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The Shape of Musicology to Come: A Case Study of Institutional Gatekeeping Through Graduate Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

I originally wrote this essay as part of my master's comprehensive exam—a supposedly comprehensive assessment of musicological knowledge. Yet the exam's repertoire exposed a fundamental contradiction: while my department marketed itself as a progressive center for multidisciplinary approaches to musicological research, the exam materials overwhelmingly privileged white, Western European composers and the traditional Western art music canon. This disconnect between curricular progressivism and canonical traditionalism reveals how standardized assessments function as tools of institutional racism, maintaining Eurological hegemony through the strategic deployment of ascribed cultural capital—the forms of knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies educational institutions legitimize as valuable commodities (Drott 2012; Almeida 2015).

The exam required students to produce two analytical essays within one week, drawing from materials that faculty had selected and distributed three months prior. These materials comprised 47 musical works spanning over 600 years and 12 scholarly readings, which faculty explicitly positioned as essential knowledge for professional credentialing and future academic positions. The first essay addressed musical and historical time, while the second examined music

and race/ethnicity, with both requiring students to synthesize repertoire mastery with theoretical frameworks from the assigned readings.

The numbers tell a damning story.[1] Of the 47 works, 80.9% were composed by white artists, with Western art music dominating at 63.8%. Black composers accounted for a mere 12.8%, Latin American and Hispanic musicians 4.3%, and Indigenous musicians an insulting 2.1%. Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander artists were completely absent. Female composers represented just 21.3% of the total, with women of color comprising only 6.4%. This isn't merely underrepresentation—it's systematic exclusion masquerading as academic rigor.

As a jazz guitarist and bassist who entered the program with only jazz theory background, I felt profoundly unprepared for an exam that demanded mastery of Western art music and classical theory. Several months before the exam, I raised concerns about the lack of multicultural and non-Western canonical representation to the exam's architect. My concerns were dismissed as "personal interest preferences" rather than acknowledged as the systemic bias I was identifying. This dismissal ultimately motivated my decision to use the second essay as a vehicle to critique both the exam and the larger musicological discipline's adherence to white European musical epistemologies. Despite months of supplemental preparation sessions with my cohort and the exam's architect, I still had to teach myself counterpoint on the fly during the exam just to complete the first essay. This experience crystallized my understanding of the exam as a microcosm of musicology's larger systemic issues with retaining students and faculty of color (Brown 2020).

My critique employs George Lewis' Eurological-Afrological framework (2002[1996]), Josh Kun's concepts of audiotopias and emancipatory performance (2005), Nina Eidsheim's concept of timbral discrimination (2019), George Lipsitz's concept of possessive investments in whiteness (2018[1998]), and and Shana Almeida's race-based epistemology (2015) to situate my analysis within racial and ethnicity-informed discourses. Through comparative analysis of works included and excluded from the exam, I demonstrate how these curatorial choices perpetuate racial privilege through seemingly neutral academic practices, sending an unmistakable message to students from historically marginalized backgrounds: your musical traditions aren't valuable enough to be classified as essential knowledge.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EXCLUSION

Understanding this institutional racism requires examining musicology's historical formation. As Matthew Morrison highlights in his 2019 critique of the "specific practices of exclusion embedded within musicology" regarding race, racialized peoples, and race relations, the development of musicological study in 19th-century Europe occurred when anti-Semitic, primitivist, race-based nationalistic, and xenophobic ideologies shaped and defined European and American societies (Morrison 2019, 782).

[1] Use link to view the comprehensive visual representation of the repertoire analysis: https://claude.ai/public/artifacts/916ea95d-8217-4672-88ca-25e2fd57d13a

Hegel's theory of evolutionary-based systematization dominated 19th-century German philosophical, sociocultural, and political ideologies during the Prussian Reform Movement, resulting in the rebirth of formalized musicological study in German universities (Moricz 2008; Bader 2018, 40). This confluence of events resulted in the view that eurocentric music traditions were more evolved and complex than other music traditions (Bader 2018). Consequently, these biases were preserved within American musicology when prominent Jewish German musicologists, like Theodor Adorno (Adorno 1962), established the discipline in American universities in the 1930s after emigrating to the United States to escape persecution from the Nazi Party (Bader 2018).

