

## Taking back Cape Town: Music Education in the Townships

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The horrors of Apartheid in South Africa have been well documented, particularly concerning the Group Areas Act of 1950. Cheryl Walker (2005), writing about the South African land question, noted that 87% of the land was appropriated by Whites with only 13% for the Black majority. Moreover, the White minority was allocated the best lands with access to the best services and facilities. The unequal distribution of lands and resources was a means of enforcing White supremacy over Coloured and Black people who were forced by law to accept subjugation. An evaluation of the impact of legislation such as the Group Areas Act on music education, however, is still in its infancy (see Walker, 2019). This chapter aims to shed some light on the consequences of this act on music education and the challenges faced in addressing past inequalities. As a young democracy of 25 years, South Africa still grapples with the inequalities left by Apartheid and part of its systemic oppression—involuntary displacement.

I was born in 1966 into what the Apartheid government classified as a Coloured (mixed race) family in Cape Town, the third generation of the Weber family to be exposed to the brutal Apartheid laws and the Group Areas Act. Aside from dictating the areas in which Coloured people were allowed to live and work, failure to comply with these laws resulted in harsh punishment. In 1956, my family was forced to relocate from an affluent White area to a newly formed township. Similarly, my mother's parents relocated from an area demarcated for Whites only. Even within this cruel and oppressive system my grandparents were allowed to choose an area in which to settle where my parents and their siblings were able to sustain themselves. Many other families, however, were literally dumped into township communities without any choice. The flats, as these Western Cape townships became known, were a wasteland, a place reserved for the victims of forced removals.

## My Music Education Experience

Both my parents' families were musical, but music ran strongest in my father's family.<sup>1</sup> I attended a primary school that offered group music teaching only, and I received my first piano lessons from family members and nuns at a nearby convent. I attended the only Coloured high school that offered music, speech, drama, and dance as part of the curriculum. During the transition from primary to high school my awareness of Apartheid laws of separation was heightened as young people were being brutally murdered by police throughout the country during the youth uprisings of 1976. These protests escalated throughout my high school career with mass action and class boycotts that were disruptive to our educational goals.

After high school, I spent a year at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It was 1984, about 20 years after the forced removals dictated by the Group Areas Act. UCT had just rid itself of the permit system for non-White students, one in which access became less restrictive for non-White students. Easing the permit rules was a political tactic that may have forwarded the cause of integration within higher education; yet, it did little to quell Black and Coloured people's feelings of being marginalized by the colonial education system. Non-White students had to constantly prove themselves and work harder to negate the inferior basic education system that had been formulated for them during the mid-20th century. For music education, Walker (2019) noted that "[p]rioritizing the cultural output of the European art music tradition (and its derivatives in South Africa) over all others implie[d] a hierarchical value of expressive culture" (p. 145). Rather than contradict the system, we worked hard to conform to international standards of Western classical music. In other words, it was important for us to don the White culture in order to be respected.

Studying in the White area of Rondebosch (UCT's neighborhood), I was one of a few Coloured students who were allowed to study at the South African College of Music at UCT without applying for a permit. I shared lecture halls and practice rooms with the privileged White students who had matriculated from the best schools. Upon reflecting on my education at UCT, I believed that my passion and vision were to serve talented musicians in the financially marginalized communities of the Western Cape. Instinctively I knew that UCT, with its historical roots grounded in a colonial model of higher education, would not understand the journey I wished to pursue. Therefore, I decided, after one year of study to leave UCT, because that institution definitely was not for me within the context of the South African political climate.<sup>2</sup>

In 1986, I was accepted as a music student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which had been established in 1960 following a parliamentary

decision to establish separate universities without autonomy. UWC came into being on an inferior, open space of land and initially was known as a bush college. In comparison to an all-White university such as UCT, the planners “hoped that, hidden from view, it would offer no [intellectual] views of its own” (Lalu, 2012, p. 37). As a *technikon*, a training college where “Eurocentric ideologies were largely propagated” (Walker, 2019, p. 151), UWC, was earmarked to serve exclusively the academic needs of the Coloured and eventually Black students. The assembly of so many oppressed persons in one common place naturally set the grounds for organization and activism. By 1975, the government appointed UWC’s first Coloured rector, an act that moved the institution to change gradually from a site of inequality, inferiority, compliance, and mediocrity to one that formally rejected the political ideology on which it was first established. UWC, in the 1980s, had become known as “an intellectual home of the democratic Left” (Martin, 2012, p. 27).

