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## **Electronic Article**

### **Theory as a Second Story: Extending a Tale**

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## Theory as a Second Story: Extending a Tale

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Wayne Bowman (2006) asks us to consider what difference narrative will make. And that depends, he believes, on what we ask of narrative. What do we ask, then, of a narrative such as Parker's? What have we come to expect of narratives regarding music practices in urban contexts? Are expectations dependent upon mediation, and if so, what do we bring to the text as ACT readers? What can we expect of voice, and whose ought to be prominent? And, as we consider education and urban contexts: can the use of narrative "change our understanding, beliefs, and ultimately our actions as music educators" (6) and how will it do so? Is the power of story such that simply in its telling we are transfigured?

My hope is that stories such as Parker's may indeed challenge our own understandings of institutional power, contradictory relations, hierarchical positionings, and situated environments. Certainly, one need not look further than the decades of articles in music journals, the discourse of principals, policy makers, parents, music teachers and movie directors, for stories that pull at our heart strings—think Mr. Holland's Opus, for instance. Clearly, then, "there is nothing inherently emancipatory about narrative." In fact, narrative "may, and often does, legitimize existing power relations, existing discourses, existing patterns of privilege and possibility" (Bowman 2006, 12). How then is the narrative of this particular urban context—offering a reading of music in the lives of children that counters so much general assumption—any different from narratives that legitimizes the use of choral programs for the betterment of children?

Narrative often leads us to the heart of action and ideals.<sup>1</sup> For those of us in search of varied meanings, storied accounts can lead toward a telling of events that, in their unfolding, present ethical encounters with and for resistance; thereby giving accounts of "processes of rupture" (11) and reinforcing how significant they may be. The wake of said stories present us with how music practices and pedagogies in urban contexts need more than the dualism between healing tales or accounts of horror—they need narratives of rupture.

Parker shares with us descriptions of positionality, ownership, mission and hidden agendas. The story is placed in a particular setting and is a tale of self-reflection, frustration, anger, of guilt and culpability. As a vehicle for making sense of a reality that continues long after dislodged, *The Agency* narrative offers a vehicle for making sense of one particular reality, while also creating the entry point for a research process to represent it. As an overflow of this narrative—and not as a response or a corrective—my entering then moves in and through, multiplying the possibilities of this inquiry.

Our texts then act both as inquiry in the form of a narrative description, as well as texts through which multiple lenses can be threaded. A similar complexity of text is seen in what is often named ‘urban musics’—those framed by racialized and economically segregated subjects. It also appears in the multitude of dispositions toward the ultimate resistant body, that of the ‘urban student’. These narratives approximate the challenges of music and teaching to the ethical dilemmas that are present in any educational circumstance. In doing so, our texts attempt to remind us that ‘urban’ is a political qualifier, which charges us to enter not ‘a world apart’ but rather our own internal commitments.

As I “thread” my way in and out (Kincheloe & Berry 2004) and think through the multiple possibilities of Parker’s text, a series of questions appear. At center is not simply my own interpretation—there are multiple ways to thread in and out of any text—but rather a way to highlight the manner in which ‘urban narratives’ in music education need to be made more diverse. At hand is the reminder that the richness of ‘urban narratives’ deserves more than the historical oblivion we have experienced; they require constant and nascent investigation. As such, my own particular point of entry suggests a multiplication of how to think through issues of otherness, lack, deficit, privilege, and care.

Thus, I grapple with the pragmatics of Bowman's question: what do we ask of narrative and consequently, what do we ask of urban music narratives? In doing so, I follow Kincheloe and Berry (2004), believing that the kind of “feedback looping” involved in a “point of entry” treatment of a text, functions to “expose locations of power, challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and de-center positions of authority” (129). Consequently, what follows is not the exact mirroring of narratives, but rather a representation of one other thinking and another set of entry points. It is an exercise in how we may continuously add to questions and thoughts to issues already raised. Focusing not on what ideas *ought* to be—and consequently are *not* to be—thought in urban music education.

### **Multiplying the Text: Ethics, Agency and *The Agency***

The mission of *the agency* provides an immediate point of entry. Mission statements function on multiple levels: they articulate the goals of an organization, provide the framework for their stated operation, and most often articulate for whom the organization exists.

Consequently, mission statements often function as slogans and as slogans are "emotive...and systematically ambiguous" (Popkewitz 1980, 304). Yet unlike slogans, mission statements also operate as policy statements. And policy statements, as Groys (2009) reminds us, are only significant if they can be "measured in terms of its value in the marketplace" (ix). Measurement, in this connotation, implies exchange. And the specter of exchange—what is exchanged and for what—is at the heart of Parker's narrative.