These ideologies manifest today through repertoire selection. The exam's established Western canon comprises 40.4% of works, while counter-canonical interventions represent only 12.8%. This distribution preserves Eurological frameworks as definitional knowledge while positioning Afrological, Latin American, and Indigenous works as supplementary corrections to an otherwise intact European canon. The need for race-based epistemological interventions like Lipsitz's possessive investments in whiteness and Kun's emancipatory performance becomes not merely useful but necessary for combating the eurocentric ideological dominance inherent within the discipline.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: REVEALING THE HIERARCHY OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

To illustrate how these patterns translate into pedagogical practice, I compare works included in my exam with those conspicuously absent, revealing how cultural capital operates to legitimize certain forms of musical innovation while erasing others.

Atonality and Innovation: Whose Experiments Matter?

My exam included Arnold Schoenberg's atonal song cycle, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, Op. 15 (1910),[2] while excluding Ornette Coleman's free jazz album, *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1961).[3] Both composers revolutionized their respective traditions through radical experimentation with atonality, yet only Schoenberg's innovations merited exam coverage.

Schoenberg's fifteen-part song cycle emerged during personal turmoil—his wife Mathilde had left him for painter Richard Gerstl in 1908. During her absence, Schoenberg discovered Stefan George's poems and began his composition. The resulting work channels anguish through

[2] Composed between 1908 and 1909, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* (*The Book of the Hanging Gardens*), Op. 15 is a fifteen-part song cycle set to poems of the same name by German symbolist poet Stefan George. The poems follow the failed love affair of two adolescent youths in a garden and end with the woman's departure, thus resulting in the disintegration of the garden.

[3] *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1961) is an instrumental album-length improvisation. It defied every convention of Jazz compositional practices and helped usher in the experimental avant-garde era of jazz, a catalyst for atonal harmonies and divergence for traditional harmonic progressions.

pervasive harmonic dissonances and abandonment of traditional melodic progressions—elements heavily associated with the expressionist movement's rejection of the perceived "formulaic rigidity" of conventional tonal systems. His broadened use of chromaticism and complete abandonment of tonal key centers represented both an extension of late Romantic style and a fundamental severance from traditional tonality.

Similarly, Coleman's 37-minute continuous improvisation—recorded in a single take on December 21, 1960—obliterated jazz conventions. His "double quartet"[4] configuration created a new form of organized sound through dense polyrhythmic foundations layered with sporadic freeform melodic commentary. Coleman's desertion of harmonic and chord progressions broke all compositional standards inherent within jazz music, creating a monumental rift between traditional and experimental jazz scenes. Free jazz, which derives its name from Coleman's album, emerged as a nascent movement challenging everything jazz had been.

Both works function as what Kun defines as audiotopias—musical spaces "within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world" (Kun 2005, 22-23). Yet the exam's inclusion of Schoenberg and exclusion of Coleman reveals how institutional cultural capital privileges European experimentation while marginalizing Black innovation (Almeida 2015; Ewell 2020). This selective canonization demonstrates that revolutionary musical thinking only "counts" when emerging from Eurological frameworks, not through Black improvisational practices.

Protest as Performance: Selective Recognition of Political Art

Similarly, the exam included Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer – [Mother of God, Drive Putin Away]" (2012)[5] while excluding Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" (1964),[6] despite both works employing performance spaces as sites of political resistance. This selective inclusion reveals how my exam validated certain forms of protest while erasing others.

Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" erupted from racial terror—her visceral response to Medgar Evers' murder and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four young Black

[4] Coleman used this term to describe two self-contained jazz quartets, each comprised of two wind instruments and a rhythm section consisting of bass and drums with each quartet heard in different channels: Coleman's regular quartet is heard through the left channel while the other quartet is heard in the right.

