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## Inconvenient Truths, and Changes to Believe In: Foreword to the Forum

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## INCONVENIENT TRUTHS, AND CHANGES TO BELIEVE IN

FOREWORD TO THE FORUM ON “ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN MUSIC THEORY: VOICES FROM THE FIELD”

JEANNIE MA. GUERRERO

**A**t the Society for Music Theory’s 2007 Meeting in Baltimore, the Committee on Diversity offered a special session entitled “Ethnic Diversity in Music Theory: Voices from the Field.” Papers were presented by Sumanth Gopinath, YouYoung Kang, Horace J. Maxile, Jr., and Jairo Moreno; I served as moderator. Thanks to the Committee’s fearless leader, Frederick Bashour, the session moved from an evening slot to Saturday morning; as a result, the panel attracted a full room of inquisitive listeners. Directed to keep strict time, I cut short an impassioned discussion period following the talks. This led the Committee’s present Chair, Phil Ewell, to arrange for the publication of these papers, both to capture the day’s energy and to channel it into a more permanent medium. (Three of these papers appear here in their near-original form; the fourth—by Moreno with co-author Cimini—has been substantially augmented.) A large number of issues resonated around the room, and they bind these very different papers in ways that should not be obscured. I shall situate the issues heard that day as “challenges” for readers to ponder and, with hope, to translate into action.

It is worth noting that a lot has happened in the world since the panel convened in Baltimore. Most notably, a black family resides in the White House. Economies around the world face collapse. An already burdened public psyche worries about burgeoning levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. A bizarre emulsion of sentiments has brewed, infused by the ups and

downs of recent events: optimism regarding upward social mobility, angst over burst market bubbles, and fear in the face of irreversible climate change.

The crisis regarding “diversity” in the field of music theory bears the imprint of all these forces, and continued denial of music theory’s connection to the world will only exacerbate the situation. More than ever the SMT desires an influx of “melanin content,” but at the same time jobs and resources that once seemed in endless supply now vanish. An institutional desire to increase the number of theorists worldwide has not triggered a comparable increase in the resources to support them; that is, music theory faces its own version of the world’s sustainability problem. Over the course of these papers, it will be revealed that these challenges arise from no coincidence and no sudden turn of events. As Gopinath writes, the world’s music theorists constitute “the crew of a sinking ship.” How is music theory to diversify if it cannot even survive?

We might emulate the strategies of the Obama Administration. Solutions to pressing issues treat the root causes, not the symptoms of the country’s many ills. Creating jobs that address climate change is one such strategy. Bolstering the economy by reforming health care is another. Gone—so I tell myself in order to sleep at night—is the Maytag-repairman mentality of using an old wrench to repair an even older household appliance. Here to stay is the engineer who designs energy-efficient and carbon-neutral appliances.

The four papers to follow beg the question: should music theory re-engineer itself? Addressing social disparities could be our climate change, the outside force that shapes the solutions to fundamental flaws in our infrastructure. Infrastructural analysis will assume four forms: a disturbing deconstruction of “diversity” by Cimini and Moreno; an economic argument for embracing diversity by Gopinath; stern warnings about cultural tokenism and an appeal to

address the pipeline early on from Kang; and exhortations from Maxile that simple, doable steps make a world of difference. These four threads weave into a unified call for new action: diversity efforts as we have known them do not work, but with re-engineering they are vital for securing a future in the SMT for *all*.

#### CHALLENGE NO. 1. ASSESS THE STATUS OF MINORITIES

As the authors variously suggest, the Committee is working to assess the status of ethnic minorities in the field. At the moment it is devising survey instruments for the SMT. As a starting point for the data that the Committee will obtain, I would like to offer limited 2007–08 statistics from the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) and the Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS).<sup>1</sup> The data, shown in Figure 1, do not reflect every music theory department in the U.S., even within NASM. The set of ethnicity data includes only doctoral programs within NASM. It is also not clear whether international students (such as those from East Asia) are counted as minorities; it has been my understanding that for U.S. legal accounting, only U.S. citizens are tallied. Music theory exhibits the *lowest* representation of underrepresented minority groups for all surveyed disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Even accounting for scholars who did not participate in the HEADS survey, the Committee will most likely find a similar scenario to what appears above.

