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While music theory can provide many tools for interacting with music, for an undergraduate music student, a narrow understanding of music literacy, not theory, is what acts as a barrier to advanced engagement in music analysis. In this essay, I explore how music literacy, typically understood as facility with five-line staff notation, as it is taught in undergraduate music theory curricula prevents meaningful progress out of music theory's white racial (and male) frame and perpetuates a hidden curriculum at odds with diversity efforts by theory pedagogues (Ewell 2020; Palfy and Gilson 2018). Despite pedagogical and curricular efforts towards inclusion of musics by BIPOC and female composers, and the development of modular curricula that are becoming more common in music departments, the expectation that music literacy comes before deep engagement with notated *and* un-notated musics constrains this admirable work towards equity and diversity. I investigate the implications of a staff notation literacy focused theory core and advocate for a broadened understanding of music literacies. I offer avenues of incorporating a range of literacies into the undergraduate theory core, focusing on a unit I designed which includes music theory research experience at early stages in the core curriculum.

Introduction

As a music theory professor at a small, private liberal arts college, I have the privilege to mentor undergraduates interested in pursuing music study in graduate school. In preparing one such student to accompany me to a nearby professional conference in his senior year, we had discussions around how conferences work and what to expect from the sessions, as well as about the demographic make-up of the field and what music(s) are most frequently studied by music scholars. As my student is a young black man interested in joining the field one day, it felt imperative that I prepare him for this aspect of our professional societies—the overwhelming whiteness of music studies and of music theory in particular. Indeed, as our discussions continued while at the conference, he reflected on both the music(s) and professionals he was seeing represented in the field. He communicated his dismay at the lack of diversity in the presenters and noted particularly that it seemed to him that most of the black and brown people he saw at the conference were graduate students, rather than senior scholars.

While several scholars have called for the need to improve diversity and representation in music theory societies and conferences, and rightly so, this engagement is hindered by the undergraduate theory core curriculum.[1] Issues of representation, like those my student is facing as he pursues an advanced degree in music research, happen not only within the curriculum—what music is taught, what composer identities are represented, what cultural contexts and competencies are celebrated or taken for granted—but also in *who* teaches the curriculum and develops music research, and the implicit biases (often baked into their training) and cultural framing those instructors bring with them. In this way, the curriculum we use in the undergraduate core, even at a small liberal arts college like my own, deeply affects the future of the field as a whole. Recent publications on music theory curricula and pedagogy have presented issues that constrain practical and meaningful change in music theory classrooms, particularly at the undergraduate level: the hidden curriculum of classical music supremacy in music academia and structures of whiteness in music theory—the white racial frame—on which it hangs and through which it is perpetuated (Palfy and Gilson 2018; Ewell 2020).[2] Not only do these normative structures maintain inequities that have plagued (in some cases) and enabled (in others) the discipline's students, teachers, and scholars for decades, but they also further entrench exclusionary ideas of "who is a musician" and "who is a scholar" through lack of meaningful representation within every music classroom.[3]

In what follows, I suggest that by better articulating what we consider to be music literacy, and broadening that understanding to *literacies*, we can embark on a basic restructuring of undergraduate theory curricula—one that will necessitate critical engagement with the social, racial, gendered, and intellectual systems that

1 The wealth of examples of these efforts include the 2019 Society for Music Theory (SMT) Plenary session featuring presentations by Philip Ewell, Yayoi Uno Everett, Joseph Straus, and Ellie Hisama, the Project Spectrum sessions and programs around SMT events (2018–2020), The Composers of Color Analysis projects, and various Interest Group meetings and panels related to this topic. Further, many recent academic publications are dealing with these issues, including the 2020 special issue on curriculum reform from *Engaging Students*, wherein Gades (2020), Lavengood (2020), and Peebles (2020) provide models for such reform, as well as earlier publications from Attas (2019a-b), Ewell (2020), Hisama (2018), Iyer (2019), and Palfy and Gilson (2019), and blogs by Ewell (2020) and Molk and Ohnona (2020), among others.

2 While many music theorists have become familiar with the term "white racial frame" through Philip Ewell's work, Ewell draws the term from sociologist Joe Feagin ([2009] 2013).

3 See, for instance, recent academic publications from Attas (2019a-b), Hisama (2018), Iyer (2019), and Ewell (2020), among others, as well as blogs by Ewell (2020) and Molk and Ohnona (2020), among others.

structure our engagement with music theory. This is because our conceptions of and pedagogy around music literacy are intricately tied to issues of social justice in our classrooms and curricula. It is more important than ever to consider how we can address structural inequities within music theory as it is currently taught, connecting lived experiences within and outside the theory classroom. In doing so, we invite a wider range of students into music theoretical engagement. Thus, I suggest that rethinking music literacy is but one of many rethinkings that can begin that work.

In the first section, I explore the multi-faceted difficulties that arise from using a narrow definition of literacy in the undergraduate music theory classroom. In section two I address implications of broadening our understanding of literacies. The third section draws attention to the success seen in several liberal arts models; I offer reports from my own attempts at such broadening within a liberal arts music department, where I include music theory research experience as part of my two-semester music theory core. This broadening can also impact the four-semester core curricula, as well as curricula taught mainly by performers or composers, rather than music theorists, and I provide some suggestions for such versions. I propose additional ideas for a literacies approach in the theory core in the final section of the essay.