[5] Pussy Riot is a Moscow-based feminist punk group known for its provocative punk rock music style and thematic lyrics addressing issues such as feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and opposition to the Putin administration. As a result, their public criticism and gorilla performance tactics have led to the detention and incarceration of several group members. Most notably, their performance of "Punk Prayer – [Mother of God, Drive Putin Away]," in Moscow's Eastern Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior, resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of three group members.

[6] Originally recorded by Nina Simone (1933-2003) for Colpix Record's 1963 album, *Nina Simone Live at Carnegie Hall* (1963), "Mississippi Goddam" was released in 1964 as a single and was later included on her 1964 album, *Nina Simone in Concert* for Philips Records. The song was Simone's response to the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers, and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama that killed four young black girls and left a fifth partially blind. It's considered by music scholars, and by Simone herself, to be her first of many civil rights songs. As a result of its explicit critique of segregation and the Jim Crow south, several southern states boycotted it upon its release.

girls. The song abandoned coded language, deploying confrontational lyrics that resulted in southern states boycotting it upon release. What makes Simone's performance particularly subversive is her choice to debut this incendiary work at Carnegie Hall. Carnegie Hall, alongside the Metropolitan Opera House, stands as a cultural symbol of American Western art music. To unleash "Mississippi Goddam" in that rarefied space was akin to defiantly flipping the metaphorical bird to Eurological hegemony—a multi-layered rejection and symbolic debasement representing a metaphorical embodiment of punk ideology through multidimensional resistance.

Pussy Riot's 2012 guerrilla performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior deployed remarkably similar strategies. The feminist punk group, known for provocative performances addressing feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and opposition to Putin's government, chose the Eastern Orthodox cathedral precisely for its symbolic weight. Their sub-minute performance before security intervention resulted in three members' arrest and imprisonment.

Analyzing both performances through Lewis' Eurological-Afrological dichotomy reveals divergent interpretations. The Eurological perspective reads these venue choices as purposeful discursive acts meant to subvert possessive investments in whiteness through spatial transgression. The Afrological perspective views these choices as improvisational performances reclaiming agency, decentering whiteness as compositional motivation. Yet only Pussy Riot's protest merited inclusion, suggesting that political resistance gains legitimacy primarily when performed by white artists challenging authoritarian governments rather than Black artists confronting racial oppression.

This exclusion operates through what Eidsheim designates as timbral discrimination—"the ways in which the systematic adoption of race into worlds of sound and vocality ascribes a 'white voice' 'a black voice' and so on in order to reproduce and institute a hierarchical sonic framework" (Eidsheim 2019). Simone's voice, racialized as Black, becomes inadmissible evidence in the academic court of musical significance.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS: HOW EXAMS FUNCTIONS AS GATEKEEPING

My exam experience revealed how these curatorial choices extend beyond individual bias to systematic institutional practices maintaining racial hierarchies. The statistical evidence demonstrates multiple interconnected strategies of exclusion. First, temporal segregation compounds marginalization. All Black, Latin American, and Indigenous works were concentrated in the post-1960 period, erasing earlier historical contributions. This temporal ghettoization reinforces the notion that "music history" fundamentally means European music history, with other traditions appearing only as modern additions.

Second, genre distribution correlates directly with racial demographics, privileging compositional categories historically accessible to white European men. Jazz, despite its profound influence on twentieth-century music, represented a mere 2.1% of the repertoire—a single work among 47. Blues, gospel, early jazz, and bebop were entirely absent. Third, the complete absence

of certain traditions—no Asian or Pacific Islander representation, no African or Caribbean works—sends an unmistakable message about whose knowledge matters. These absences function as present negations, actively defining the boundaries of legitimate musicological study through exclusion.

