celebrate as in, “Yeah! He's dead.” They celebrate as in, “His soul has reached a higher place.” And so they do these drumming and so...

Juliet: Okay. What have you learned about the Ghanaian culture?

Obi: Uh... That, like... They do, like, sacrifices and when someone dies, like, they have a party and, like, and some cry also.

Juliet: Because it's sad too? [Leading question: This was my mistake.]

Obi: Yeah.

Bob, an 11-year-old in grade six who described himself as Canadian, British, and Indian, observed the sense of community within the traditions surrounding death. He noticed that the

celebration of life and the mourning for death happen as a community, rather than as a small family unit, with all members of the community supporting the family experiencing the loss. At 12, Bob was very thoughtful and perceptive. His trip to India three years before gave him a unique cultural perspective. Obi's comments in the previous section indicated that he was deeply influenced by stereotypes and generalizations, yet the comment above indicated that he was becoming aware of specific practices within the Ewe culture in the village of Dagbamete and the surrounding communities.

Kelsey had a unique perspective on sacrifice; she related it to concepts in Western culture that did not make sense to her. She was an extremely perceptive and mature 13-year-old—a self-described Jewish Canadian with Polish and Romanian heritage—who had spent much time reflecting on her experiences in Sankofa.

Kelsey: We watched that video, from Kathy, whatever her name was [Armstrong, 2002] and the Ghanaian travel thing and, um, I learned about culture and stuff and how their culture is really different than our culture. Like when we were watching the thing, there was that, um, scene with the sacrifice...

Juliet: Mm-hm.

Kelsey: And all the other... All the kids in it [the video] were like "Oh, that's so bad. How could they do it?" And then there was one girl who said, you've got to respect it, 'cause it's one of the places that they still do it. Like one of the girls said that and I agree with her, like... They sacrifice animals. In America, we send people to go die in a war.

At 13, she respected and honoured differences between cultures as she moved towards understanding. Whereas the younger students began to be cognizant of the traditions in other cultures, Kelsey strove to become aware of the meanings behind those traditions, moving towards the cultural understanding that Campbell (1994) identified as a goal of multicultural music education. If cultural awareness and respect are the first two steps to the disruption of stereotyping and generalizing, some of the students in Sankofa, at least, were clearly well on their way as they grappled with the concept of death and sacrifice in the Ewe culture.



To further her earlier comments regarding sacrifice, Kelsey also offered insightful comments about the differences in drumming between peoples, expressing a desire to distinguish between Ghanaian musics geographically. No other students referenced this concept.

Juliet: Has doing this music changed any beliefs you might have had about the Ghanaian people or culture, before you started doing this?

Kelsey: Yeah, I always thought that, um, in Africa, everyone drummed the same. Like all people had the same like pattern of drumming, but now I know that there's difference and even though they're kind of the same for each thing, like, like Bobobo was from another like tribe and they came here and they changed it and they made it their own [I actually think she was referring to Gahu, which originated in Nigeria before it came to Ghana]. I know that like each thing has a specific one. I guess that if you learned all of them, you could probably figure out which one was which, if you just listen and you find the similarities and the differences and all that.

Kelsey was keen to enhance her knowledge of Ghanaian culture. Watching *Footsteps to Ghana* (Armstrong, 2002) greatly excited her and she was clearly moving towards a deep cultural understanding.

### **Disrupting Media Stereotypes**

As previously noted, the media plays a significant role in stereotyping people in Africa. Dismantling images perpetuated by the media is a way of disrupting the construction of the Other. Betty's comments speak to the heart of this type of disruption:

Juliet: Has performing this kind of music changed any beliefs you might have had about Ghanaian people or the culture there? Like, think about what you thought of before and what you think now.

Betty: Well, I was not really that, like, into the world or knowledgeable about it and I just figured like, there's this more information about all these bad things going on, than the good things, so I guess it changed my thinking like that... Like not everyone's starving or dying. Like they can actually do stuff. They're smart and they have this way of communicating that we... That I haven't seen before, so...

Betty, who self-identified as a Jewish Canadian of Russian and Armenian descent, realized that the images she had seen were far from the whole truth. It was a revelation to her that

there was more to life in Africa than what she had seen, and she commented on Ghanaians being able to find happiness in a life where she felt that grief is more prevalent than it is in Canada. At 13, she was also now cognizant of the fact that the media tends to report negative issues more than positive ones, and she was conscious of the way she had formed stereotypes about Africa based on what she had seen.

### **Toward an Ethical World Music Ensemble**

The comments from Bob, Obi, Kelsey, and Betty indicated their disruption of stereotypical images of Africa, as well as their preliminary efforts to understand Ghanaian culture as prompted by participation in the world music ensemble. However, the overwhelming amount of data showed a maintenance of stereotypes and staunch ideas of difference, and—perhaps more startlingly—sameness. So, as music educators or directors of world music ensembles, what do we have to do to foster the kinds of disruption to stereotypes that might lead to more ethical world music ensembles? How do we perform music from around the world without exotifying, commodifying, or encouraging colourblindness in our celebration of diversity?