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<sup>1</sup> NASM is an association of approximately 615 schools of music, primarily at the collegiate level but also including postsecondary and non-degree-granting schools of music; for more, see <http://nasm.arts-accredit.org>. The HEADS Project is a statistics system that gathers and compiles data from member and non-member institutions; for more, see <http://secure3.verisconsulting.com/HEADS>.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, neither Gopinath nor I would be counted in this number because we received our Ph.D.s from non-NASM departments. The other three authors also are not reflected in the survey because they received their degrees before the survey period. Ethnomusicology is not represented in this particular set of data because it is not a free-standing department at Eastman, for whom this report was created.

**FIGURE 1.** Data on diversity from NASM and HEADS

(a) All students by gender, 2007–08

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Men	70.5%
Women	29.5%

(b) All students by ethnicity, 2007–08

<u>Ethnic category</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Percentage of all URM*</u>
African-American	1.8%	14.75%
American Indian	1.0%	8.20%
Asian	9.6%	78.69%
Hispanic	0.7%	5.74%
Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.82%
Total URM*	13.2%	

\* *Underrepresented minorities*

(c) Data summary of graduating Ph.D. and D.M.A. students, 2002–08

<u>Discipline</u>	<u># in pool</u>	<u>URM</u>	<u># in pool</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u># in pool</u>
Composition	291	6.9%	20	20.6%	60
Conducting	327	12.5%	40.875	24.2%	404.325
Humanities <sup>†</sup>	4071	10.8%	440	29.4%	1197
Jazz	No data	No data	No data	No data	No data
Music Education	373	11.8%	44	52.5%	196
Musicology	128	10.2%	13	51.6%	66
Organ	71	5.6%	4	45.1%	32
Piano	571	6.1%	35	65.8%	376
Strings	305	8.5%	26	59.3%	181
<b>Theory</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>4.2%</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>31.3%</b>	<b>30</b>
Voice/Opera	317	5.8%	18	66.1%	210
Total	1861	9.84%	645	37.04%	2427

<sup>†</sup> *A number of liberal-arts departments have been accredited by NASM. The present category likely denotes general music concentrators within such institutions.*

All the same, ethnic membership categories are far from stable entities. For accounting purposes, the Committee has been forced to determine arbitrarily what categories will be used. I believe that at the time of this writing, the Committee plans to ask respondents to specify with what ethnic group they identify, in addition to their national origins. For example, persons from

Brazil do not fit neatly into any single category, nor do persons from former Spanish colonies in the Pacific islands. Also, there is always the problem that a (white) person from Spain or Portugal will be included in these tallies (such as the Galician colleague to which Moreno refers). Most importantly, *individuals can only be counted if they respond to the Committee's survey*. In short, the issue of data collection is complex; but it is an obstacle that the Committee will certainly take great pride in surmounting.

Data is also needed on retention of students and faculty. Gopinath suggests qualitative data collection through oral histories. The Committee might also examine publications by ethnically interesting scholars and assess whether publication rates differ in comparison to others, as the Committee on the Status of Women has begun to do.<sup>3</sup> Also, a scholar's place of employment is a crucial determinant in the process. Departments, tenure committees, and university administrators need to be apprised of these findings, because scholars of *all* colors are being assessed in ways that do not account for influential factors such as topical interest (and the unconscious discrimination that attaches to it) and material resources. For example, certain institutions appear to be adopting the perceived publication standards of Ivy League schools in the interests of raising their rankings. Without the remunerative, capital, and temporal resources to match the Ivy League, the tenure-track scholar is left to *less* than his or her own devices to achieve a benchmark that is grounded more in anecdote than in fact.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Two papers at the 2008 session of the Committee on the Status of Women (at the SMT annual meeting in Nashville) began investigations into the rates at which women clear peer-review processes in the field: Brenda Ravenscroft, "Gender and the SMT: Report on Gender Statistics within the Society for Music Theory"; and Robert Zierolf, "The Number and Nature of Journal Articles by Women in Music Theory."

