Ghosts in the Machine: Sampling Dr. King

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

Education is never politically neutral. Many of us advocate for social justice when we're outside of the classroom but struggle to continue that work inside as well, especially with issues that appear on the surface largely unrelated to our disciplines.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Civic Engagement, Digital Humanities

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Education is never politically neutral. Many of us advocate for social justice when we're outside of the classroom but struggle to continue that work inside as well, especially with issues that appear on the surface largely unrelated to our disciplines. This inaction maintains the centering of the white experience, continuing to normalize and prioritize it at the expense of all others. Marginalized voices remain marginalized. We don't need our own students to be directly impacted by policies to advocate on behalf of those who are. This is work we all must do.



"New Orleans Street Musicians ..." by Flickr user sswj, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

While social issues have made important inroads within musicology and ethnomusicology, they rarely make an appearance in music theory or composition, especially in a classroom setting. To begin these conversations, we must expand the scope beyond the purely technical and examine the ways in which music is a social and cultural phenomenon. Understanding how a triad functions, for example, is only part of the story. We must also recognize that any musical activity involves a network of people who might be engaged in any combination of producing, performing, buying, selling, listening, analyzing, teaching, institutionalizing, and so on. Discussing these networks means discussing their persistent systemic inequalities and power differentials, and understanding that these are social and not just musical issues. Cultivating this awareness is crucial in the development of our students as critical thinkers who can question the society in which they live, who can locate injustice and fight to advance social good. Abstract music theory is important, but music theory combined with a social awareness is vital.

Georgetown University hosts an annual *Let Freedom Ring!* initiative, a recurring project to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King. "Teach The Speech," in particular, is a cross-campus curriculum project where interested faculty and staff incorporate that year's selected work by Dr. King in our courses and workshops, sparking campus-wide conversations rooted in themes of social justice. The first time I joined the "Teach the Speech" efforts, I redesigned my basic theory class to include guiding principles from King's entire body of work. In addition to covering the expected chords, scales, and other technical material, we discussed the disparity in representation

faced by women and POC within music, viable modes of protest in music, and the possible roles of government sponsorship and censorship of artists. We rooted these issues in the real-life examples of the Grammy's, the Women's March, and the threats by the Trump administration to cut funding to the NEA and the NEH. Final projects based on these bigger-picture topics provided students further opportunity to reflect on the ways in which these and similar topics manifest in their own lives, transcending a preoccupation with "notes on a page."



"Free at Last" by Flickr user Thomas Hawk, CC BY-NC 2.0

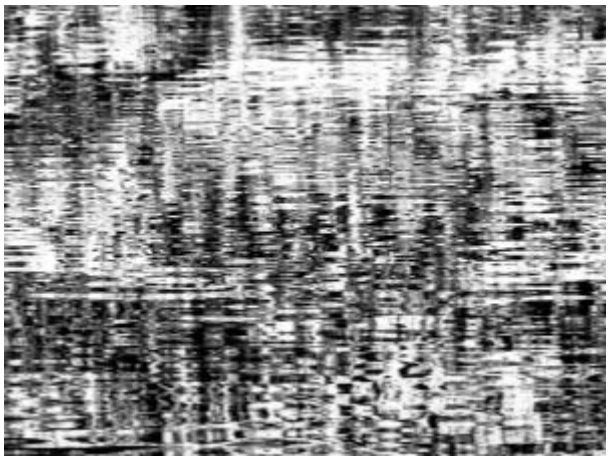
My second time participating in the "Teach the Speech" initiative, I used a recording of Dr. King delivering "I Have Been to The Mountaintop" as part of a module on sampling for my DJing and production class. Students had to create short tracks using this recording as the only permissible sound source. Anything resembling a kick, snare, hi-hat, melody, or harmony had to be constructed from a sample. Using something we don't typically consider to be music as the sound source for creating music demonstrates the power of the studio and illustrates just how far creative slicing, dicing, and processing can take us. Beyond these important practical applications, though, the use of speech provides us with a framework for discussing why context matters. Do context and history always travel alongside the immediate acoustic phenomenon of sound? Can we identify something as "the music itself"? Through wrestling with these and related questions, students begin to understand sample-based composition as both a musical and a moral undertaking.



https://youtu.be/ixfwGLxRJU8

The process of sampling is largely a process of curation, involving a responsibility not just for the product but also for the source. If a student chooses to sample a large-enough portion of Dr. King's speech, so that one can recognize words, phrases, even full sentences, then her choice includes the layers of extra-musical meaning attached to those words in addition to their musical qualities. "Violence," for example, has a particular sonic profile and meaning that most listeners understand. How we actually interpret this word depends on many factors, including the context in which it is used in the original source, the identity of the speaker, and any audio processing that students might apply. The addition of distortion, for example, will influence the impact of that word on and its reception by the listener. The sampled word might be a fragment of a larger word, "violence" snipped from "nonviolence," and never appear in its own right in the source. These and other complex issues involved in the process of sampling exist whether or not the student chooses to engage with them.

If the student samples an extremely small fragment of the Dr. King speech, obscuring the source and working with sound on an almost molecular level, then perhaps these questions go away. Can we still discuss the attendant connotations and denotations of indecipherable fractions of words or slices of the ambient hiss between the words? In this situation, is the origin of the sample still relevant for the work being done? When the ties connecting a heavily processed source to the finished product are untraceable, does it matter where we sampled from? Is white noise simply white noise?



"White noise on the Columbia" by Flickr user jaisril, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Arriving at these kinds of questions is largely the point of the exercise. With a little deliberation, students realize that there is a very clear distinction between sampling the word "violence" from a speech by Trump and from a speech by MLK. There is a context, a lineage, and a history to samples that lives outside the phenomenon of pure sound, and this holds true even at the molecular level. This is crucial for students to understand, and its implications extend far beyond a music class.



"Pride (In the Name of Love)" by Flickr user T, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

We can, for example, ask students to consider the related question about whether or not it's possible to separate art from the artist. Can we ever listen to pre-MAGA Kanye with the same ears? How do we interpret a post-MAGA Kanye song about uplift and resilience? What does it mean to

watch a film where Harvey Weinstein had a major role in producing? A minor role? Moral dilemmas form a part of every media interaction we have, and similar questions comprise other aspects of our lives. Can we continue to allow the misappropriation of Dr. King's "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" without acknowledging the "radical" Dr. King? Can we reconcile a country built on expropriation, slavery, and genocide with one whose propaganda extolls the principles of equality and freedom? These are indeed crucial lines of moral inquiry, and our pretending otherwise enables current systems to remain in place. Sampling King's speech enables my students to engage with those lines of inquiry from an angle they have not considered before: at the level of sound.

This is work we all must do. Within academia, we need to combat injustice inside the classroom as well as outside to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. One way we can engage is through careful attention both to the examples we choose and the way we contextualize them. Students and educators alike need to understand the political nature of education that is too often a means of upholding the power structures within society that position whites at the top, and white males at the very top. These largely invisible systems have very real impacts on our lives, and the only way we can evolve to a more just society is by questioning their seeming inevitability. We must foster dialogue that transcends the classroom. We must engage with social problems. We must look beyond the accumulation of knowledge as an end in itself. We must, in short, to do good. This is work we all must do.

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Featured image: "Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial" by Flickr user Cocoabiscuit, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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