I. Framing the Problem: A theory core curriculum focused on a single literacy

While music theory can provide many tools for interacting with music, for an undergraduate music student, music literacy—not theory—is what acts as a barrier to advanced engagement in music analysis. Here, music literacy is often defined at its most basic level as the ability to read and write the five-line staff notation of music of the classical style.[4] There is often a disconnect between what *can* be said about music and what *will* be said based on whether students can engage with staff notation, as evidenced in many music listening or "appreciation" courses for non-majors. Similarly, foregrounding notation and music-reading as a gateway to advanced music study strengthens the implicit message many students already receive in college:

4 Due to the problematic way that the term "Western" has historically been used, I will use "classical" as a generic term to indicate musics ranging from Renaissance and Baroque counterpoint through the lineage of early 20th-century classical music. Not only is "Westernness" constructed as an ideal within the white racial frame, it is also a misnomer: many musics produced and consumed in "the West" are largely unnotated or use notation other than the staff notation system. As such, while many musical cultures have a form of classical music, and thus the term is far from perfect in and of itself, I find this to be the best term to replace "Western" or "Western Art Music" for the purposes of this article.

that notated music is worth studying, while music from non-notated traditions is just "entertainment." Basic expectations from almost any undergraduate music program are grounded in staff notation literacy as well as in repertoire experience and priorities that maintain structures of whiteness in music theory. The expectation that students have some experience with the classical phrase model is one such example of repertoire-specific knowledge; the quintessential classical phrase model is found in tonal music, associated with classical cadences, and typically taught with reference to a score.

If our objective is for students to become experts in music of the classical style, then the current fundamentals courses focused on five-line staff notation, or the placement tests centered in bass and treble clefs, are perfect. However, this is not an objective that works to decenter the structures of whiteness in music academia. One way to approach such decentering is to rethink what we mean by "music literacy" and how it is situated in undergraduate curricula. Such rethinking could take many forms, but the most successful will occur at a structural level: how we approach the very learning objectives we aim to achieve in our theory curricula rather than how we can develop or perfect the content we currently teach with an eye towards diversity.

Higher education music institutions—whether conservatories, research universities, or liberal arts colleges—almost all focus undergraduate theory education around basic music literacy and musicianship. This core music theory typically provides a foundation for further music study in performance, composition, or preparing students for careers in music education, music therapy, or music scholarship. However, in many programs, these two-four semesters of music theory can be the only theory experience a student might have during their undergraduate career. While the ability to engage with staff notation is crucial for participation in performance and composition and while experience in reading notation and performance skills are vital to the development of any musician, educator, music therapist, or music scholar, music literacy defined as the ability to read and analyze staff notation as a focal point of core undergraduate music theory study works against other aims for a more equitable curriculum. This can be seen primarily in the often-implicit link between people and musical cultures, and in the conflation of music theory with music literacy that many undergraduates infer. These issues are addressed in the next two subsections.

I.1. What Musics? = What People?

In thinking about music literacy as focused only on staff notation, we limit ourselves: only some music can be scored according to the five-line staff notation

system developed for classical music, and thus other musics are either not engaged with at all, or are distorted in the translation from their original form into staff notation. Examples of such distortion abound in sheet music of popular songs where rhythm and timbre are simplified, or in non-Christian liturgical music where notation struggles to represent the nuance of what are often primarily oral traditions.[5] Staff notation requires fixing music in a static form, wherein it can then be observed synoptically and analyzed out-of-time. Such a notation system sidelines musics that do not adapt well to its format and undermines the power of embodied, temporal, and experiential analytical practices. In this way, when literacy becomes synonymous with understanding five-line staff notation, we become stuck within the white racial frame, despite valiant attempts to escape.

As such, issues of literacy can be seen to be indelibly tied to issues of social justice in the classroom. Even in curricula that are broadly diverse and inclusive of popular, folk, and global musics, there is an expectation that learning basic five-line classical staff notation must come first.[6] Privileging and centering classical music in this way reinforces the hidden curriculum Cora S. Palfy and Eric Gilson illuminate, regardless of the lengths to which instructors may reach to incorporate other genres and styles of music (Palfy and Gilson 2018).[7] Further, it implies the music most worth studying in academic settings is music that can be notated, marginalizing not only non-classical music notation systems but also musics produced in Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) or that of oral traditions.[8] As a result, students interested in music production, popular music, world music, folk music, and religious (non-Christian) music get the message that they must develop skills in tonal classical music first before moving to the style-specific skill set.[9] In other words, although they—individual people of any

5 This is, of course, also the case for non-notated Christian liturgical music (as opposed to the wealth of notated Christian liturgical music that populates the classical music world and our music theory classrooms). For example, this is the case for contemporary Christian worship repertoire where lead sheets or other forms of shorthand notation, or the absence of notation altogether, may be used by musicians.

6 See, for example Jennifer Snodgrass's textbook, *Contemporary Musicianship*, which was designed for a population of music production students.

7 Another study by James Gutierrez from 2018 shows complementary research.

8 For example, see the 2017 push back to Charlotte Gill's *Guardian* article discussing what she perceives as an overemphasis on notation in music academe from a range of music scholars and composers who were aghast at Gill's "romanticization of illiteracy" (see Pace et al. 2017).

9 Again, while many religious musics may be notated, Christian musics have long been a core component of undergraduate music theory study while other religious musical traditions are not. For example, consider our pedagogical history of using Bach chorales to teach harmony and voice-leading.

race, gender, or background, as well as other styles and genres—may be *included* in the tonal classical structures of whiteness and maleness that pervade music theory, entry-level study in the discipline is in no way *designed* to accommodate non-canonic musical cultures or interests. This is due to the difference between how these structures of whiteness and maleness guide music theory's current understanding of music literacy, versus individual whiteness and maleness seen in the field and the classroom. As such, in the current state of music theory, black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) can and do participate in structures of whiteness, and women and gender non-conforming individuals participate in structures of maleness. In other words, these issues work at a structural, institutional level, not an individual one.

For example, in popular music analysis courses, the narrow view of literacy as staff notation creeps in as transcription of popular music into five-line classical staff notation is often highlighted as a learning goal that then "allows" for classical-like music analysis—marking on the score. This is the case in music theory classes even when many popular music artists and analysts do not ultimately use staff notation to such an extent in their regular professional engagement with this repertoire.[10] The supremacy of five-line classical staff notation as a gate-keeper to all musical knowledge and activity is reinforced through academic music study at almost every level and in every musical subdiscipline.