<sup>4</sup> To establish precisely how scholars are faring in recent years, one need only perform a RILM search for the past five years under various rubrics such as "theory" and "peer-reviewed."

## CHALLENGE NO. 2: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR HOW MUSIC THEORY BECAME SO NON-DIVERSE

*Absence or paucity of role models and mentors.* Kang and Maxile emphasize the importance of identifying—and identifying *with*—role models throughout one’s career, but the implication is that in the absence of such mentorship, the minority scholar likely faces disaster. We can only wonder what would have happened had Maxile not been encouraged by the right people to engage in essential activities like networking. Similarly, Kang credits her mentors at Yale and the University of Pennsylvania for fueling her interest in pedagogy and theory; would she have remained a theorist in the absence of such mentors? On the other end of the spectrum, Moreno did not ask for the type of “advice” he received, and Gopinath truly maneuvered in the dark. These stories and those that surfaced during the discussion period share an unsettling element: none of the authors knew that their genetics and rearing would affect their professional lives. Transmitting that awareness through mentorship might stem attrition at several career levels.

*Methodological clashes.* Gopinath’s account of his comprehensive exam was the first of an *impressively large* number of such stories to be related during the session. All of them reflect a conflict with canonical interests and methodologies that seems endemic to scholars of ethnic, gender, and other minority groups.<sup>5</sup> Kang theorizes that identity manifests itself as research in off-beat ways because theory does not provide an inherent outlet by which to assert one’s ethnic identity. Gopinath writes that minorities identify as outsiders, thereby possessing natural affinities for new and non-mainstream methodologies. This complex relationship to one’s research is

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<sup>5</sup> Scouring for ethnic authors through a basic RILM search on various theory journals reveals two things. First of all, there are not many publications to find, an entirely separate problem. Second, unfamiliar or less-traveled themes and topics seem to be common. The research interests of the four authors illustrate this point vividly: the role of ringtones in subversive political movements, traditional Korean music, black music, and “post-Heideggerianism of French origin.”

hardly self-evident, and our four authors proceeded unaware that they were challenging core values through their research, professional interests, or even their word choices and demeanor (e.g., in Moreno's job-interview experiences). These four accounts should serve as indispensable reading for the emerging and emerged scholar alike.

*Identity politics thwarts its own cause.* Cimini and Moreno provide an extensive account of the forces shaping "diversity" efforts throughout recent history. Richard Nixon's second presidential campaign sets the tone for a portrait of how these efforts have led to the continued suppression of those whom it supposedly benefits. Sedimented so deeply in current debates, identity politics threatens its own future. As a political means to neutralize potentially insurgent masses, "diversity" assumes the trappings of the ultimate roach motel: it lures undesirables inside with the promise of nourishment, and then it feeds them poison over the course of a short life and a slow death.<sup>6</sup>

### CHALLENGE NO. 3: ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF (NON-)DIVERSITY

*Redefine the terms of the debate.* Cimini and Moreno launch a detailed foray into the legal origins of "diversity" and its manifestation as area and cultural studies, from which music theory has largely been immune. Nonetheless, to be effective diversity must first be redefined. Coincidentally, recent rulings by Chief Justice John Roberts indicate a gradual shift of juridical focus onto economic disparities, which largely but not always coincide with race.<sup>7</sup> New efforts can emphasize equal access rather than place respective groups into direct competition for bene-

