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Providing Contexts for Understanding Musical Narratives of Power in the Classroom: Music, Politics, and Power in Grenada, West Indies

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Providing Contexts for Understanding Musical Narratives of Power in the Classroom: Music, Politics, and Power in Grenada, West Indies

Danielle Sirek
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The role of music in Grenada, West Indies has traditionally been to pass on knowledges, values, and ideals; and to provide a means of connecting to one another through expressing commonality of experience, ancestry, and nationhood. This paper explores how Eric Matthew Gairy, during his era of political leadership in Grenada (1951-1979), exploited the transmission and performance of music in very specific ways to further his career politically and exert power over Grenadian society. This historical case study of Grenada, where music was deliberately used as a method of supporting perceived social and political binaries, sheds light upon the power dynamics that are at play when we uplift certain musics in the classroom, and silence others.

Keywords: *musical narratives of power, music in politics, Grenada, steelband, calypso, music education*

The year was 1951. Grenada, West Indies: a tiny island nation of less than 100,000 people sitting 85 miles northwest of Trinidad in the Caribbean Sea. Eric Matthew Gairy, a young black man who had grown up in a climate of civil unrest and plebian desire for social, economic, and political equality, had just led his country through its first social revolution. Gairy and his supporters sought to combat the severe destitution and oppression that black persons were experiencing every day in this former slave colony, where white Europeans still constituted the ruling class. Indeed, although the enslaved had been given full emancipation in 1838, conditions in many ways had not much changed, and black Grenadians continued to live at the mercy of white society. The history of slaves and masters, the brutality of working on banana plantations

and at sugarcane mills, and the whip were thus not so very far away in the collective memory of the people during this pivotal time.

Power and knowledge are inseparable, and those who hold power control discourses in education and schooling (Bourdieu 1990, Foucault 1972/1980). Recently, there has been much intensive discussion on cultural hegemony and power dynamics in music education, and what different musical narratives of power might mean for our students. This historical case study of Grenada, which draws upon research from my doctoral fieldwork carried out in 2010 and 2011 (Sirek 2013), explores how Eric Matthew Gairy, during his era of political leadership in Grenada (1951-1979), exploited musicking¹ in very specific ways to uplift and legitimize working class identity, further his political career, and maintain power and control over black Grenadian society. It is my hope that this analysis of music, politics, and power in twentieth century Grenada, in which music and its transmission² were deliberately used as a method of supporting perceived social and political binaries, will shed light upon the power dynamics that are at play when we privilege the teaching and learning of certain musics in our classrooms, and suppress others.

Identity and Music

Considerations of identity³ are central to contemporary theorizations of West Indian culture, with an accompanying understanding of identity as a fundamentally shifting and transforming process. Stuart Hall, a black cultural theorist who wrote extensively on theories of identity (1990, 1995, 1996, 2001), warns us that “Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think” (1990, 222). Indeed, contemporary discourse on identity is extensive, with a multiplicity of viewpoints on what, in fact, constitutes identity. In Hall’s analysis of cultural and diasporic identity, he conceives of identity not as something static, rigid, and accomplished, but rather as a “production.” He continues the quote above thus:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which . . . cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production,” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (1990, 222)

Using this as a framework, I consider identity to be an ongoing *act*: continuous and ever-changing; as Hall (1996) explains, a process of becoming, not of being.

To better conceptualize identity as ongoing and ever-changing, it is perhaps valuable to conceive of identity by taking the metaphor of a rhizome,⁴ earlier envisioned by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) in their analysis of representation and interpretation: manifold and connecting any point

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to any other point and in which no location is a beginning or an end, or a this or a that. Rather, it is comprised of random connections that are, in this case, constantly shifting: “attaching and reattaching” (95–6) so that some elements are stronger, and others, weaker. As feminist music philosopher Elizabeth Gould (2009) articulates, rhizomes are made up of “anomalies, chaos, and difference” (32). I would further posit the idea that people may travel back and forth and across identities, choosing and not choosing (or being made to choose or not to choose) the many identities that are constantly being claimed by us, ascribed to us, and negotiated within us.