This focus on the staff notation music literacy works directly against the reforms suggested by those advocating for curricular change at all levels of music education. The common, and current, approach to curricular change is the *augmentation* or *additive* approach, wherein one continues to work within the existing structures of whiteness and maleness but tries to include a wider range of musical examples and diverse composers in an effort to offset the overwhelming whiteness (and maleness, and heteronormative-ness, and Christian-ness, etc.) that is so blatant in undergraduate curricula. Philip Ewell illuminates these issues eloquently and at length in his recent article, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame" (2020). Vibrant discussion before and after Ewell's article has seen scholars suggesting a range of teaching tools in order to address these problems.[11]

10 For example, many hip-hop scholars use lyrical stress charts to analyze flow in rap, which does not require knowledge of five-line staff notation (e.g., Kyle Adams 2009, Noriko Manabe 2019, and others).

11 For example, Robin Attas's work on Kendrick Lamar and her work around decolonizing the classroom both offered practical avenues for the type of reframing that Ewell calls for (2019a, 2019b). Ellie Hisama's 2018 essay on race, ethnicity, and gender in music theory classes and Fernando Orejuela's 2018 essay on incorporating critical race studies and activism in the non-major's music classroom

However, another underlying issue to consider is who is teaching music theory. For long-term structural change to occur in the undergraduate curriculum, training at the graduate level must be expanded to include a stronger focus on pedagogy of a wider variety of musics. Meanwhile, anyone currently teaching music theory and musicianship can take strides to expand their individual skill set, especially if institutional support and professional accolades are directed towards such efforts.

Additional constraints on the undergraduate curriculum are imposed by professional organizations, such as the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). This accrediting agency prescribes a level of tonal, classical, and popular music-centric engagement in music curricula that may make it difficult to expand and rethink literacies in NASM-accredited institutions. For instance, keyboard knowledge and skills are part of the NASM guidelines, which automatically privileges musics that use equal temperament, scales without microtones, and specific instrumental timbres heavily used in tonal classical and popular music. As a pianist myself, I am both personally fond of the instrument and find it a valuable teaching tool. Still, why should all music majors learn the piano and not the kalimba, ukulele, djembe, zheng, or accordion? What about using DAWs like Logic or Ableton Live? The piano allows entry into certain musics, cultures, and ways of listening and hearing, and restricts others. It follows, of course, that schools constrained by NASM standards are those producing music educators for K-12 music programs, so again, *who* is teaching, broadly speaking, is just as important as *what* is being taught.

I.2. Staff Notation Music Literacy ≠ Music Theory

If learning music theory can be understood, generally, as the development of skills to analyze, deconstruct, theorize, and talk about music and sound, why do we constrict undergraduate exploration of all of these facets to narrow, classical music literacy? By focusing on such a limited literacy of reading staff notation and some musicianship skills, we misrepresent what music theory (and music scholarship more broadly) actually is and what it can do. We forget that teaching strategies for close listening also requires teaching students to learn empathy: we are actually teaching students how to listen to a musical communication and take stock of their own experiences

make similar strides. Michael Tenzer makes a compelling case for basing a theory/musicianship curriculum on the acquisition of transcription skills, which can do the dual work of preparing students for meaningful engagement in future music endeavors while providing an opening for a wide range of musics *and* notation systems to be explored in a bottom-up, discovery learning style (2017). Other ideas have been offered in conference presentations, such as the Pedagogy into Practice conferences (see conference report from Harrison 2020).

to try to understand it, structurally, narratively, and affectively. Working to connect with different ways of hearing the same music can foster a connected classroom environment and can be a meaningful and transferrable skill outside the classroom. Similarly, teaching form analysis is as much a way of teaching debate, rhetoric, and persuasive writing as it is a way of teaching how to teach. Asking students to think about how they might clearly and compellingly communicate their analytical ideas becomes a lifelong skill.

I do not suggest that we should teach music theory for these aims alone, but rather that the narrow view of staff-notation based literacy undermines these larger learning objectives in a theory classroom. As Robin Attas notes, "what I teach is not the repertoire, but how to engage with it theoretically, with a curious analytical mind and a trained ear" (2019a, 5.3). Since classical music staff notation literacy seems to come prior to all other music theoretical coursework, it becomes the "what" of music theory for students, just as much as the composers whose music is taught within those core courses become the "who" of important musical contributions.

Students, therefore, do not always understand that score analysis, triad building, and counterpoint are not the only activities in which a professional music theorist engages. Even with the exploration of engaging with music of more diverse repertoires or artists/composer identities in the classroom (i.e., de-centering whiteness and maleness), there is too big a leap from what music theorists *can* do and what they *actually* do. Rethinking our literacy objectives may allow students to connect music theory as taught in the undergraduate core more easily to other music theory practices—those of professional music theorists in the field, and of music theory as it sits within music studies more broadly.

II. Shifting the Conversation from "Literacy" to "Literacies"

Why not broaden our narrow definition of music literacy (i.e., five-line classical staff notation) to music *literacies*? I define music literacy more broadly as the development of expectations based on experience in a musical culture; these expectations are the preconditions for different forms of musical meaning-making. In other words, we might consider musical meaning-making as the umbrella literacy: how to connect to, make meaning of, and engage with musical sound and experiences. While related to Paul Broomhead's discussion of literacies in music education (discussed further below), this definition also acknowledges the cognitive learning of expectations that is developed through the process of acquiring music literacies.

For example, one way to make meaning from music is to transcribe it using notation of any sort and then look for patterns, similarities and differences, and highlight what is interesting or compelling. Another way could be to dance or embody music (e.g., using Dalcroze's *plastique animée* techniques or through choreography), or to perform the music—to improvise, arrange, produce, or compose in a given style. Still other literacies could be talking with others about music, such as through educational or ethnomusicological practices, looking at how the brain processes music, as is done in the fields of music cognition and music therapy, and researching the history of music, such as through musicology. While these different literacies—ways of demonstrating experience and expectation, and of making musical meaning—may seem linked to specific academic disciplines, incorporating them into an undergraduate music theory classroom strengthens not only what is considered music theory, but also how interdisciplinary inquiry and experience can invite countless musics and peoples into the endeavor of musical meaning-making. Doing so allows people myriad ways to develop expertise in music, without suggesting that specific structures (in this case, structures of whiteness and maleness) are the only or most desirable ways to demonstrate musical knowledge. Any given music literacy will allow us to develop expectations based on experience in a musical culture. This definition requires us as educators to ask ourselves which music(s) and what musical activities we want students to be literate in, and to what extent of expertise.

