

# A PEDAGOGY FOR LIVING

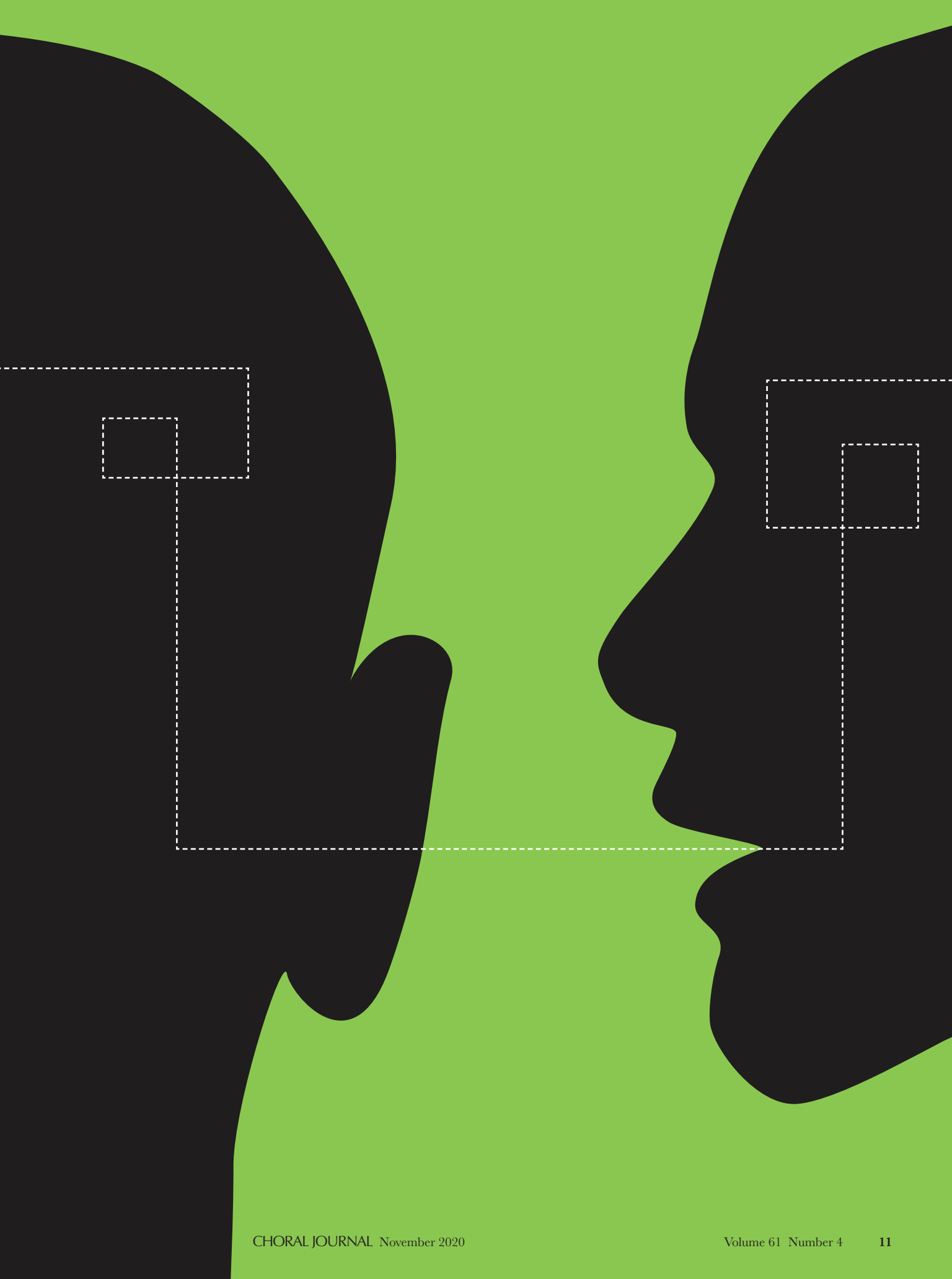
## APPLYING RESTORATIVE, ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGY IN THE CHORAL CLASSROOM

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“I don’t care what song they play. This is a multibillion-dollar entity. It should be about providing security from COVID-19 and economic security for underserved communities.”