I invoke this conceptualization particularly in examining how identities—and the power dynamics that are formed and informed therein—are constructed and negotiated through the relationships that are created in experiences of musicking. The idea of the constantly shifting “rhizomatic” identity I propose is based on our continuously changing experiences and relationships with others and the Other: as others’ identities change, so do our relationships with them, thereby changing our perceptions both of them and of ourselves. Our relationships shift and take on new meanings, and our identities are constructed and reconstructed through these constantly transforming relationships and how we view ourselves in light of them. We then consciously or subconsciously choose facets of our identities based on what we see and what we know—or think we see and think we know—of the people we encounter and the world around us, continually asking, “Who am I at this moment?”; “Who would I like to become?”; “How would I like others to see me?”; “How would I like others not to see me?” and so on.⁵

Conceiving of identity as poststructuralist, as fluid, and as based on relationships with others begs the question that if identity is active and constantly being renegotiated, is it possible to speak of a seemingly solid “my identity”? How can one embrace simultaneously on the one hand the fluidity of identity, and on the other its ostensible stability as manifested in ideas of culture? The paradoxically fixed (*my* identity; the sense of who I am, what I perceive to be and present as the permanent, or “core,” elements of myself) yet constantly shifting concept of identity provides a productive tension to frame identity discourse. I would like to suggest that identities become temporarily presented and understood as fixed through cultural practices and performances, which provide and display “this is who we are” moments in time. And in using music to both represent and construct identity, we are also using music to crystalize and declare cultural values and articulate narratives of power.

Numerous scholars have likewise explored music as a mediator of relationships, identity, and power. Bruno Nettle (2005), for example, conceives the fundamental purpose of music as being a way of arbitrating various

relationships and maintaining group inclusivity through representation of collective values, suggesting that music is a means of:

. . . controlling humanity's relationship to the supernatural, mediating between human and other beings, and [supporting] the integrity of individual social groups. It does this by expressing the relevant central values of culture in abstracted form. (253)

Nettl further argues that music provides a way for hegemonic powers to assert themselves and for less powerful groups to “fight back” (256), which is salient for this discussion.

Simon Frith (1996/2007) tells us that we should not only be concerned with how music reflects a people, but also (and perhaps more importantly) how it produces them—the “performance” and the “story” of identity, as he puts it—through the constructing of experiences that can only be understood and appreciated by taking on certain subjective and collective identities (294). This is also examined by Christopher Small (1998, 2011) in his theory of musicking, in which music-as-experience, which can lead to ongoing ventures of self-discovery and self-definition through relationships forged during the musicking process, is perceived as much more important than music-as-object.

Music, then, functions as a means by which individuals and groups can both create and affirm identities. And since every relationship is a negotiation of power (see Foucault 1972/1980), identities—which are constantly in flux and based on relational experiences—always constitute narratives of power. Inherent in musical constructions and proclamations of identity, therefore, are also musical constructions and proclamations of power—and this has serious implications for music education.

Pause: Power, Positionality, and Representation

Before I proceed any further I wish to address, as best I can, the position from which I write and how I perceive my *own* identity and situatedness. In this research, I attempted to create a dialogical space to explore issues of power and music transmission in historical Grenada—that is, one open to multiple voices and having the potential to destabilize and challenge norms created by colonialist writings and thought. As such, I encouraged co-construction of the material that follows with my informants in order to emphasize and contextualize tensions, and to focus on issues of power, dominance, and classism in the Grenadian context. This is examined in relation to my perceptions of my own identities—themselves laden in white Western hegemonic prejudices—and my conceptualizations of power and history as a white, young, female, heterosexual, middle class, Canadian, (usually) open-minded, (hopefully) social-justice-

oriented, mother, wife, sister, daughter, singer, teacher, researcher . . . me. In this research, I therefore do not posit myself as a single omniscient voice but rather as a medium for many narratives of power, politics, and music in Grenada, co-constructing alongside my research participants so to deeply understand the way Grenadians, as Barrett and Stauffer (2009): say, “story a life and live their stories” (3): always in conversation with my own positionality.

I must also acknowledge that despite conceiving myself as a co-structor and as working alongside my informants, it is nonetheless me, the white Other ethnographer, who chooses which words to use, who decides which narratives to include, and thus whose voices will be heard (and in what ways they will be heard), and whose voices will remain silent. I am also ultimately the one who describes, interprets, and analyses these things, even with informants acting as co-constructors and reviewers of what I have written. I therefore acknowledge that although I have done the best I possibly can, issues of power, positionality, and representation still exist in this analysis of the teaching and learning of music, politics, identity, and power.