Within my teaching practice, I regularly spoke of Ghana, played recordings, and discussed colonialism and my own positionality as a white, Western woman and student of Ghanaian music. In the year prior to the study, all of the students except Sarah worked with master drummer, Kwasi Dunyo, and during the year of the study, all of the students saw Armstrong's (2002) documentary, *Footsteps to Ghana*. Yet the data indicated that something was missing. Reflecting back now, four years into a PhD, I wonder if being more explicit about the way colourblindness functions, as well as critiquing the discourse of multiculturalism and the mindless celebration of diversity with the students might have led to different responses from the

students. While I was teaching, I worked to explore coded language with students, particularly in relation to the racialization of certain words. We also looked at textbooks critically in the younger grades where textbooks were available. This work always provoked interesting discussions. Engaging in critical race theory in this manner with the students in the classroom would surely be a powerful way to disrupt preconceived notions of the Other.

The other crucial factor to this discussion is that of material relations. In order to be ethical in leading a world music ensemble, I believe we have a responsibility to both represent musics ethically and work toward changing material relations that maintain the hierarchy of civilizations. Again, doing so leads to critical discussion within the ensemble. In order to be ethical, ethics must be at the centre of the discussion. Despite my initial intent with the ensemble, the data indicated that I fell short with my work, which is not to say the ensemble was not valuable in other ways. Data from the larger study indicated that students gained a great deal of confidence from their ensemble participation; the ensemble fostered a sense of community between academic streams and across grade levels. However, it is clear from the data that in order to provoke the kind of political awareness I sought, I needed to address politics explicitly.

### **The World Music Ensemble: Caveats and Possibilities**

I end this paper with a reflection on Vaugeois' (2009) discussion of music education as a practice of social justice:

Projects that are conceptualized and structured as reaching down in order to lift someone up affirm racist assumptions about whose music is good or superior, and who is generous while neglecting the political conditions that produce unequal access to the means of survival. (p. 13)

The issue in this study is slightly different, as music deemed Other is not necessarily designated “inferior.” However, the sense of generosity implicit in multicultural education begs some discussion. Elsewhere (Hess, 2013), I critiqued the way that performing “world music” allows musicians to construct themselves as “tolerant” subjects—people willing to explore and

experience the Other—albeit within the limits of Alibhai-Brown's (2000) three "s" model: saris, samosas, and steel drums. The importance of bringing ensemble participation beyond that of "performing tolerance" is paramount in disrupting dominant power relations.

If, as Vaugeois (2009) suggested, we neglect "the political conditions that produce unequal access to the means of survival" (p. 13) when we explore the music of the Other, we miss an opportunity to affect change through music. In September 2009, amid much debate and controversy, an Afrocentric school opened in Toronto. The school emphasized teaching students to critique the world they see around them, beginning at a very young age. Reflecting back on the world music ensemble, performing musics from around the world provided a unique possibility for discussion and critique. What would the world be like if music educators used music to teach students to trouble the world around them and directly challenge the political conditions that produce unequal access to the means of survival?

Placing power and material relations at the centre of the discussion and grounding said discussion within a context—a sociohistorical context that includes the interrogation, acknowledgment, and problematization of (on-going) colonialism—allows music educators to push for social and material change through music. Educators must not deliver multicultural a curriculum in the form of "pre-packaged materials" (Wasiak, 2009, p. 213) in a "corporate-managed United-Colors-of-Bennetton pluralism" (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 47) that produces nothing but superficial cultural consciousness. While Sankofa is a pseudonym, the real name of the ensemble means "to understand" in the Ewe language. If the goal of a world music ensemble, in addition to making music, is cultural understanding and political awareness, that name becomes increasingly appropriate over time.

Beyond simply understanding the context of the music studied, students need to comprehend the structural relations that produce inequity in order to move towards social change. Perhaps the real place for critical theory is elementary school. Issues that emerged in the discussion of the interview data throughout this article pointed to incidences of colourblindness as well as discussions of sameness and difference—matters thoroughly examined in critical theory. By the end of elementary school, if students understand the systemic issues that affect their lives, they are empowered to potentially become agents in their education and towards change. An introduction to such critical theory is particularly useful in schools dogged by such labels as performance plus. Designating a school population as at-risk is nebulous at best, and encouraging students to come to terms with the power relations that create such designations helps them move toward potential mindful subversion. When equity discussions begin in the music classroom, the result may indeed be powerful.

My initial goal for the Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble was political awareness and the disruption of stereotypes. This study reveals that, in many ways, students became more politically aware through their participation in Sankofa. However, the stage after becoming politically aware is becoming politicized. The world music ensemble is a potential stepping-stone to activism in equity issues. Fighting for equity can begin with music, and the implications here for music education are significant. After all, if we give it the chance, music just might change the world.

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