—Nolan Rollins

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In an interview with NBC News, Nolan Rollins, chief executive of SMRT Mouth, a technology company in Los Angeles, challenged the performative nature of the National Football League's decision to present the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," during the opening week of the 2020-21 season. Encapsulated in this quote about football is a question that has begun to ring in my ears as I consider the role of music education in our post-George Floyd and (eventually) post-COVID-19 world.

As our society is in the midst of a social quantum leap, there is an abundance of strategies to help music education professionals become more sensitive and effective in selecting diverse repertoire. While there is a current renewed attention and energy regarding this subject, the consciousness about diverse repertoire choices has been present since the mid-1960s. In his article "Multicultural Music Education in the United States" for *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education*, Michael Mark states, "Prior to this time, it was the goal of schools to assimilate students to the predominant historical culture."<sup>1</sup>

The unique nature of this current wave of social justice interests lies not only in the active and public engagement of large numbers of White people. It is also apparent that many are doing private and personal work, evidence by the "clearing of the (virtual) shelves" of books such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* and Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, amongst others. Seeing large numbers of White people expressing a desire not to do better but to *be* better regarding race is a refreshing and welcomed evolution in our society. Nevertheless, it does not come without its own dangers.

Early on in DiAngelo's book, she states, "I believe that *white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color.*"<sup>2</sup> This is a shocking statement, because the common conception is that White conservatives hold this distinction. However, DiAngelo goes on to explain: "White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because we think we have arrived [...] and feel as though we already get it" and thereby stop the process of continuing to learn, which this process requires.

One of the challenges that White people face is reconciling that they are, in fact, White; and that reality of being White has implications regarding how one

navigates the world and how one perceives (or doesn't acknowledge the perception of) race. Coming to terms with this whiteness is a critical—and possibly alarming—part of becoming anti-racist. Because White people represent the societal norm, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum says: "Whites can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about race."<sup>3</sup> Yet, the impact and influence of White supremacy are so interwoven in the fabric of our nation that it is impossible to remain unaffected. It is incumbent upon every citizen to take inventory of their thoughts, feelings, and responses—not to uncover *if* you are impacted, but how. Put another way, writer Ijeoma Oluo says in the title of her article for *The Establishment*, "White People: I don't want you to understand me better, I want you to understand yourselves."

### Self-Interrogation as the First Step

Contemporary efforts in choral music education toward establishing equity through diversity and inclusion initiatives focus on highlighting the contributions of marginalized cultures to society at large and, specifically, the choral arts. It has become an accepted expectation that music educators infuse their programs with evidence of this work, to the extent that its absence could bring rebuke from both the choral community and even school administrators. Yet, if this interest in diverse and inclusive music has been on our collective radar since the 1960s, why are we still engaging in seemingly the same conversations regarding repertoire, composers, and appropriation? What is missing in the process that would render it as wheels spinning in the mud, resulting in a lack of progress that one would expect with such collective awareness of the issue?

Martin Luther King, Jr., stated of White racial education: "Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the White people of America believe they have so little to learn."<sup>4</sup> This quote speaks to the fact that in efforts toward civil rights, King observed that Whites had not taken direct and intentional steps toward educating themselves on systemic racism, and the role of Whiteness and the White race myth in main-

taining that system. The clear implication by the use of the word “reeducated” is that there is already a working education in place. What can be lost in the aforementioned quotation is that the reeducation to which Dr. King is referring does not solely include an understanding of the impact of White supremacy on Black people. There also is great impact levied upon the White people who grow up being socialized within this society.

When efforts are made, White people often expend significant energy listening to and learning from Black people about the Black experience living in a White supremacist society, but have not taken similar steps to interrogate their own experiences living in that same society. DiAngelo references data pointing to this reality:

Despite the claims of many white young adults that racism is in the past and that they were taught to see everyone as equal, research shows...that 41 percent of white millennials believe that government pays too much attention to minorities, and 48 percent believe that discrimination against whites is as big a problem as discrimination against people of color.”<sup>5</sup>

With nearly half of the millennial generation believing this about racism and discrimination, is it hard to understand the political divide when an elected official uses racist dog whistles? Is it any wonder that racist policies against Black and Brown people garner so much political support and are thought to “make sense”?