Historical Antecedents: Grenada, 1951-1979

In Grenada, musicking is considered a powerful force in the constructions, perceptions, and representations of the black Grenadian identities which have been constantly oppressed, subverted, and corrupted by colonial and postcolonial hegemonic structures (Sirek 2013). An understanding of Grenada’s history is of pivotal importance to the ensuing analysis of the musicking which itself grows from and informs this history in fundamental ways, and helps to situate musical narratives of identity, manipulation, and power by social and political means. After the complete genocide of Grenada’s indigenous peoples (the Kalinago, or “Caribs”) by French colonizers, black Grenadians were brought to the island in the mid-1600s from Africa as enslaved persons. In its brief recorded history, Grenada has seen rebellions, revolutions, and insurgencies; impossibly slow progress in social, educational, and political advancements; and conflict between its leaders and its people. The 1951 to 1979 period in Grenada’s history included two revolutions—in 1951 and 1979, respectively—and also Grenada’s turbulent journey to independence from Britain in 1974.⁶ This era of political upheaval began with the social revolution in 1951, led by black Grenadian Eric Matthew Gairy.

Eric Matthew Gairy, a young black man from a rural village in the parish⁷ of St. Andrew’s, sought to represent the often underpaid and exploited Grenadian agriculture workers through his union, the Grenada Manual and Mental Workers Union (GMMWU), and the Grenada People’s Party, a political party. The

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GMMWU became popular very quickly, and Gairy soon came to be considered the de facto leader of the black working class, despite being unsuccessful in his demands for wage increases. On 19 February 1951, Gairy called for an island-wide strike and popular protest, which involved approximately 5000 agriculture workers and 1500 public workers. The strike caused severe disruptions in Grenadian economics and politics. Thus began Grenada's social revolution. Upon marching a group of demonstrators to Parliament to demand a meeting with the Governor, Gairy and his associate Gascoigne Blaize were arrested and put into custody. More riots, destruction of communication lines and other property, road blocks, and acts of arson⁸ ensued, giving rise to anxiety amongst police and estate owners. The local government declared a state of emergency. On that same day, mass demonstrations took place, protesting the state of emergency and demanding Gairy's release, which eventually pressured the Governor into signing a proclamation ending the state of emergency and releasing Gairy on 6 March 1951. In the eyes of the people, this moment turned Gairy into an icon and strengthened their fervor even more: the Governor was forced to release Gairy simply to maintain order on the island.

The strike formally ended 19 March 1951 following a radio broadcast in which Gairy appealed to the embittered workers with the guarantee that a settlement would be reached by 4 April 1951. Over the next number of days, Gairy made a series of speeches calling for peace but also calling for change. He was hugely charismatic and people flocked to hear him speak. A wage agreement, negotiated with a mediator between the Grenada Agricultural Employers' Society and the GMMWU, was finally reached on the agreed date, 4 April 1951. Following this, a new constitution for Grenada was approved in September 1951, which, for the first time, included election by universal adult suffrage and the removal of all barriers to enfranchisement. This enabled virtually every of-age Grenadian, regardless of social status, the ability to win a seat in the government.

The successes of the social revolution were just the beginning for Eric Matthew Gairy; he would go on to dominate politics in Grenada for over 25 years, winning five of the next seven elections. During this time, he was immensely popular: Gairy had a charming personality, captivating oratory, and was regarded as a defender of the people's rights and the person who could free the Grenadian people of their bondage. As much was evidenced in the various pro-Gairy political songs⁹ that arose during this time period, which were sung by his supporters at political rallies and at public events. One such song urges Grenadians to vote for "the star," Gairy's symbol on the voting ballot. Since most of Gairy's supporters were illiterate, this was a significantly meaningful symbol; according to one informant, the word "star" became synonymous with Gairy and alluded to Gairy's

God-like status amongst the black working class (e-mail correspondence with a music teacher, 3 June 2013):

If you want to live a heavenly life,
We voting the star
If you want to live a heavenly life,
We voting the star
And we don't care what nobody say,
We voting the star on election day!
And we don't care what nobody say
We voting the star on election day!