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<sup>6</sup> One of my Eastman colleagues puts it still another way: we are caged gerbils given exercise wheels to sap our energy; those wheels placate our need to be active, but they divert us from dealing with those who caged us.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., two cases cited in the paper by Cimini and Moreno: *Crystal D. Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, 551 U.S. 05-915 (2007); and *Parents Involved in Community School v. Seattle School District et al.*, 551 U.S. 05-908 (2007).

fits to which they will no longer be entitled once they cease to be statistical minorities. Cimini and Moreno do much to credit this new way of thinking to the Committee's 2007 session abstract, which was composed by the four authors with Frederic Bashour, then the Committee's enthusiastic Chair. The abstract itself evolved and—as I understand it—received heaviest editing by Gopinath, Bashour, and the present (and equally enthusiastic) Committee Chair, Phil Ewell.

*Rethink canons.* Simply expanding the canon is not fruitful, and none of the authors favors it without substantively redefining the field. The knowledge base within the field as it exists now precludes meaningful studies of non-canonic repertoires. As Kang warns elsewhere, “superficial treatments of the subject often obscure the pedagogical objectives intended in these courses and negate the full potential for scholarly inquiry offered by these disciplines.”<sup>8</sup> Kang believes that globalizing the canon might be a futile exercise for music theory as a field, and she sees practical value in maintaining theory's well-developed, communal Western parlance as a staple. Gopinath adopts just the radical approach that Kang seeks to avoid, transforming the discipline itself through a “globalized harmony” curriculum, which treats harmony as a colonizing force throughout history. Either way, supplementing traditional theory courses with world-music material does not solve the problem in itself.

*Resist corporatization.* For Gopinath, this means unionizing, especially in alliance with adjunct faculty, teaching assistants, and other personnel. Ethnic minorities inhabit these lower ranks of university society in the numbers universities would like to see in the tenure track. Further, as outsiders, minorities seem drawn to socially inclined causes. Through unionization of non-tenure-track ranks, music theory can build enough of a—dare I utter it—critical mass to

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<sup>8</sup> YouYoung Kang, “Defending Music Theory in a Multicultural Curriculum,” *College Music Symposium* 46 (2006), 46.

resist the corporate forces that are now downsizing departments in the name of financial exigency. Left unchecked, such forces could completely dismantle the tenure track. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly features articles on post-tenure review, one frightening step toward this outcome. The increasing reliance on adjunct faculty also bodes very badly for all non-profitable disciplines.<sup>9</sup>

Another unification strategy is advocated by Cimini and Moreno. To counter the corporatized academy, individuals and collectives need to free themselves from the divisive shackles of identity politics. By keeping ethnic groups distinct and in direct competition with one another, identity politics enables their continued suppression. With the final blows being dealt in the name of profit margins, cultural and humanistic disciplines will lose their strongholds. Whether through self-governance or collective bargaining, all affected parties need to unite. Race divides people; economic conditions unite them.

*Fill the pipeline earlier.* Wishing for a diverse job- or degree-applicant pool does not create one. Recruiting at the graduate level might also be too late, but that should not stop efforts laid out by Maxile. Kang argues for increasing and improving music theory's presence in primary and secondary education. Given the more pronounced impact of economics on younger age groups, attending to the earliest links in the pipeline also addresses the disparity issue discussed above. To pursue Classical music in college or beyond presumes financial means to pay for music lessons and instruments. Further, tomorrow's primary- and secondary-school teachers should foster a positive image of music theory. The situation of theory alongside music

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<sup>9</sup> *The New York Times* and other periodicals provide constant reminders that humanists perennially lose out in competition; see, e.g., Patricia Cohen, "Doctoral Candidates Anticipate Hard Times," *New York Times* (7 March 2009): C1; also available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/07/arts/07grad.html>. Stanley Fish's "Think Again" Blog in *The New York Times* (<http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com>) regularly reports on academia; as of this writing, Fish has learned of and denied his own purported role in the creation of the neoliberal academy.

education departments in music schools ought to present opportunities, not additional divisive mechanisms.