To be sure, certain skills are important to learn in order to develop those repertoire-specific expectations, and reading and analyzing staff notation might be one such skill. However, it is crucial to contextualize the skills within a musical repertoire. For instance, teaching students to listen for, identify, analyze, and write cadences helps them understand their own experiences as listeners, as well as how to lean into or away from certain cadences to invite specific engagement from other listeners when they perform. Cadences guide music perception in fundamental ways, by organizing musical language into phrases, paragraphs, and tomes. However, the term "cadence" as used in a music theory classroom also implies a specific array of harmonic progressions, complete with voice-leading, metric, and rhythmic expectations. In this way, some cadences are privileged above others. So even though we might assert that all musics have some level of formal structure, using the term "cadence" instead of "closure" to apply broadly to diverse repertoires forces us to maintain structures of classical music supremacy and authority even while seemingly decentering classical music in our courses.

Alternatively, if we teach students to develop literacy in "closure" rather than "cadence" first, then we are teaching them to identify—likely aurally and through fully embodied experience—those moments of repose in music that allow us to conceptualize phrase. This could allow for a variety of musical styles to be explored, all serving to teach students how to group and delineate musical thought in time. Once students can identify closure generally in music, instructors can direct them to repertoire-specific parameters for closure. This could mean learning how to distinguish Imperfect Authentic Cadences from Perfect Authentic Cadences in classical music, or learning how to anticipate, identify, and perform the distinct melodic gestures that indicate closure in Ashkenazi Torah cantillation, or learning how timbre and texture are used in Electronic Dance Music to create formal structure on both small and large levels. By moving from a broad literacy to a narrow, repertoire-focused literacy, students neither lose the rigor or expertise they need to become fluent in concepts of closure, nor are they taught that certain musics are to be privileged in learning about closure writ large.

Ideas about music literacies are also found in music education scholarship focused on K-12 students and connect to renowned music educator Bennett Reimer's framing of musical roles as multiple intelligences (2003). This concept—that multiple intelligences can be expressed through various musical roles—challenges the assumption that staff notation is at the crux of what it means to be musically literate. Addressing literacy directly, music educator Robert Davidson notes that, "music literacy extends beyond reading (and sometimes writing) staff notation" (2014, 172). Davidson continues to highlight the benefits of such an extension, noting that other practical and real-world skills can be gained from a literacies view in music education. These might include collaborative and independent learning skills, creativity development, and the empowerment of open-minded music engagement, all of which are imperative in real-world settings.

Paul Broomhead suggests defining music literacy in terms of "literate behaviors" for "all possible music texts" wherein a text is not predetermined but rather is defined as such by the way in which individuals interact with it (2018, 16). One particularly compelling aspect of Broomhead's definition is that other humans, one's own body, ephemeral sound events, recordings, performances, and notated (or transcribed) music can all be considered texts in which one can be musically literate. In this way, Broomhead's vision "liberates conceptions of music literacy from the tyranny of language literacy; it also liberates those conceptions from the exclusivity of western notation and other conventions that often prevail in our classrooms" (2018, 17).

These ideas about music literacies from music education scholarship underscore that our fates are bound together across our music disciplines and levels of education. We have to rethink what the skills we teach are in a way that decenters and deprioritizes the canon. As these music education scholars suggest, the potential for considering music literacies and their musical meaning-making possibilities does not undercut traditional music literacy (classical staff notation) but rather provides opportunities to teach students in ways that reflect their own musical meaning-making while still opening up new musical experiences for them. For example, young children are often invited to embody music through dance and movement. But as staff notation is learned and musical meaning-making becomes increasingly focused on learning musical texts such as scores, these opportunities move into the field of dance, rather than continuing to be a part of a music curriculum. By the time students reach the undergraduate level, they are rarely invited to embody music, unless in specialized curricula using Dalcroze or other such body-oriented pedagogies. Even then, such curricula are often relegated to separate coursework, instead of being fully integrated into the core music theory sequence. By allowing the body to be a text, as Broomhead suggests, we can ask undergraduates to explore music in new ways, as they also engage with their own positionality and bodily experience.

Emerging in this discussion is an understanding that literacies work in a dovetailed fashion: one aspect being repertoire-specific knowledge and expectation that allows for meaning-making within a repertoire, and the other aspect being the multiplicity of places and ways that meaning-making can occur. Thus, in identifying music literacies, we consider what skill-sets—notation, analytical tools, musicianship tools, and historical and cultural context—are required to meaningfully engage with culturally, historically, stylistically, and geographically diverse musics. This invites students and pedagogues to (re)consider what it means to be musically literate: does it mean one can sing or play a specific instrument, read specific notation, or speak articulately about what they are hearing? Does it require repertoire specificity or is it a more general skill? Is research, composition, or musical or dance performance a part of music literacy, or is literacy a "theory-only" type of skill set? Is literacy important for musical meaning-making, and if so, is musical meaning-making evidence of, an outcome of, or concurrent with literacy? Once we move from literacy to literacies, many of these questions can be answered in the affirmative without the dissonance entrenched in the current curricular structure.

When rethinking literacies, it is crucial to consider the audience of our students and their goals for employment following our classes. What good is it for a student

wanting to work in music ministry, or one who desires to open a music-production studio, to be well-versed in sonata form? Proponents might argue that sonata form is historically important in music literacy, and that to be a well-rounded musician one should be familiar with this music. However, this is a fallacy—and an artifact of the white racial frame—since centuries of musical forms created and perpetuated by marginalized, enslaved, and colonized peoples are not considered "historically important" and vital to the development of a well-rounded musician by curricula in music academe.[12] For the student seeking to enter music ministry or production, then, these marginalized forms and musical processes are more important, despite their neglect in current curricula. The aspiring music minister will need to think about connections between music and prayer, and how performance practice in religious music differs from that of art or popular music performance. The production student will undoubtedly need to develop literacy with DAWs more so than with staff notation and along with a range of technical knowledge to meaningfully produce a variety of musics. While these topics could certainly be incorporated into a theory core, perhaps even alongside sonata form, they require a broader view of musicianship and music theoretical skills than traditional core learning objectives currently afford.

