

## September, 2020

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### Bearing Witness

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A new academic year commences. Music faculty are rightfully proud of the work they have carried out to effect a safer Fall return. The task has been herculean in scope. The compassion, empathy, understanding, flexibility, and cooperation exhibited by music faculty this summer will be necessary as we continue in our efforts toward music school redesign. Not to draw too fine a point, but like the allegorical icon, Rosie the Riveter, we can do it.

We return to our classrooms, studios, and professional societies after a summer of hurricanes, flooding, coronavirus, erosion of civil rights, the further melting of West Antarctica, outbreaks of locusts, wildfires, the last of the stimulus checks, the intransigence of systemic racism, and the suspension of live music performance and F2F lessons. High points? The caring of millions, one for another and in so many ways, and during truly unprecedented times and - the drop of Beyoncé's new visual album.

I move to music's futures and to themes illuminated in *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin's ever prescient volume of meditations about race, published in 1963.<sup>[i]</sup> My inspiration is the first piece, the writer's ever-so-brief essay in the form of a letter to his nephew, the content of which is as apropos today as it was at the time of the book's publication. Baldwin offers loving words of advice to his nephew about the importance of self-acceptance in an often cruel world. His words challenged the worldview of sympathetic white people who, at that time, could not grasp the magnitude of racial injustice. I have recalled the letter at different points this summer as journalists have enumerated the names of young black men whose lives have been taken needlessly and without regard. Baldwin's essay continues to speak over space and time in the events that unfolded last month in Wisconsin and in recent years.

The link provided is the version used for common core teaching; I am partial to the artistic renderings of black men carrying the iconic signs that read, "I am a Man." For over a decade, I too, have carried an "I am a Man" key chain with its slogan dating to the late 1960s and the strike of sanitation workers in Memphis. As a scholar of gender and race in music, I embrace the statement not as a signifier on gender fluidity, but as an everyday reminder of the gap between the U.S. founders' espousal of our unalienable rights, and, to this day, the deferral of the same.

With this prelude, my stories are brief and speak to the exhausting effect racism and the events of this summer have had on our students and faculty of color in music, particularly in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. As we return to teaching and administration this fall, my hope is that we will keep this in mind as we facilitate class discussions, assign repertoire, teach large format classes on country music and the Texas two-step, publish articles on Schenkerian analysis and so on.

Experts advise that we not depend on students to bring their worries, exhaustion or anxieties about racial injustice forward to faculty office hours or to class discussion. This holds true, actually, whether students are politically liberal or conservative. In an article that appeared in the July 2020 *Chronicle*, Sarah Brown addresses the need for academia to address the very real mental health concerns of students of color throughout the racial injustice "crisis."<sup>[ii]</sup> Take-aways I gleaned from Brown's essay include: a) Make drop-in counseling services available to students in locations beyond the university counseling center. *Could a department or school of music dedicate an unused office for this purpose?* b) Counseling centers should hire therapists who are culturally diverse, c) Universities could offer anti-racist training for white students. A program benefit is that the training could empower white students to oppose racism on their own behalf rather than as "allies." [this is my own insertion].

Scholar and critical race theorist, William A. Smith, of the University of Utah, goes one step farther, suggesting that campuses be alert to indicators of [racial battle fatigue](#) exhibited by students as well as faculty.

I learned a lot too, a couple of weeks ago, while attending a University leadership event on my campus. One of the speakers was a representative from the Black Student Union. In moving terms, she spoke of how the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 was a wake-up call for her generation. Her words prompted me to reconsider the effect of trauma on different political generations. While my reference point for change leaders are members of the civil rights generation, the student representative had other role models and touchpoints for the galvanizing of her activism. In some ways, the 1960s civil rights movement functions as early music, meaning that it is the musical equivalent of —wait for it—the Beatles for many of today's generation of college students. Her words were especially important for those of my generation to hear.