This lack of racial *self*-awareness has rendered many efforts toward diversity and inclusion to be somewhat performative in nature. It allows for a well-meaning choral arts teacher to attempt to engage in efforts toward representation on behalf of their Black students but never engage in what Dr. Bettina Love calls “Abolitionist Teaching,” which is “a way of life...a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice.”<sup>6</sup> What use is performing a set of music by Black composers if you are not aware of how you create a racially toxic environment in your ensemble that your Black students must navigate? There may likely be some appreciative nods given by the students and audience; however, genuine transformative pedagogy resonates from within the teacher, not just from outward performative acts. Self-in-

terrogation is so critical to restorative, anti-racist pedagogy because it allows for the interrogator to uncover how their own experiences, history, family upbringing, educational background, etc., have all been used in service of perpetuating White supremacy.

## **Anti-Racist Living Begets Anti-Racist Teaching**

Moving away from the framing of White supremacy or racist behavior as a description of actions exclusively by bad actors is critical to developing anti-racist ideology. As Ibram X. Kendi states, “One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an anti-racist.”<sup>7</sup> With this framing, restorative, anti-racist pedagogy is grounded in focusing on changing “policy instead of groups of people.” A focus in impacting the lives of students begins to include how you impact their lives outside of the choral classroom, even outside the realm of education. It will cause you to make connections and see where your private and professional lives converge in the classroom. For instance, if you teach in a school serving low-income Black students, how much good is singing spirituals if you support policies that would reduce their access to much-needed government assistance?

Racist policies such as standardized testing, property tax-based funding of public schools, and gerrymandering all serve to create the circumstances by which we come to view Black and Brown children as “under-achieving.” These policies need to be challenged during every school board, city council, and town hall meeting in our country. As Kendi states, there is no such thing as a “non-racist” policy. Policies are either racist or anti-racist. They either work directly toward racial equity, or they work toward racial inequity. Therefore, the absence of anti-racist thought in spaces such as school board meetings inevitably leads to racist thought being present.

## Anti-Racist Pedagogy

With these aspects in mind, what, then, is restorative, anti-racist pedagogy? It is two-fold. First, it is pedagogy that is grounded in deep self-interrogation of your role in upholding White supremacy and internalizations that come from being socialized in a racist society. It evaluates areas of racist thought that result in behaviors that cause students to have to navigate, suppress, and ignore moments or environments where racism is apparent. It is self-reflective research that leads to an understanding that the most direct path to equity in the classroom is through applying abolitionist principles to your living, but more specifically, teaching.

Next, it is a pedagogy that is undergirded by efforts outside of the classroom that focus on anti-racist engagement. It is grounded in action taken toward challenging the racist ideas that lead to racist policy, and the racist policy that leads to racist ideas. It is voting for and supporting expressly anti-racist policy and practices in the school building and district.

With this framing, it becomes clear that restorative, anti-racist pedagogy has little to do with what music is selected on our concerts, and has nothing to do with the race of the choral director. This pedagogy can and should be applied by directors of every race. Furthermore, it is clear that it exists as much outside of our classroom as it does inside. This is not to suggest that representation does not matter or is not impactful. It is to suggest, rather, that such decisions are low-hanging fruit, and without other anti-racist action they amount to being performative in nature. If we, as choral teachers, are to institute a restorative, anti-racist pedagogy, then it is critical that we are present at school board meetings and engaged during school faculty meetings. We should continuously be aware of how policies and decisions are moving toward racial equity or inequity. Who better to offer our students holistic advocacy than music teachers who often teach students for multiple years?

It is paramount to understand that this pedagogy is one of manifestation and engagement, not just logistics or curriculum. As Nolan Rollins questioned, “What good is singing a song if we are supporting the systemic and environmental issues that oppress our Black students?” If a choral teacher has engaged in self-interrogation of how white supremacy has

impacted them and actively presents anti-racist ideas to change racist policies in their school building or district, then what will manifest is an atmosphere in the classroom that gives their efforts toward representation a firm footing on which to stand. One cannot merely use the language of inclusion in the classroom and create this type of environment. Genuine inclusion considers more than just how we impact our students through music but also how we impact their lives with our own. **C**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Michael L. Mark, “Multicultural Music Education in the United States.” *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education*. 19, No. 3 (May 1998): 177-186.
- <sup>2</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why it's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 186.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 47.
- <sup>6</sup> Bettina L. Love, *We Want To Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and The Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 89.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be An Anti-Racist* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 9.