Further, considering where students are when they come into our programs is imperative in the process of broadening our understanding of literacies. For example, the ability to read and perform tablature notation on guitar is one way of being musically literate, as is the skill to learn the same song by ear. In our current context, however, both performers would be placed in Foundations or Music Theory I courses because both would be considered musically "illiterate" despite their "talent" (i.e., skill), and experience in music, simply because they cannot read classical staff notation. By understanding both of these students as possessing skill and experience in specific musics—possessing two types of music literacy—we also understand these as literacies worth teaching and learning in the academy. Rest assured, I do not advocate for the abolishment of five-line classical staff notation. Rather I am advocating for the contextualization of five-line classical staff notation and its centralized power in music inquiry in the academy, and for diminishing its power through the empowerment of myriad literacies under the umbrella of musical meaning-making.

Many conservatories and schools of music based almost exclusively in a classical music literacy model are approaching the need to equip their students in broader

12 Kofi Agawu's essay, "Tonality as a Colonizing Force in Africa," is a great example of how the white racial frame of music theory not only marginalizes musics outside the classical canon, but actually demonstrates its power of cultural (here, musical) erasure through colonialization (2016).

repertoires by inviting students to take upper-level coursework in non-classical musics (as well as upper-level coursework in classical music), and to develop skills in arts management, entrepreneurship, and arts advocacy.[13] Such curricular development is important and helpful for students graduating with Bachelor of Music degrees and looking for work in a declining classical music industry, providing students with a range of literacies.[14] Still, these types of programs do little to de-center or re-frame whiteness in music academia because they arrive only *after* students have taken core theory coursework, and are designed primarily for those who will be working in the classical music industry (2016).

There are many avenues one can take towards building a framework in the music theory core that supports the broadened view of literacies. As such, I cannot here offer a singular path from literacy to literacies, as doing so would be counterintuitive to the very concept of literacies. However, while long-term curricular change certainly needs to occur, short-term change within course design can also begin to invite a range of literacies into the music theory classroom, rather than privileging a single music literacy. In addition to the examples provided above, a look at curricular developments within music theory core courses at liberal arts institutions can offer one way of using short-term changes to begin the very long-term work of dismantling classical supremacy and music theory's white racial frame within music academia.

III. Liberal Arts Models

I write from a liberal arts perspective for two main reasons. First and practically, it is my current personal context: I am the sole music theorist at a small, private liberal arts college on the East Coast of the United States. However, my own education and training was completed in conservatory and research university/school of music settings, which has allowed me to see the stark differences in approaches to undergraduate education in these different types of music departments. My background has made me acutely aware of the challenges of the small liberal arts

13 For instance, Peabody Conservatory's "citizen artist" component to their curriculum, New England Conservatory's Entrepreneurial Musicianship opportunities, Curtis Institute's Artist Citizen curriculum, Eastman School of Music's Institute for Music Leadership, Juilliard's range of "Entrepreneurial Coursework," and San Francisco Conservatory's new Center for Innovative Leadership. Such programs often include both required coursework for all majors, as well as optional certificates, minors, or concentrations, and seem to be centered around the practical concerns of graduating performers with expertise primarily, or solely, in the classical music world.

14 For interesting discussion on development of programs towards such aims, see Campbell et al.'s task force on the undergraduate music major report for the College Music Society.

music degree program, as well as how distinct the students I work with are from those who pursue degrees at conservatories.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I write from a liberal arts perspective because music departments in these institutions tend to focus on broad, foundational knowledge about music, which is adaptable to diverse student abilities and prepares students for lifelong involvement in music (Levine and Kohut 2017). Unlike at conservatories, liberal arts students often arrive with widely varied abilities and backgrounds in music, spend more of their time at college taking coursework outside of music, and do not always expect to continue on to a career in music following graduation.[15] Further, liberal arts institutions tend to hold critical thinking, research, writing, and speaking skills as core goals for all undergraduates, in addition to the development of character, and individual and community understanding. In this sense, a music department in a liberal arts institution is perhaps one of the best places to begin dismantling the narrow view of music literacy in an undergraduate curriculum. Unfortunately, I must admit that change in these institutions will probably be the least effective in creating major change in the culture of music academia in general, given the prevalence of performance as "musicianship" in our society and our universities.[16] Still, within liberal arts colleges, music theory's white racial frame and classical literacy-only focus continue to collaborate, perhaps inadvertently, preventing meaningful change that aligns with liberal arts missions and values statements. It is this misalignment that urgently invites curricular change and development of an undergraduate core based broadly on music literacies.

As in most undergraduate curricula in music departments, liberal arts music majors typically take two–four semesters (or three–six quarters) of core music theory. These courses are often aligned with similar requirements in music history (likely of classical music) and followed by upper-level electives in a variety of areas. Victoria Lindsay Levine and Emily Kohut have reviewed several liberal arts music curricula that deviate from this norm in their essay in *College Music Curricula for a New Century* (edited by Moore, 2017). Here, they explore departments "revising their curricula toward a flexible major with a 'lean' required core that accommodates changing student culture and prepares students for lifelong involvement in music" (2017, 49). These programs draw on local and global music practices and demonstrate commitments to social justice, projects that are creative and student-driven, and concerns of

15 For engaging data on these points, see tables 3.1a and b in Levine and Kohut's essay (2017).

16 Robin D. Moore's discussion on the impracticalities and narrowness of such a view is quite compelling on this point (2017).

professional musicians, which Moore outlines as five priorities for undergraduate music study (2017, 60). The curricular developments that Levine and Kohut describe are ultimately reliant on specialization of the faculty, a willingness of faculty to be innovative in course design and pedagogy, and on connection and exchange between music departments and local musicians or music-making communities. In other words, such changes require moving away from the self-replication of academic knowledge and "quality" (i.e., whiteness). While the music departments that Levine and Kohut survey are doing exciting work, their programs cannot always be easily transferred to other schools. In short, there is a "school-specific" aspect of such curricula, depending on the aims of individual programs.

