

Chase Kuesel  
7/25/18

**Reflections on Culminating Experience Project:**  
*Rhythm and Language: Explorations in Conversation*

This project proved to be transformative in regards to the way I view both the cultural role of music more generally and my professional/personal aspirations specifically. I began this project with a simple goal: to get to know some drummers in the Berklee community in a meaningful way, and to learn as much as I could from them. At the time, I had no idea that the project would transform into a larger meditation on what culture is, what music can do, what I value in life, and how we can learn to be with one another in a more connected and engaged way.

Interestingly, these thoughts crystallized for me on a recent trip to Canada, just a few weeks before I had my final presentation. After an incredibly stressful ten minutes running through the Toronto airport, in which I nearly missed my connecting flight and had to leave my friend/bandmate to spend a night in the airport (he didn't make the flight in time), I wrote a note on my phone in which I realized that this whole chaotic incident was related to my final project in a way that was totally invisible to me in the moment. Here is what I wrote:

---

6/14/18

“Anyone who believes in the stability of the self needs to watch a movie of how I moved through the Toronto airport trying to make my connecting flight. In retrospect, I'm completely horrified and devastated by the way I acted — in the most selfish, entitled, inconsiderate, and even dangerous way as possible.

What makes this worse is that I had convinced myself, just two hours earlier, that I could never act in such a way towards other people. This thought happened after I was totally disrespected by a man at the gate at the Boston airport. It was incredibly crowded, and my bag was wrongfully blocking a few seats. He marched up, motioned me to move my bag, and then told me: “What you’re going to do is you’re going to move this bag over there so my friend can sit here.” I remember feeling hurt at being talked at in such an indignant way, and also horrified that someone could talk to someone like that with no empathy. I felt with absolute clarity that I *\*would\** never, *\*could\** never talk to someone like that.

However, at the Toronto airport, I thrust my customs form at an agent. I was about a centimeter from completely running over a woman in the terminal, which is why she rightly yelled out “Jesus Christ,” as I flew by, totally apologetic and unaware of who she was. I ran up to the gate counter and started talking at — not with — the gate agent. To top it all off, I left my amazing friend Eli stranded at the gate at midnight in a foreign country with no sure plan of how he’d make it to Calgary. Needless to say, I felt terrible as the plane taxied and took off.

As I reflect on this, I realize this story is a useful analog for what this culminating experience project means to me. Those ten hectic minutes are a useful encapsulation of some of the qualities I believe I most need to work on. I was completely entitled and utterly fixated on my own needs — which I believe I was owed — and my future goals and desires that I lost any sense of awareness of the living and breathing people who were right around me, equally as deserving of respect, empathy and care as I was.

Regrettably, much of my background has taught me to act in this way. The color of my skin, my parent’s vocational choices, the neighborhood I grew up in, the luxury of attending institutions

of higher learning — these factors have combined to put me in a perpetual position of thinking I \*know\* things, of thinking I am \*owed\* things, of thinking I \*deserve\* things more than other people. This, combined with societal structures of racism and classism, a fixation on technological advancement over real-time, fully-present engagement, combines to present a force that makes it very difficult to simply \*be\* with other humans.”

---

That was a very stream-of-consciousness writing sample, and I have tried to leave it as unedited as possible. While perhaps slightly unfocused, I still agree with the main ideas it presents, and how my final project relates to them. This project was amazing because it allowed me to get very close to people who grew up in life circumstances that varied greatly from my own. As I mentioned above, it is crucial that I seek this conversations out: I simply need to constantly put myself in a position where I can learn something from the experiential knowledge of another person. Indeed, my background prized a type of bookish, academic, intellectual knowledge, which is useful for some things – but it pales in comparison to what we can *all* learn from the lived experiences of people who are different than us.

These differences need not inhibit genuine communication, friendship, and growth, however. I quickly realized, with each person I interviewed, that these circumstantial differences did not inhibit our musical or personal relationships. Quite to the contrary, we were able to bond over our shared love for music that is rooted in the African Diaspora and our experiences as students moving through the world of music together. If anything, our differences made the end result more profound and gratifying, as it again demonstrated that music can exist as a space where we are able to work together towards a common goal despite certain autobiographical differences.

This realization also informed the format of this project, which sought to combine my love for narrative/conversation with music by blending the interview and musical excerpts into a seamless video collage. I think this is a combination that could be explored more in musical spaces, and I would like to continue to do more of this type of thing – to see how narrative and music can come together to create a story that is richer than either of them alone. There have been many amazing duo recordings and compositions, and there have been many illuminating interviews of jazz musicians (*Notes and Tones* by Art Taylor immediately comes to mind), but I cannot recall seeing many examples of someone combining these two ideas into a format where they are placed next to one another. I plan to continue to explore this fertile ground as I move forward in my career and life.

---

Endless gratitude to Danilo Pérez, Marco Pignataro, everyone in the Graduate Studies office, the BGJI faculty/fellows, and my 2017-2018 BGJI classmates. You all made this year into the profound learning experience that it was, and I will remain indebted to each of you for the rest of my life for the positive impact this program has had on me.