

EDITORIAL

## “Reflection and Accountability: Towards Acknowledging and Dismantling Oppressive Structures”

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Published: 1 November 2020

*As a young child, I had a recurring nightmare that always progressed in a relentless loop. There was a narrator, who calmly and impassively explained how one character fought with and destroyed a second, who then came back to life to extinguish the first, who in turn inexplicably revived and destroyed the second again. The cycle repeated in maddening meaninglessness and paradoxical simplicity. Why did they keep trying to destroy each other, I wondered? When would the absurd cycle end? Why did they never learn from their folly?*

My first fully formed memories are from my life as a very young U.S. expatriate living in Saudi Arabia. My family lived in a cinder block walled compound, in effect cordoning us off from the local Saudi communities. But within the confines of those walls existed a rich conflux of cultures, my friends and those of my family heralding from Lebanon, India, Japan, Canada, various countries in Europe, and the United States. Variations in skin color, body smell, vocal inflection, cuisine and customs were not unusual to me. As was the case for many ex-pat families at that time, my family's interaction with local Saudis was limited to those who worked within the compound, and to those we met on our infrequent family trips to local shopping centers. On those trips I was an attentive observer. Though a young child, I was aware that I was a guest in this space, that my culture was not the indigenous culture, and that I should pay deference to the local customs. My first experience of culture shock<sup>1</sup> came when I was eight and my family moved to the southern United States. I felt like an outsider—unfamiliar with basic norms (What is this “Pledge of Allegiance” that we have to recite daily? What are these references to popular culture that I do not understand?), and disoriented by the lack of diversity around me. I was perplexed by the static conceptualization of “us” and “them” that permeated the thinking of my peers, that influenced the way we learned about history, that set the tone for the way we were indoctrinated in our schooling. Those who are “us” are always right, always just, always justified. Those who are “them” are always wrong, always misguided, always inferior in some way. But as a child I reasoned—if you happened to be born over there among “them,” then you would experience those people as “us.” There was no fundamentally superior group of people, no superior race, there was only the human tendency toward othering as a means of making one's own self feel safe, significant, more worthy. This I understood as a 9-year-old.

And yet we see clearly throughout history that groups of people have used power and privilege to dominate others, colonize lands, pillage resources, enslave peoples, and establish oppressive systems that subjugate those who are deemed inferior due to their skin color, their sexual orientation, their unique abilities and cultures. The dominant “us” become entrenched behind their walls, aiming to distance themselves from the threatening and menacing “them.” Blaming the “them” for their lack of resources, and using this disparity as a means to justify judging them as inferior, serves to assure the “us” that they are most worthy, and most certainly justified.

I realize that I am necessarily squarely positioned in the dominant “us.” I am white, born to this world with privilege, speak the dominant (and often dominating) English language, have the means to travel and to change my living situation. I have experienced being a numeric minority in terms of race in my places of work, culture (and language) in my current home, and gender in some of the higher echelons of academia, but I have not experienced being minoritized or marginalized in relation to social, educational or political systems. I have never lived in Brown or Black skin, have never had to explain or defend my sexual orientation, have never been forced into assuming a gender identity that is not my own.

I recognize that I have unearned access to power and privileges due to my membership in dominant and ruling groups. Now as a co-editor of this journal, I am given a podium from which to be heard, presently in the form of an editorial in which I can comment on the valuable work of others from my advantaged position. And I do use this opportunity afforded to me by this position of privilege. I use it as an opportunity to introduce myself and some aspects of my experience, and to thank those who have come before me and those who make what are often unacknowledged contributions, but foremost to acknowledge that my voice is not the voice that needs to be heard.

Using her powerful voice to shake us from our static pose of indifference, Marisol Norris asks us in this issue, “What in music therapy must die so that freedom may be affirmed?” (Norris, 2020a). Through her stoplight session from the 16th World Congress of Music Therapy, available in this issue as both poignant video and complete text, she clearly highlights how the profession of music therapy makes color invisible, in effect avoiding recognition of racial oppression and failing to recognize a complicity in the subjugation of Black and Brown communities (Norris, 2020a,, 2020b).

The unexamined utility of racially sanitized music therapy approaches within practice settings circumvents clients’ personhood and puts into practice tools of dehumanization that serve to superimpose devaluation and psychological assaults upon Black clients. (Norris, 2020b)

Marisol Norris challenges us to acknowledge that the therapeutic context is inherently politicized, to understand systems of oppression and of empowerment, to recognize our own roles in those systems, and to work actively to deconstruct oppressive structures and replace them with culturally sustaining ones (Norris, 2020b).