*Reach out.* Maxile reports that scholars with very little exposure and access to the field have no great desire to join it. Maxile teamed up with Phil Ewell to produce a series of events with Fisk University during the 2008 SMT meeting (with the American Musicological Society). From guest-teaching on campus, to bringing students to a special session devoted to Fisk, to inviting all conference participants to hear the Jubilee Singers perform, Maxile followed through on every mandate he laid out in Baltimore. To date, the Committee is planning outreach efforts for the 2009 meeting in Montréal; these outreach efforts are being chaired by Tomoko Deguchi and Deborah Rohr.

However, SMT meetings should not be the only times to act, and non-theorists need to be involved. Admissions officers can establish a presence in economically disadvantaged areas. Students can teach and perform in these areas as part of their coursework. Scholarships can be awarded to help students gain admission to not just the granting institution, but any other. Above all, society at large needs to see the economic dividends of music theory. Kang and Gopinath highlight the critical-thinking aspect of music theory. That aspect needs positive imagery not simply within musical circles, but all social strata as well.

*Adjust attitudes.* This last sub-challenge is latent in the four papers and was also a background theme in the comments afterward. I take great liberty now in casting the spotlight onto it. The field must identify and reconcile unconscious biases. Kang, now an administrator herself, points out that minorities (and women) perform a disproportionate amount of official and unofficial service (Maxile's class-after-class can also be considered as such). These activities result from and perpetuate unconscious biases. Any minority candidate is subject to ambush during job

interviews by area-studies faculty, who not so subtly express their need for an *X*-Studies person. Diversity-committee service is regarded as an inclination to avoid research or worse, thereby weighing negatively toward one's job security. Lastly, scholars of color do not seem to find publication outlets as often as others, which is very likely a result of the clashes discussed above; the peer-review process may be contributing to this outcome, perhaps by rewarding research that falls easily into well-defined cliques.

Minority educators of all kinds often receive negative student assessments—even negative peer assessments. Again, the coding of verbal and corporeal language sways such perceptions. It is worth viewing a training video at the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard, which confronts several racial stereotypes: the submissive female Asian, the black Affirmative Action beneficiary, the black token student as spokesperson for an entire collective, as well as the insensitive white teacher.<sup>10</sup> These stereotypes do not manifest as overt hate crimes. Rather, a minority who enforces discipline receives misbehavior rather than obedience. Ideas given to advisees are not credited as such. Sensitivity and awareness in the classroom eventually transform into paranoia and dread. Minorities also serve as easy scapegoats. It goes without saying that it is dangerous to be blamed in writing for everything from students' general apathy (not just apathy for theory), to their resentment toward their parents, to a badly worded question on an exam that someone else wrote. Minorities do not enjoy any buffers insulating them from these attacks; perceptions stick to them and are not deflected by the unassailable character that others seem to possess.

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<sup>10</sup> "Race in the Classroom: The Multiplicity of Experience," co-production of the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning and the Office of Race Relations and Minority Affairs, Harvard University (nineteen minutes, 1992). A number of other videos as well as books can be found at Portland State University's Office of Diversity and Equity, <http://www.pdx.edu/diversity/CAE.php>.

One unconscious bias regarding students is that minorities will be fine if left alone, and are better off that way. At the student level, emerging scholars must negotiate exam and dissertation committees, where biases play even more potentially devastating roles. A student who receives little support during the dissertation process will emerge with a significant disadvantage in the field. A student who has been transplanted purely for diversity into a foreign environment will have adjustment issues that will lead to negative evaluations. A student who never finds a true mentor enters and leaves the field alone.