As I have described to friends, the recent shooting in the back of Jacob Blake, seven times at the hands of police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, has prompted me to have flashbacks to the 2015 [death of Freddie Gray](#), a young black man from Baltimore, who died while in police custody.<sup>[iii]</sup> At the time, I served as the chair of the department of music at a university of 20,000, located six miles from the Baltimore city line.

Our department of music had programmed a faculty brass concert for the evening of April 25 and as department chair, I planned to attend as usual. Peaceful protests by the black community sprang up almost immediately after Mr. Gray's death and continued throughout that week. The entrance to the Camden Yards baseball stadium was closed off and other universities in the area cancelled their events for that evening. Against that backdrop, I felt that our faculty concert, too, should be rescheduled. The concert was scheduled for 7:30 p.m., and I began requesting permission to cancel the event around 5:00 p.m., with my urgency increasing with each request. The University was firm in asserting its refusal of the request, invoking a phrase dating to late 19<sup>th</sup> century circus culture, responding with "the show must go on."

The concert proceeded and went smoothly. I lived very near campus and by the time I arrived home after the concert, the surveillance helicopters were in flight, hovering overhead. The next day, quintet members related their experiences returning home from the restaurant where they had gone after the concert to celebrate. They had been met by waves of protesters and others marching toward them, and they had encountered cordoned off streets. A senior upper brass professor remarked that his travel home was scary. The next day, our interim provost wrote to all of the University's department chairs asking how we were, and I related the narrative I have shared here. At that moment, I vowed to file the university's handling of the matter in my permanent memory bank for recall if I ever assumed a position of greater responsibility. Now, I share it with you.

The University's decision exposed the gap between the institutional espousal of diversity and inclusion, and its actions, which ran contrary to the presupposition that inclusion matters. Moreover, excepting athletics, music and theatre were the most public-facing departments; one would think that the viewpoint of the department chair would have been taken into account. If the purpose of diversity is not to incorporate the thinking and knowledge of musicians and scholars of color, then why do we pretend to value it?

I knew then as I know now, that when civil unrest ensues, administrative leadership, parents, and concerned citizens, must consider ingress as well as egress. Anyone can get to a protest; my point is that you and your loved ones must get to return home. This is not news to the parents of [Heather Hyer](#), the paralegal and civil rights activist killed at the Charlottesville protest in 2017.<sup>[iv]</sup> My knowledge was borne of lived experience and was not attained through attendance of undergraduate courses in sociological theory. I was a young girl when Dr. MLK Jr. was assassinated and black neighborhoods across the country were cordoned off when the news of his death was received and riots ensued.

Last week, Dr. King's granddaughter, [Yolanda Renee King](#), age twelve, spoke at the 2020 National March on Washington.<sup>[v]</sup> She declared that it would be her generation to complete the work of her grandparents, Martin Luther King Jr., and Coretta Scott King. The thousands in attendance applauded. Black parents work hard to model that type of aspirational thinking for their children so that they will have the fortitude to go the distance, completing their generation's leg of the justice journey. As much as young people and our students address social justice issues on our campuses and in their communities, I believe it is incumbent on faculty and administrators to lead the effort.

You will pardon me here, but permission to rant: Doesn't it seem as though everyone now [loves Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)? The white-washed, milk toasted, ahistorical representation of King, denuded of his strong indictments and trenchant analyses that gave no quarter, renders him almost unrecognizable as a critical strategist. We should all be insulted by characterizations that perpetuate such willful mis-readings of history. At the time of his death, King was one of the most vilified leaders in the history of black political counter-culture. To lose sight of that nullifies the link between the philosophies he espoused and the "[I am A Man](#)" signs carried by peaceful protesters today. [end of rant]

This summer, I have listened appreciatively as commentators have described "the talk" that black and brown parents have with their children about race. When their young people are ready for more advanced discussions about race, assumptions, and police encounters, the parents or guardians initiate these conversations as well. These "sessions" are arguably some of the most significant co-curricular instruction black and brown young people will ever receive. Jemar Tisby's 2018 account published in the *Atlantic*, illuminates his thought process as he prepares to initiate conversations with his black son.<sup>[vi]</sup> I appreciate also that contrary to some discussions, Tisby's representation of "the talk" is gender inclusive.