Two forms of exchange are particularly prevalent in this story. The first sets geography against assumptions of race and class. And the second highlights education in music against ownership. As Parker presents it, the larger mission of this particular agency is to "provide the necessary support and opportunities for children from mostly low-income families." Within the choir itself there appears to be a mixture of cultures that cross class and racial lines. Within that mixture, however, there are narratives that suggest a coded interpretation of urban, and assumptions that are at once deficit based and potentially destructive. This particular construct of urban plays out in two ways that immediately come to my attention. Firstly, it is assumed that the agency is urban, for it is geographically situated in a large city. However, in this context of geographically urban situatedness, Parker recognizes that, as with many urban environs, there are sections of the city many would loath to speak of as urban when defined by assumptions of lack, need, or "underprivilege". To use the example of the city in which I have lived for the last 20 some years: Greenwich Village may be located on the same island as Washington Heights and Central Harlem but in the coded language of race, Greenwich Village is not urban—unless of course, one chooses to play the reverse cultural capital card. Indeed, this is raised as Parker writes of students being confronted with assumptions about their "financial resources" simply because they are members of the choir. Secondly, while there may be no clear sense of the racial or ethnic representation in the choir, what constitutes class division lines is quite clear. The agency owns the production of labor and both students and Parker are commodities.

Marx (1977) suggests there is little that is inherently problematic in the notion of commodity. Indeed, one could argue that the musicing the children are doing with Parker

satisfies a very human need for self-expression. This story shows us, however, how easily the envisioned pedagogy of the teacher and the willing involvement of the children can be exchanged for something that separates both children and Parker from the musicing process. It seems clear that the showcase choir, housed in an agency whose mission is to support the education, growth, community, and musicing of students from low-income families, is being exchanged for recognition. Such an arrangement places the public as the conferring authority, the legitimizing force that confirms that something of value is being done for *these* children and thus, for *society*.

As workers, the children's job is to show up, behave, and sing well. If they should lose interest or not find satisfaction in how the choir is run, this has little effect on the organization. The children can, quite literally, be exchanged for other children. Parker's exchange-value, on the other hand, hinges on her consent to not only shepherd the children through the concerts and repertoire but to consent to the use of herself, and thus the children, as a donation generating "publicity vehicle." On one hand the choir is being exchanged for monetary support, which quite possibly brings a sense of self-satisfaction, and yet works against a commitment that reaches beyond writing a check. And on the other hand, an agency whose mission is founded on support seems to be using the choir to "[save] children from their communities rather than working with communities toward excellence" (Delpit 1992, 238).

Interrogating those systems that fuel the commonsense practice of using any musical ensemble as a publicity device that legitimates and makes ownership of a group possible is essential. Interrogation, then, starts with the placing of a story, and continues with alternative readings, which expand, challenge and strengthen an initial stance. Practices of continued interrogation remain nevertheless scarce in urban music education. It is thus inviting to extend Parker's initial questions by asking: Do agencies, similar or not to this one, use these kinds of ensembles to project a fictional societal order over a perceived urban disorder? In what ways does the use of the choir ensure a circle of dependency that furthers the continuation of similar non-for-profit arts organizations, or an adulthood that guarantees the continuation of modes of production that accentuate class divisions?

These questions bring us back to Popkewitz (1980) who asks us to consider that:

The potency of a slogan is that it can create the illusion that an institution is responding to its constituency, whereas the needs and interest actually served are

other than those publicly expressed. The slogan my suggest reform while actually conserving existing practices. (304)

I wonder then what evidence exists that suggests that singing in the choir contributes to happy and healthy adults and what exactly constitutes a happy adult in the context of this agency and its mission? Certainly there must be the recognition that simply saying one would like to help children "become happy and healthy adults" doesn't necessarily make it so, nor is this goal sufficient for the education of children, urban or otherwise.

Not unlike the realities of many teachers, Parker is being asked to reject her ethical desires as she engages with students and musicing. As she repeatedly engages in behaviors in which she denies and even betrays the children and her own vision of musical engagement, her identity, the identity of the students, and their conception of musicing and happy adulthood is constructed through the patriarchal and coercive lens of the agency. Patriarchal narratives, that often permeate lives in education and are particularly present in urban milieus, both whisper and shout, "We'll take care of you, if you take care of us;" control is established by a hierarchy through which Parker consents to both overt and covert dictates. Fundamentally, she enters into a contract of adhesion that is both articulated and insinuated; a contract in which the agency holds the power over both Parker and the children. It not only appears that Parker's consent indicates that she has given up the rights to her ethical grounding, but that this consent also signals and substitutes the consent of the students. This double burden that many teachers face, is rarely aired or confronted. While this relationship isn't necessarily dictated by gender, one wonders whether the location of Parker's race, gender, and ethnicity place her at odds with the mission, both stated and lived. As such, a feminist read of this narrative could bring to surface yet another entry point and a set of complex understandings of the agency's relationship with and complicity to a society that continues to privilege certain persons above others.