Letters of recommendation serve as vehicles for other subtle forms of unconscious and sometimes conscious discrimination. Research about the letters that women receive must be expanded to include minorities.<sup>11</sup> These letters bar scholars at all levels of their careers rather than admit them entry. Admissions, search, and tenure committees also need to be letterhead-blind in considering these letters while also being bias-conscious. A faculty handbook that specifically calls for letters from prestigious universities (e.g., those of the Ivy League) will have a disparate impact on scholars (such as in the field of black music) whose field leadership is situated in institutions considered as “less prestigious.” Further, as Maxile has demonstrated, historically black colleges and universities simply do not appear on music theory’s radar.

#### IS THE SHIP HALF-FULL OR HALF-EMPTY?

Gopinath’s “sinking ship” metaphor also tells us that those who work on the lower decks will see the ship take on water before those waltzing on the upper decks. At the same time,

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<sup>11</sup> See Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka, “Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty,” *Discourse & Society* 14/2 (2003): 191–220; and Rhea E. Steinpreis, Katie A. Anders, and Dawn Ritzke, “The Impact of Gender on the Review of the Curricula Vitae of Job Applicants and Tenure Candidates: A National Empirical Study,” *Sex Roles* 41/7–8 (1999): 509–28. For ethnicity-specific disparity, see Joann Moody, *Faculty Diversity: Problems and Solutions* (New York: Routledge-Falmer, 2004).

Cimini and Moreno warn that if and when the lower hands gain entrance to the ballroom, they will be just as reluctant to yield the space as others had been. Seeing the ship as half-full consigns all to go down with it. To see it as half-empty (as Kang and Maxile seem to do) instills hope, and it is hope that unfurls sails or oars or hands to propel ship to shore where it can be repaired—or rebuilt.

It seems that a reconfiguration of our terms for conversing about diversity would be in order. First, “diversity” needs to be replaced by a new term, perhaps along the lines of “equity” or “inclusiveness.”<sup>12</sup> Next, we must realize that we cannot simply replace the group at the top through a revolving door of constant insurrection (as happens too often in the world). The top–bottom concept of hierarchy itself must change, but how? To put it another way, the great steam engine that drives capitalism and diversity is competition. As Cimini and Moreno argue, competition exerts forces that *divert* individuals and communities in separate directions. To resist such forces, music theory needs to replace the steam engine with something new—perhaps a wind turbine—to transcend identity politics. But what would drive the great wind turbine of a post-racial world, aside from the obvious: hot air?

Whatever that force may be, unity as opposed to universality is something we need. Wind turbines function because their blades unify the otherwise disparate streams of air into a propulsive force. Our black President got elected because he placed wind turbines into hotly contested electoral battlegrounds, and the blades gathered up individual puffs of air that could not generate much power by themselves. We cannot accomplish substantive change without unity amongst ourselves, but we also cannot do it without reaching outside the field. Since outside worlds

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<sup>12</sup> Whether these terms also stand for roach motels or gerbil wheels needs to be determined.

impact us, we must also impact the worlds outside. This is what I meant when I adjourned this Saturday session in Baltimore with the perky proclamation: “Diversity begins with you.” In light of what the following papers will present, it may be more appropriate to launch them with the exhortation: “The new world begins with all of us.”

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## ABSTRACT

This is a foreword to four papers that originated in the special session, "Ethnic Diversity in Music Theory: Voices from the Field," at the November 2007 meeting of the Society for Music Theory (Baltimore). Inspired by the impassioned discussion period following the talks, the Committee on Diversity arranged to publish these papers to capture the session's energy and channel it into a more permanent medium. This foreword, written by the moderator, highlights several issues that surfaced in the papers and in the ensuing discussion. The issues coalesce into

a call for new action: diversity efforts have not worked in the forms known, but with re-engineering they are vital for securing a future in the SMT for all.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeannie Ma. Guerrero is Assistant Professor of Theory at the Eastman School of Music. She served on the SMT Committee on Diversity from 2006 to 2008 and is an original member of the Eastman Diversity Committee, which was established in 2007. Her research focuses on the music of Luigi Nono, Italian music of the fourteenth century, and correspondences between music and the visual arts.

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