This second example, a children's song, asks God to bless Uncle (a nickname by which Gairy was commonly referred) "Gaywee":

God bless Uncle Gaywee
God bless Uncle Gaywee
God bless Uncle Gaywee
Blessings unto him.

Other songs, such as this popular GMMWU anthem, proclaimed that Grenadians would do whatever possible to protect Gairy and his government:

We'll never let our leader fall,
For we love him the best of all.
We don't want to fight to show our might,
But when we start we'll fight, fight, fight!
In peace or war, you'll hear us sing,
God save our leader,
God save us all,
At the ending of the strike,
The flag unfurled
We'll never let our leader fall!¹⁰

In the post-social revolution period, Gairy set the ambitious goals of bringing Grenada to independence and becoming Grenada's first Prime Minister, which he would eventually accomplish in 1974. During this time, Gairy became increasingly unscrupulous, using manipulation and blackmail as means of control. After negotiations surrounding the Federation of the West Indies collapsed in 1961, allegations of embezzlement and abuse of public funds precipitated an inquiry. Gairy was found to have instructed others under his authority to spend over budget, and had also approved numerous expenditures without a warrant—enormous excesses that would come to be known as "squandermania."¹¹ Despite Gairy's increasingly dictatorial and unscrupulous behavior, the people still looked to him to provide leadership and to facilitate change, for it had not been until Gairy took power that the lower classes had

unions, universal suffrage, and the ability to apply for candidacy in the election, and it was not until Gairy that wages were increased and that labor laws were created. This was the first time that many felt some element of control over these aspects of their lives and indeed empowered, and music contributed much to this effect.

“This song is for love of country...”:¹² Music, Politics, and Power in Grenada

The role of music in Grenada has traditionally been to pass on knowledges, values, and ideals; and to provide a means of connecting to one another through expressing commonality of experience, ancestry, and nationhood in very direct ways. Eric Matthew Gairy recognized the importance of grassroots and folk artforms¹³ to the black Grenadian working class, and that music could be used as a powerful tool in encouraging or subverting hegemonic structures. Throughout his political career, he thus effectively “propagandized” the working class and exploited folk culture to empower and legitimize the identity of the black Grenadian majority. Gairy did this in very deliberate ways to cultivate a working class identity for himself to use to his advantage; to unify the bloc of traditionally impoverished voters he sought to rally under one identity; and to simultaneously ostracize the upper class, despite, paradoxically but perhaps not uniquely, he himself aspiring to the values of the white elite.¹⁴

In Grenada, music, drama, and storytelling act as guiding mechanisms for behavior, and also function as a way of sharing Grenadian experience in a deep and meaningful way:

[Folk artforms exist] to guide the way we speak, the way we act—tell stories of the society, politics, and to teach children what to do and what not to do . . . [We have] a very, very rich musical culture and folk culture. Because we have a very, very rich culture of storytelling, and a very, very rich culture of folk music. And a very, very rich music and theatrical culture that is integrated into our lives. To us, theater is not about performances. Theater is about stating your experiences.

Interview with a saxophonist
18 April 2011

Although the teaching of music in Grenada historically took place in informal contexts, such as at social events and in familial settings, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century under Gairy’s rule, formalized music learning initiatives were increasingly more common. The transmission of grassroots and folk artforms became prolific in political and cultural events with the inauguration of multiple festivals and competitions of music.¹⁵ As a result of these initiatives, many prominent performance ensembles began to emerge

shortly after the social revolution in 1951, often stemming from village folk groups or church choirs (interview with a Ministry of Culture employee, 13 April 2011). Gairy also established a Ministry of Culture that, as this interviewee explained, functioned in part to garner political support:

Basically I think, based on my discussion with persons across the premise for the establishment for the Ministry of Culture was to kind of assist in the spread of the traditional folk art . . . around the late 60s, 70s, that trend began with the then Prime Minister, Gairy, he was the one who introduced a Department and Division of Culture, and a Ministry of Youth and Sport. So that kind of drive to create some avenues, new avenues for young people to learn more about the traditional artforms. And at that point in time I think from a political standpoint it was prudent for him because a lot of his followers were grassroots people who traditionally had that knowledge; that knowledge was embedded. And in order to give some kind of recognition and appreciation for their knowledge, he created that kind of platform. So a lot of the people who were employed in the division at that time, were . . . persons who would actually go around and try to discover what was present in the communities in terms of music, dance, and that sort of thing, to try and promote it. So they were basically dealing with teaching, passing on traditional knowledge. That was the focus around the late 60s, 70s.