My own curriculum includes two semesters of core theory and aural musicianship, in addition to a foundations course for students who arrive with no five-line classical staff notation experience. The core theory courses meet four days a week for an hour and are intended to be a hybrid of written theory and musicianship, including sight-singing, ear-training, and keyboard skills. Traditionally, my predecessors and I have used standard theory textbooks (Kostka, Payne, and Almén, and then when I arrived, Clendinning and Marvin) and the course fills with about eight to fifteen students each year. The two-course sequence is required of majors and at least the first course is required of minors in our department. Admittedly, and despite my attempts and commitment to diversify the composers and styles of music represented in my curriculum, the course sequence remains woefully reminiscent of "traditional" theory literacy courses and surely reinforces the hidden curriculum exposed by Palfy and Gilson (2018). In part, this is due to constraints within my own resources and the wish to more holistically redesign the music major with my colleagues in the department. But it is also the fault of a singular vision of what music literacy—and particularly music theory literacy—looks like at the undergraduate level.

Why do I feel hindered in this way, even though I am in charge of the theory curriculum at my institution? My institution's (and I will argue, the discipline's) focus is, perhaps rightly, on music theory literacy as skills for musical meaning-making. However, perhaps wrongly, this musical meaning-making seems to only occur through score analysis, structured (and unrealistic) dictation exercises, and creation of highly constrained model compositions. If the purpose of core music theory courses is to develop skills for musical meaning-making and, thus, to demonstrate mastery of such acquired skills through a variety of modes of musical meaning-making, why not rethink this relationship as acquiring music literacies such that the foundational knowledge students acquire is directly tied to real-world musical work. In plainer

terms, students should understand what faculty do outside teaching, as faculty are real-life musicians with expertise in specific music literacies themselves.

In my Music Theory and Aural Musicianship I course, I open by asking my students what music theory is and what music theorists do. Students often suggest that theorists compose and teach about music, and that music theory is about understanding the structure of music, particularly from a compositional standpoint. While these answers are not wrong, of course, they are narrow and perhaps more meaningful for a professional composer who teaches music theory than for a professional music theorist. As a music theorist myself, I decided to bring a research unit into the classroom, with the hope that it could benefit my students in a variety of ways. Mainly, it would get them doing musical meaning-making work earlier than they normally would in the music major curriculum, it would invite new voices to be present in the classroom beyond just my diversified repertoire examples, and it would engage students in music theory earlier than usual, due to the linking of research and teaching in the classroom.

III.1. The Undergraduate Research Project

In a pilot experiment on incorporating research into undergraduate core theory, I designed a literature review project for second-semester music theory students. While students in my two-semester core are required to compose model compositions and write short analysis essays, I ended the second semester with a short research project on a topic of their choice (see the full prompt in the appendix). These projects took the form of mini-literature reviews, of six to ten scholarly articles which students were required to locate on their own. They then created annotated bibliographies and wrote proposals for their full literature reviews. The unit culminated in a ten-minute presentation during our final class meeting. This assignment ended up being incredibly successful as a way to engage undergraduates (the majority of whom were first-year students) in another facet of the practice of music theory. Learning objectives that were reached included allowing students to understand more about the field, practicing critical reading and synthesizing of professional music scholarship, and honing writing skills in a genre that was new to many in the course. It was well worth the space in my super-tight curriculum.

Why so successful? First, and perhaps foremost, at a time in the year when my students were feeling most burnt out, I invited them to independently explore an area of their own interest in the "real world" of music theory (i.e., without a textbook helping them). This produced projects that ranged from music analysis of film scores

to reviews of the intersections of music and language. Similarly, students were able to connect their majors in a cross-disciplinary fashion that resonates deeply with the liberal arts. For example, one first-year student explored music and statistical analysis, connecting her math major and music minor—never have I seen a student so clearly explain complex models of computer-generated music!

Second, the experience gave them practical research skills that they could use beyond the music classroom, especially in a liberal arts setting. Just understanding what a "peer review" article is opened doors to search platforms that we, as professionals, use regularly. For instance, not only did these students learn about RILM, they also discovered Google Scholar and its citation functions. A class period devoted to online research methods provided them with valuable skills for their academic work across disciplines. Similarly, students also learned to use the library for more than just quiet studying; we toured the music stacks, had a tutorial on Inter-Library Loan, and discussed how to make the most of a library catalog search.

Lastly, the project also helped students develop important writing and communication skills that are key in upper-level research of any kind, including music. We learned to distinguish between a persuasive essay and a literature review, and discussed strategies for reading and synthesizing scholarly articles, as well as approaches to organizing a proposal and presentation. These practices not only improved student writing from their earlier analysis papers, but also produced an excellent round of oral presentations.

By requiring students to pick a topic of interest and work with it, the field of music theory as a whole became bigger, broader, and deeper than whatever cursory experience my students enjoyed with rondo form and pivot-chord modulation earlier in the term. Further, this changed their idea of what a music theorist does. Instead of theorists just being people who work solely with music, particularly scores, they began to see overlap both by discipline and by method, understanding that music theorists also work with people, the brain, historical documents, machines, and so forth. I supported this (as the "live professional music theorist" in the room) by sharing writing samples and giving short oral presentations, demonstrating the type of discussion I hoped to hear from the students and giving them a sense of my own work in a specialized area of music theory.

Overall, the time that this project took away from other possible content felt reasonable. As many students would go on to independent studies, capstone projects, and future undergraduate research, this unit provided key curricular groundwork. Further, the research, writing, and communication skills gained are applicable across

the board in college, as well as in their professional lives, and are closely aligned with broader liberal arts learning goals. The open-ended aspect of the project allowed students to be creative in structuring their reading list, and encouraged them to think critically about the articles as they prepared their proposals. For instance, one student studied analysis of rap and was surprised at the amount of literature on authenticity he encountered, nuancing his initially limited view of both the field and the genre.