As a Woman of Color, Tanya Marie Silveira provides a reflection on her experiences of racialization and othering as an Australian of Indian origin. Like Marisol Norris, she calls for music therapists to acknowledge systemic racism, make the invisible visible and take a stand. Tanya points out that music therapists are generally skilled at countering biases directed against the profession, acknowledging the depth and complexity of the people with whom they work and assuring that they are seen and heard. She wonders then, why don’t more music therapists extend these skills to collaborating with, learning from, and advocating for fellow music therapists who experience adversity?

Continuing the theme of music therapists taking responsibility and action, Beth Pickard, Grace Thompson, Maren Metell, Efrat Roginsky, and Cochavit Elefant advocate for music therapists to make visible and critically examine the assumptions and intentions underlying their practices. They point out a tendency of many music therapists to intentionally or unintentionally take on a normocentric position (Mottron, 2017) when working with neurodivergent people. Music therapists are challenged to

consider how they can support strengths and celebrate diversity and identity, while also fighting to remove barriers to access and participation that otherwise lead to marginalization.

Reflection and accountability characterize the other contributions to this November issue. Viggo Krüger, Eunice Macedo, Anna Rita Addressi, Eha Rüütel, Catherine Warner, Alexandra Carvalho, and Leslie Bunt provide a report on their multinational Erasmus+ project STALWARTS that uses engagement in the arts to promote relational health in schools. Kerry Byers identifies and dismantles her own assumptions and practices in light of Brian Abrams' (2014) essay, "McMusicTherapy McMarketing: Reflections upon the promotion of music therapy services in an increasingly commercial economic climate." Varvara Pasiali, Dean Quick, Jessica Hassall and Hailey A. Park carefully consider the role of music therapy for persons with eating disorders, and reflect upon how music therapy may contribute to formation of sense of self. Anthony Meadows and Lillian Eyre call for increased accountability related to the development and revision of the professional certifying exam used in the United States. Based on complex results from their survey of academic program directors, they call for better collaboration between those who develop the exam and academic program directors and wonder whether this exam is evaluating only one philosophical orientation to clinical practice.

As co-editor Susan Hadley pointed out in her editorial from July 2020, our editorial team is experiencing a significant amount of change. I express deep gratitude to Melody Schwantes and Avi Gilboa who are concluding their service as copyeditor and article editor, respectively. And at the risk of not sufficiently making their behind-the-scenes contributions fully visible, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous vision and tireless effort of the co-editors who founded and carried *Voices* through to the rich and vital exchange it is today: Brynjulf Stige, Carolyn Kenny, Cheryl Dileo, Sue Hadley and Kat Skewes McFerran. The pathmaking of these exceptional people is a true gift to us, and I am very grateful for the chance to collaborate with Susan and the rest of the skilled editorial team to carry forward the mission of *Voices*.

Marisol Norris reminds us that the counter side to access and power is death (2020a). People in positions of privilege and power must be ready to relinquish that power, to let part of their privilege die, to move out of the way, to accept responsibility for their part in sustaining oppressive structures. We return to my childhood nightmare—a relentless cycle of mutual destruction, and a strangely apt (for a mind that was so young) representation of the cultural, political, religious, and ethnic wars that exist and repeat throughout the world. I have typically understood this dream as representing entrenched conflicts that repeat incessantly due to complex histories and a lack of mutual understanding. But now I perceive a revisioning of this dream. It may be understood that one side, the more privileged and powerful one, must in effect "die" in order to create space and place for those who are oppressed to actualize themselves and to rise. The breaking down and the dismantling, extinguishing the old self and the old system, is entirely necessary, in order for those who have been oppressed by those very ways of being and those systems to claim their power and their equity, and those with unearned advantages due to group membership to take requisite steps to actualize their fuller humanity.

*I do not speak for the authors in this issue who proclaim their truth and call for accountability: they speak for themselves. But I thank each one of them.*

## Acknowledgements

I thank Susan Hadley for comments on an earlier version of this editorial.

## Notes

1. My home now is in Norway, where political attitudes and social welfare practices align more closely with my own values. I have not experienced a profound sense of foreignness when living in Norway, but have experienced such a feeling at times when I travel back to the United States.

## References

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