### **The Exchange-Value of Urban Youth**

What then are the consequences of the organization's desire to sell the image of the choir? And what exactly is the agency selling? Berger (1972) reminds us that, "publicity has an important social function. The fact that this function has not been planned as a purpose by those who make and use publicity in no way lessens its significance." He argues forcibly that, "publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy" where

The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world. (149)

These words make clear that publicity is grounded in the future, rather than in immediate needs. The function and purpose of publicity is focused on presenting an image that is to be envied and desired. Consequently, what agencies such as these publicize and what that something might be are paradoxical. Just as Parker realized that the purpose of the choir had shifted, teachers are often confronted by how their institutions "broadcast [their] image...through children."

In his book *Deschooling Society*, Illich (1972) interrogates and dismantles the benevolence of institutions and suggests that,

Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions, which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools, and other agencies in question. (1)

Through this particular lens the agency hardly exists as a benevolent institution, rather it engenders an irrefutable voice of what creativity can be, what counts as music, and even more problematic, what "these" children can and should become. Such misguided, indeed racist and paternalistic "care" has been challenged by Delpit (1995) who points out that, "oppression can arise out of warmth, friendliness, and concern" (45). Clearly, the choir felt cared-for by Parker, as she grappled throughout her stay in the agency, balancing caring for the students and the dictates of the agency. But for the agency, caring for childhood does not lead toward happiness as the empowerment of a healthy and critical adult voice.

Postman (1982) has suggested that the construct and conception of childhood has essentially disappeared. Using examples of images of children as mini-adults that proliferate all media and the ways in which play is rarely spontaneous and almost always organized, he demonstrates how the distinction between childhood and adulthood is blurred and often deliberately obfuscated. This view helps us to consider how the choir is being used for the purity of the children's voices and thus the purity and air of innocence they present. What we experience, then, is "proof" of the agency's success: the purity of the voices of children has the power to transcend and lift these children from any despair, real, or otherwise.

Postman believes childhood should be sacred. Indeed, few of us would suggest that the wonders and creative possibilities of childhood should be used in exchange for anything that eradicates the sacredness of childhood—a sentiment that seems to be integral to the

stated mission of the agency. And yet, it is exactly the sacredness of childhood that is at stake with the goal of "broadcasting the image of the agency through the children." It is exactly the sacredness of a full, equitable, and promising childhood that is denied when we relegate the education to the casualty of social circumstances. Many teachers desire to work in opposition to the social trend of "adultification" (Postman 1982) and behave in ways that speak to the essence of being human in their ability to "deviate from the socially determined programme" (Groys 2009, 78). Unfortunately, it seems that rather than dismantling a system that systematically robs children of a childhood, a childhood that might indeed pave the way for children to "become happy and healthy adults," the agency exploited the children's choir and made use of a society unwilling to interrogate a world that is so often named for others in the name of justice. Does this agency function as a site of resistance or legitimizing institution for empowered status quo (Kincheloe & Berry 2004, 143)?

The agency for which Parker established this choir, all agencies such as this one, are political institutions that engage in political practices. Wolin (2004) reminds us that, "these institutionalized practices play a fundamental role in ordering and directing human behavior and in determining the character of events" (7). In this case, the character of events appears to be far-reaching in ways that Parker probably couldn't have predicted previous to this experience, but of which she now asks us to be wary. Far-reaching, in my own engagement with Parker's narrative, speaks to a capitalistic discourse for this not-for-profit agency that is mired in class positionings and assumptions. Far-reaching also suggests how musicing, repertoire, performance in urban contexts requires more than the historical oblivion that permeates and has constructed many of our assumptions and much of our actions.

This response is my own reckoning of Parker's narrative. To be sure there will be and are others, which brings us back around to Bowman's (2006) warning to "resist the notion that narratives are authentic and emancipatory" (11). Neither of these narratives is by themselves emancipatory, but each uncovers a series of questions worth pursuing.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Such as the ones developed and supported by the Mayday Group mission.

## About the Author

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