Finally, instead of perpetuating the classical canon or some sort of chronological "progression" of music analysis aligned with the canon, this project allowed students to think about what they care about in music—it spoke to the audience of students in a way that a canon-based curriculum did not. When we perpetuate the canon, we leave many voices out. This project provides space for voices that are missing, based, of course, on student interest. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to complicate the binary of "Western" and "non-Western" musics and theories. In this way, the project works to expose music theory's white racial frame at the same time as it invites a broadened idea of what music theory is. By unpacking what students discover in their literature reviews—the "who" as well as the "what" of the scholarship they study—space is opened in the classroom to discuss issues of racial and gender inequities in the field. The flexibility inherent in the unit allows for the project to be well suited to any undergraduate theory core, regardless of institutional values or repertoire focus. In the end, this project gave my students new answers to the question, "what do music theorists do?" and allowed them to work like professional music theorists, at least for a few weeks.

III.2. Extensions and Modifications to the Undergraduate Research Project

Something this pilot assignment does not address is that many composers and performers are often the ones teaching music theory, especially at small institutions. While I designed this research unit because it allows me to work from what Robin D. Moore might consider to be a "local" standpoint—drawing on the resources that are locally available in my own position in the classroom and my contacts in the field—I do not imagine that this is the only way to engage students in building music literacies within music theory (Moore 2017). For instance, where I asked students, "what do music theorists do with music theory?" a composer could ask, "what do composers do with music theory?" and a performer, "what do performers do with music theory?" Such units could be devised to engage students in more earnest composition projects, rather than the typical model compositions that pepper the music theory core, and more advanced performance and analysis projects that look at expressive, historical, or

stylistic performance. Whereas my unit culminated in conference-style presentations and research papers, I imagine that in a course led by a composer or performer, these final projects might be a mini-concert or lecture recital, a listening party, or analytical papers on score or performance studies that were completed.

Another possibility could be to offer a modular, choice-based assignment for the end of the semester. Instead of only a mini-literature review, students could choose from a variety of in-depth projects. These could include, for example, a research project, similar to what I have discussed here, as well as a model composition, an analysis paper, or a performance analysis. While such a menu of projects would certainly be appealing for students, this approach requires a high-level of flexibility and preparation on the part of the instructor, both for mentoring during the projects and for grading them when they are complete. Further, developing rubrics that allow for fair grading across projects with inherently different goals is quite difficult. That said, this sort of choice-based assignment could be particularly effective in larger university schools of music, where BM, BME, and BA students all take the same theory core. In considering the types of literacies most meaningful for different student populations, such projects may be particularly successful.

Finally, a note about timing: I designed the research project as a culmination of my two-semester theory core. However, it would certainly be possible to integrate this assignment into a four-semester sequence. One way to do so would be to leave the project at the end of the first year, in the second half of the second semester. This would act as a "break" from the composition and analysis projects that typically populate the undergraduate core and, ideally, further engage student buy-in to the work of music theory more generally as they move into their second year of core coursework. Still, for students to be able to understand even the most straightforward analytical scholarship they will need some experience with formal analysis and basic harmony. As such, depending on the organization of the theory core, keeping this project in the second semester may not be prudent for some undergraduate programs. In this case, placing it in the second half of the third or fourth semester would allow students to have enough foundational knowledge to understand the materials they are working with, and where it would provide a natural entrée into upper-level theory coursework.

Conclusions

While there are many more aspects of undergraduate core theory curricula that must be addressed—indeed, a full overhaul is likely necessary at both liberal arts colleges (including my own) and conservatories—I see this work as a step towards dismantling canonized notions of music literacy and opening the door to music literacies. My focus on rethinking music literacy is only one lens through which we can reconsider what we teach when we endeavor to address issues of social justice and equity in the music theory classroom. There are many other ways one might accomplish these goals. Even just working from a literacies view, there are several possibilities, of which I will offer two in brief now.

First, thinking broadly, could be the integration of theory and history, or theory and ethnomusicology curricula to have all coursework identify an overt repertoire focus (e.g., the theory and history of American bluegrass, or of 18th-century classical music). While this requires buy-in from music departments on a larger level, it is certainly a seedling of potential growth away from the white racial frame. By deeply contextualizing all music studies, students of all concentrations can develop both repertoire-specific skills and a better understanding of themes or threads that cross stylistic boundaries, and those that do not. Such a curricular overhaul would of course be dependent on specialization in the department—no one music department could have coursework in all possible musics—but would achieve a decentering of whiteness in the curriculum due to a rethinking of literacies objectives for graduates. This school-specific curriculum approach echoes some of the liberal arts models discussed above, but could be viable at larger institutions as well given the appropriate resources.

Another possible literacies-based intervention I am actively researching is incorporating embodied knowledge and practice into my classrooms, both in place of and in addition to staff-notation-based performance, analysis, and composition. While this research is ongoing, initial results have shown students experiencing nuanced and deeply personal understandings of both music-theoretical concepts such as intervals, as well as of their own bodies in space and in relation to others. Here, unlike in my above suggestion, the literacies I focus on are multiple ways of understanding a specific style and its conventions. By incorporating increased ways of knowing, I can challenge students to develop skills that may prove to be transferrable to other areas of music study, and to their lives more generally, in addition to asking them to learn deeply the content at hand.