These patterns create multiple barriers for students from marginalized backgrounds. The exam requires mastery of cultural capital—European musical forms, analytical methodologies, and aesthetic frameworks—that systematically excludes their own musical traditions. Students must demonstrate fluency in a foreign musical language while their native tongues remain unrecognized. My personal experience of having to teach myself classical theory during the exam week exemplifies this burden placed disproportionately on students from non-Western musical backgrounds.

This correlates directly with musicology's documented challenges retaining students and faculty from diverse backgrounds (Brown 2020). When exams systematically devalue the musical traditions of marginalized communities, they create hostile academic environments communicating that cultural knowledge from these communities lacks scholarly merit. My exam experience suggests this functions as a microcosm of larger systemic issues within the discipline.

MOVING FORWARD: BEYOND TOKENISTIC INCLUSION

Given the numerous innovative compositional achievements of artists like Coleman and Simone, why does my exam—and by extension, musicology—ascribe higher cultural capital to Schoenberg and Pussy Riot? The answer lies not in musical merit but in the perpetuation of institutional racism through academic gatekeeping. The statistical evidence from my exam reveals that current diversification efforts amount to tokenism rather than transformation.[7] With 80.9% white composers and 63.8% Western art music, the exam maintains European hegemony while offering minimal representation to create an illusion of inclusivity. Counter-canonical works (12.8%) function as exceptions that prove the rule rather than challenges to it.

To use Morrison's phrasing, achieving justice and equity "extends beyond creating a 'melting pot' or 'multicultural' approach within music studies to one that includes diverse methodologies, topics, and the collective efforts of both majority (white) and structurally marginalized groups" (Morrison 2019, 782). True decolonization requires more than adding diverse voices to existing frameworks—it demands dismantling the frameworks themselves.

CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR RADICAL RESTRUCTURING

My experience highlights how institutional resistance operates by reducing structural problems to individual preferences. When I raised concerns about systemic bias, they were dismissed as "personal interest preferences" rather than legitimate critique while I struggled through an exam

[7] https://claude.ai/public/artifacts/916ea95d-8217-4672-88ca-25e2fd57d13a

that presumed Western musical traditions as universal knowledge, demonstrating how assessments function as exclusionary gatekeeping mechanisms. This, paired with the overwhelming presence of white composers and the complete absence of Asian, Pacific Islander, African, and Caribbean traditions, reveals how institutional exams function as mechanisms that actively maintain racial hierarchies rather than assess comprehensive knowledge.

These practices directly correlate with musicology's documented challenges retaining diverse students and faculty (Morrison 2012; Brown 2020). When exams systematically devalue marginalized musical traditions, they create hostile environments signaling that certain cultural knowledge lacks scholarly merit, perpetuating the exclusion the discipline claims to address through progressive theoretical discourse (Almeida 2015).

Therefore, I challenge musicology departments to fundamentally reconsider their exam material selection processes. These patterns demand fundamental reform in examination design. Departments must move beyond allowing predominantly white faculty to exclusively determine canonical requirements and instead incorporate student perspectives—particularly from underrepresented backgrounds and communities. They represent both the discipline's demographic future and strategies for addressing cultural capital imbalances affecting marginalized musical traditions.

As the next generation of musicologists, our perspectives must inform every aspect of academic development, not just course curricula while exams perpetuate colonial structures. Repertoire diversification alone cannot achieve this transformation. Meaningful transformation requires interrogating canonization itself: the criteria determining inclusion, our analytical methodologies, and the epistemological frameworks defining legitimate musicological knowledge. The future of musicology depends on confronting uncomfortable truths and dismantling institutional mechanisms maintaining them. Recognizing examinations as instruments of racial exclusion rather than neutral assessments marks the essential first step toward creating a musicology that genuinely reflects global musical traditions. Only through comprehensive structural reform can we as a discipline move beyond tokenistic inclusion (Shehan et al. 2014) toward genuine transformation and the inclusive field it claims to be.

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