I, too, have childhood memories of "the talk." As Tisby suggests, the latter was in fact, a series of age-appropriate conversations on various topics. In my case, the topics for the two-minute sessions ranged from 'why people are poor' and 'what can be done about it,' to 'what civil disobedience is,' and 'ways to respond to laws that are unjust.' I recall the instantiation of "the talk" that would conclude the series of chats my father had with me on these topics during my childhood. I was eleven (almost the age of Yolanda Renee King), when he turned to me in the car while driving and said in a calm and clear voice, "the state will kill you." I understood immediately that he referenced no imminent action toward me. Rather, he spoke of the state's capacity, through its laws and reinforcement processes, to limit the life chances of those who are black, brown, or poor. His utterance was designed to instill neither shock nor fear. Like Jemar Tisby, he was sharing the valuable lesson as one who "loved me unconditionally."

These days, I think nostalgically about the brass quintet concert given that so many live performances have been put on hold for the foreseeable future. But another story not unrelated to the topic of civil unrest is worth recounting here. One day, toward the end of the semester, one of our esteemed composers came to my office asking for help addressing a difficulty. At issue was that a black male student in his arranging class who had missed the final exam, was asking for an exception so that he could take the test at another time. The student, one of the best singers in the department, reported being stopped by the police on his way to campus. The experience, he said, was stress producing and threw off "his game." The professor said, "But Eileen, you know that students lie all of the time just so they can get out of doing work. You know I'm right. What should I do?" We had a brief but productive discussion. I asked our colleague to bear in mind the town in which we lived (Baltimore) and to consider the relationship of black people to the police (ambivalent, to say the least). I added that given the humiliation and possible fear instances such as this instills, it is not easy for students or faculty to report blackness under surveillance whether the context is driving, shopping, conducting the orchestra, or presenting at a music conference. The composer gave the student another opportunity to take the exam. I considered this a welcomed outcome, but the incident reminds us that our efforts to address musicians' health must also be sensitive to the experience of racial battle fatigue mentioned earlier, and to its collateral effects for our students and faculty of color.

This has been a challenging summer, even for those who are fortunate to have remained healthy, and/or live adjacent to small towns north of nowhere where nothing ever happens. My point is that there is something each of us can do this term to contribute to positive change in our conservatories and colleges of music. My hope is that in the great future, readers of James Baldwin will receive his highly acclaimed work as a remarkable time capsule from a period in history that no longer resonates with the lived experiences of blacks and other people of color. Years hence, the letter to his nephew will be appreciated as a chronicle, or guide to what was, rather than as a tour de force elixir that is still speaking to the masses that comprise the chorus.

That day is not today.

But “Ah,” says John Lewis. “Let us persist and get into trouble—good trouble”— now, even in music.

Dona nobis musica pacem et iustitia.

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## Endnotes

[i] Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. Originally published by The Dial Press, New York, 1963.

[ii] Brown, Sarah. “Students of color are not okay; here’s how colleges can support them.” Accessed August 30, 2020. July 6, 2020.

[iii] Baron, Justine. *The Appeal*. “The Death of Freddie Gray Five Years Later.” April 23, 2020. Accessed August 30, 2020.

[iv] Lavoie, Denise. “Man who drove into Charlottesville Protest, Killing Heather Heyer, Convicted of First-Degree murder.” *Nation*. Dec 7, 2018 5:35 PM EDT, Accessed on 8/30/20.

[v] Accessed August 30, 2020. “Martin Luther King Jr., Granddaughter Speaks at the March on Washington.” August 28, 2020.

[vi] Tisby, Jemar. “The Heavy Burden of Teaching My Son About American Racism” in *Atlantic*; March 20, 2018. Accessed August 30, 2020.