Considering pedagogy as a broad term that encompasses both curriculum and teaching styles, these suggestions, and the pilot discussed above, emphasize applications of different ways of musical meaning-making through music literacies and encourage students to think about what the musicians they have daily contact with do, beyond teaching music. Practically, they also allow faculty to link their teaching and scholarship directly, which is potentially beneficial for faculty productivity and retention. More importantly, perhaps, such curricular changes can work, from the complete overhaul to the low-cost and low-effort solutions, to address issues that many scholars have identified in the field: that for all the diversification of music theoretical scholarship at the graduate and professional levels, undergraduate music theory is distinctly out of sync with these changes and perpetuates classical music supremacy through structures of whiteness and maleness. This issue is pervasive, despite textbooks and other teaching resources attempting to diversify repertoire and include composers and performers who are black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

Indeed, the language of inclusion here is at the heart of the problem. Diversity as additive may be a short-term solution, but in the long-term a reconceptualization of what the music theory "core" means is imperative. In this sense, although including a "what do ___ do with music theory?" unit may initially seem detrimental to the development of musical skill in that it requires possibly drastic slashing of material in the typical core syllabus, it begins the work of upending, or at least tipping, the traditional table of a singular music literacy in favor of an opening towards multiple music literacies. It is important that we employ such pedagogies, and especially so at the earliest stages of undergraduate music education, to help diversify the field of music theory.[17] In reimagining music literacy, making it more exploratory can be a key part of diversifying curricula. As Vijay Iyer discusses in his 2019 essay "Beneath Improvisation," there are clear and potentially harmful relationships between how we frame music study in academia and how we frame ourselves, and difference, in the world. He opens with a discussion of the ways in which black musics have historically been othered as "not music" by the white academic community, pointing most recently to critiques of Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize-winning album in 2018 (2019, 760). Iyer then explores his own experiences researching improvisation where he witnesses the dearth of scholars of color, particularly black scholars, being cited throughout conferences, syllabi, and publications, juxtaposing this discussion with an instance

17 Philip Ewell's 2020 blog series, "Music Theory's White Racial Frame: Confronting Racism and Sexism in American Music Theory" has helpful data and discussion towards this point.

of the "thousands of tragic, traumatic examples of the removal of Black life in an ordinary encounter gone wrong" (2019, 764). Iyer continues, arguing:

> What I hope to indicate is that such clearly improvisative moments that are contiguous with everyday life—events of extremely minor import, the innocuous actions of innocents—are systemically suspected, abhorred, criminalized, punished. So this kind of systemic struggle is what I wanted to study: the very unequal distribution of experience itself, the differential ways that the world "shows up" for different populations, in the real-time, improvisative flow of everyday life. Because if we can't even agree on that, then what do we mean when we speak of improvisation in music? In whose music? Improvisation for whom, and compared to what? (2019, 764).

Through this juxtaposition Iyer highlights what many music theory instructors already know to be true: we will not be able to recognize diverse musics in our music theory curricula if we can not even recognize and honor the diversity of lived experiences sitting in our music theory classrooms. And such recognition does not require "inclusion" into the white racial and male frame but rather de-framing and re-framing in order to truly create equity in music academe. By engaging undergraduate music theory students in a range of music literacies from the start, we not only allow them to see others in the fields of theory, composition, performance, education, or even music industry who look like them, or whose life experiences resonate with them, but we also invite them to see *themselves* as actors in these fields. We honor the literacies they already carry with them upon entering college while encouraging them to pursue diversification of those literacies. This in turn opens avenues for musical skill acquisition and meaning-making that have the potential to enrich their lives and the music communities of which they are a part, and lead to lifelong music engagement.

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Appendix

Assignment Prompt for Undergraduate Research Project

Final Research Project

Prof. Abrahams

The purpose of this project is threefold:

1. To allow you space and time to explore a sub-area of music theory in order to see what music theory has to say about a repertoire and/or analytical method that interests you.
2. To broaden your understanding of what music theory *is* and what music theorists *do*.
3. To give you experience writing in the genres of the annotated bibliography and proposal.

Step 1:

Choose an area of music theory to research from two main categories:

- *Repertoire focus*: for example, "what do music theorists have to say about grunge rock?" or "how do music theorists research grunge rock?"
- *Analytical methodology focus*: for example, "what do scholars studying rhythm and meter talk about?" or "how do people research musical meaning?"

You will develop **1-3 guiding questions to shape your topic inquiry**. These questions are **due by** ____.

Questions: 15 points

Step 2:

Complete a search to find scholarly literature on your chosen topic. You will want to find **6-10 articles**, all of which should be peer-reviewed. You will compile these sources into a **bibliography** (using Chicago style citation), which is **due by** _____.[18]

Bibliography: 15 points

Step 3:

Read! You should read each source and then create an annotation for the source.

18 Class periods and office hours were devoted to instructing students on how to search for peer-review scholarship, and how to properly cite and organize their bibliographies.

This annotation should be 1-2 paragraphs and should summarize the purpose or "so what" of the piece as well as the author's main points. Repertoire explored and/or methods used should be reviewed as well. All the annotations will be compiled into an **annotated bibliography**, **due at the finals period**. Please use Times New Roman, 12-point, double-spaced font, with page numbers and margins no greater than 1-inch.[19]

Annotated Bibliography: 60 points

Step 4:

After reading and annotating your bibliography, you will create a 300-500 word proposal, which summarizes your findings for your sub-area, and answers (in some way) your guiding topic questions. The proposal is for a literature review that you will not actually write, but pretending that you are writing a full-length review is fine. **The proposal is due at the finals period**. Please use Times New Roman, 12-point, double-spaced font, with page numbers and 1-inch margins.[20]

Proposal: 60 points

Step 5:

Present! **During our final period you will present your findings** to your classmates. While not required, you may find a PowerPoint, handout, or other visual or sound aids to be helpful.

Presentation: 50 points

Total Project: 200 points

Note: While no project meetings are required, you are *strongly encouraged* to make appointments to get along-the-way help and feedback about your project as you work on it.[21]

19 Class periods and office hours were devoted to discussion of how to read, understand, and synthesize scholarly articles, and how to write the annotations. Sample annotated bibliographies were provided as well.

20 Class periods and office hours were devoted to discussion of how to write the proposal. Sample proposals were provided as well.

21 All students ended up scheduling project meetings during office hours. If time allows, I recommend multiple project meetings throughout the course of the project—an initial meeting for brainstorming and future meetings for problem-solving thereafter.

Grading

Your project will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Ability to clearly synthesize music theoretical literature coherently and meaningfully.
- Ability to explain others' ideas concisely and accurately.
- Ability to locate scholarly resources on a topic of your choice.
- Clear, coherent, and well-edited writing.
- Adherence to project guidelines.
- Professionalism of presentation and written materials.