As a student in the UWC Music Department, I was encouraged to develop my music skills—teaching and performing—by a supportive faculty. In the 1980s, UWC was already a community-focused university and understood the need for community engagement as relevant and integral to music education. “In thinking about the idea of the struggle around the concept of community, UWC was...a space for contesting and elaborating a concept of community. This bound the university in a unified project” (Lalu & Murray, 2012, p. 21). As students, we were reaching out to communities near the university where no outreach had previously occurred. While outreach does not sound like activism, it represented a kind of resistance in which we pushed minority government-imposed geographical and educational boundaries to take music into remote areas of the Western Cape to teach and perform. This foundational work in township-based music teaching inspired me to serve youth from marginalized communities. Today, UWC’s music department graduates lead the public-school sector in communities that had been established under the Group Areas Act, providing music education in townships.

### My Teaching Life

Having grown up in the Anglican Church, a denomination that opposed segregation, I chose to teach students from financially marginalized communities in the Western Cape. In my early career, I taught at four township schools as an instrumental music teacher, providing education in recorders, marimba, brass, and guitar, as well as music theory and history. I was the first Coloured educator employed as a full-time instrumental music teacher at a Black school. In each

of the schools, a colonial system of music education was implemented, particularly that of Trinity College of Music (London), and students' achievement was measured by external examiners brought to South Africa from the United Kingdom. While the students were schooled in Western musics, learning skills and attaining some successes in Eurocentric performance mediums (e.g., church music, jazz, and Broadway musicals), the practice of external examination by a former colonial government only served to reinforce the subordinate position of local musical practices and advance the dominance of Western art music from the global north. University music departments staffed by White, Black, and Coloured people still teach Western art music as the central focus of their programs. Walker (2019) surmized that "music departments appear to still be continuing their segregation era obligation as institutions that promote the state-sponsored ideological values that helped fuel apartheid, most notably the superiority of European culture" (p. 154).

Music educators who were forced to teach mainstream subjects during the school day began to develop music projects in the townships. The Department of Cultural Affairs became active in funding community-based music projects such as Christmas bands, Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigades, and cultural groups like the Minstrels and Cape Malay Choirs. Professional companies such as the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra created outreach and education initiatives in order to address the lack of music education within schools.

The geography of residence, especially for the poor and marginalized, remains unchanged at the time of the publication of this volume. Students who suffer the latent effects of forced displacement find themselves living in communities that still offer little or no arts education in their schools. In order to participate in music programs, these students must commute, relocate, or join a community music project suited to their needs. Community-based music projects continue to serve as the primary form of music education.

Higher education has done little to advance the cause of music education. University students are only trained in life skills, and no formalized music education curriculum for teacher training is provided.<sup>3</sup> There has been some forward movement to include music teacher education within university settings. For instance, I am part of a research project called Performing Arts Research Project 2020–2022, requested by the Department of Higher Education and Training and funded by the National Research Foundation. The committee is designing curriculum that will be introduced at University of the Witwatersrand and UWC. The program starts with music, dance, and drama as degree electives for interested students. The ultimate goal is to bring formal arts education into mainstream curriculum in schools. This effort is the first step in creating a new model for music education nationally.

## Negotiating Space, Making Place

Before 1994, the dawn of a democratic nation, Black and Coloured South Africans could not envisage living and working in the ‘Whites Only’ areas from which they were banned. One of the most difficult aspects of the experience of Blacks and Coloureds in South Africa was the feeling that we did not belong in places that, under Apartheid, had been foreclosed to us. To illustrate this lack of comfort with our still-new freedom, I share a situation from my teaching experience in the Cape Town region.

From 2000 to 2006 I served as the Western Cape director of the Field Band Foundation, a non-profit organization that uses “the joyful and transformative power of marching bands to prepare self-confident and healthy young people to participate constructively in society.”<sup>4</sup> Armed with two sets of instruments stored in a truck and trailer, we transported our cargo to communities as far away as Stellenbosch, about 50 kilometers from Cape Town, where activities took place after school and on Saturdays. Band members found it difficult to cross the geographical borders between poor townships and the affluent cities. They also retained the same sense of uneasiness when they entered certain buildings once reserved for Whites. On one occasion, my students were invited to participate in workshops and rehearsals at Artscape Theatre Centre in Cape Town’s central business district. During Apartheid, Artscape was called the Nico Malan Opera House; Coloured and Blacks were not allowed to attend performances. Ten years into democracy, the students still felt as though they did not belong in this space. Their feelings of not belonging had little to do with Artscape as a place, but rather with their personal experiences of conforming to the dominant narrative. In order to counter that narrative, the instructors encouraged regular attendance, which gave us time to develop artistry and more importantly, a sense of belonging. We wanted the students to know that they mattered, that their talents were important, and that exclusion was not their reality and should never be accepted as normal.

After serving with the Field Band Foundation, as well as eight years as an education coordinator and outreach manager at the Cape Philharmonic, I returned to the University of the Western Cape to head its Centre for the Performing Arts (CPA) and amid the educational restructuring, the CPA needed to find relevance in the changing music education environment, particularly that of community music. The extracurricular programs in music aimed to address the imbalances caused by Apartheid, its resultant displacement situation, and the failing education system in the new democracy. The programs provided a means to level the playing field for financially marginalized communities by providing access to higher education and encouraging students to develop

their talents. As of 2019, the university music program places senior music students into township-situated internships to teach music under the supervision of UWC CPA staff. In 2017 and 2019, the community engagement projects expanded to include a music education program for special needs students at Athlone School for the Blind.

### Conclusion

In his estimation, Walker (2019) considered that, “it must be recognized that coloniality will continue to exist so long as a still-powerful minority continues to exploit previously disadvantaged South Africans” (p. 149). But many Black and Coloured South Africans aspire to be defined by something other than the Apartheid regime, the Group Areas Act, displacement, and inhumane practices associated with forced dislocation, but Apartheid still affects us. Involuntary displacement was more than losing homes; it was losing the ability to work when unjust practices dictated future employment; it was being located in townships on inferior land that dictated status and sociality; it was being identified as lesser than humans (or as animals that herd together) in a certain demarcated area; and it was losing identity and being branded by skin color.

Separation and segregation are responsible for having devalued the human spirit and created a lack of self-belief in young people living in financially marginalized communities, grappling with their identity, and feeling helpless and unworthy. As of this writing, each step of our journey in community-based music education helps to rectify the imbalances of the past. Music education in the township communities may be rekindled with care, compassion, understanding, and most importantly, create opportunities for a new reality.

### Notes

- 1 *The Weber Family of Genadendal: Their Contribution to Religion, Education, Art, Music, and Science* (Williams, 2013, p. 3), follows the Weber family from their first arrival around 1765 until 2013.
- 2 Incidentally, the land upon which the University of Cape Town was “donated’ by colonial tycoon Cecil John Rhodes” (Walker, 2019, p. 152) was recently reclaimed during student movements called #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. The movement was successful in its efforts to have Rhodes’s statue removed from the campus grounds.

- <sup>3</sup> There are eight learning areas in basic education; one of the eight is called Life Skills. Music, art, and dance are included within the life skills cluster.
- <sup>4</sup> Teacher training colleges closed down one by one from 1998; hence, no future music educators are being trained. Teachers who graduated as music educators prior to the close down were absorbed into mainstream education. Others, like myself, moved into arts administration. For further information on Field Band Foundation, see <https://fieldband.org.za>

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