Interview with a Ministry of Culture employee
13 April 2011

Grenadian artist Oliver Benoit (2011), writing on the relationship between Grenadian national identity and the institutionalization of the visual arts in Grenada, suggests that after universal suffrage in 1951, the black working class that constituted the majority of the Grenadian population began building under their political leaders a “new, somewhat fragmented identity,” and that while they aspired to the ideologies and values of the white upper class, they were consistently rejected due to their color and social standing (563). He argues that due to this stratification, a strong national identity in Grenada did not form, thus impacting the development of national art and art institutions, an argument that could be seen to apply to other cultural forms as well, including music. Although Grenadians at this time used music in very deliberate ways to negotiate Grenadian identities, ideas of exactly what these identities were, and how they should be manifested, differed greatly between the elite, the burgeoning middle class, and the black working class.

Unsurprisingly, the white bourgeois attempted to curtail the attempts of the black working class to define Grenadian culture, and as much as possible prevented the artforms of the lower class, which they considered to be primitive and uncouth (and perhaps also dangerous or even evil), from becoming representative of Grenada and Grenadian identity. As one older interviewee recounted:

In the beginning, the bourgeois redirected us. It's surprising to see how many groups now exist on the island . . . The higher folks, in class, did not like it. They felt that it was too low-rated to go to see or to participate in. But we carried on, and it worked out in '58. We started roughly in '50-'51. And by '58 this was where the call came. They needed a performing group to represent Grenada at the inauguration of the Federal Parliament, and we were the only existing group here.

Interview with a teacher and storyteller
23 April 2011

In uplifting the transmission and performance of working class musicking and its associated ideals, Gairy acknowledged the people who played these musics. As this interviewee noted, the Gairy government supported some of the folk musicians who helped promote Gairy through their music, and these musicians became affiliated with the most popular politician on the island:

Interviewee: The quadrille and the lancers, and the string bands¹⁶ were supported by Eric Matthew Gairy; he was very keen on that kind of culture. A lot of the folk; the singing of the folk songs, and so on.

Interviewer: Why do you think he was keen on it?

Interviewee: Because he came from the roots himself! And I think he was a very astute politician anyway, and he knew that the people loved these things . . . Some of the bands, some of the dancers, even became identified with him.¹⁷

Interview with a Grenadian historian and supporter of the arts
19 April 2011

The elevation of working class culture influenced Grenadian perceptions of their own cultural identities and won Gairy many supporters. This initiated a transition whereby members of the working class and their cultural forms became representative of Grenadian identity, and they felt empowered by this representation, as demonstrated in discussions with informants about performances of grassroots and folk musics on- and off-island during this time. These musics, although always loved by the Grenadian majority and recognized by the black population as an integral component of Grenadian identity, were previously considered unsophisticated and were not taken seriously, particularly by the white upper class. However, now, with Gairy, they gained popularity and began to be performed as an expression of Grenadian identities, and were in fact used as a means of reinventing these identities (interview with a school principal and former music teacher, 14 April 2011; interview with a former music teacher, 26 April 2011). Indeed, these musics, for many, thus became acceptable, admired, desired—something of which to be proud.

In facilitating the teaching and learning of musics meaningful to and representative of the working class, and recontextualizing them as suitable and even respectable, over the course of his reign Gairy transformed and uplifted “low-class” musicking. In so doing, he legitimized Grenadian working class identities and experiences, thereby empowering (or at least, giving the illusion of empowering) the people who were associated with them. The next section examines more closely Gairy’s use of steel pan and calypso music as tools of power and control, as well as the impact of Gairy’s political appropriation of these musics on Grenadian identities. For many Grenadian families, steel pan and calypso music were part of everyday life, heard at community gatherings and at special events, while at work, or while attending to chores. These types of music were (and are) representative and constitutive of African ancestry and nationhood, with which many working class people felt a sense of belongingness and connection. Steel pan and calypso have continued to play an important role in Grenadian musical life since Gairy and his government uplifted their legitimacy and acceptability, and so the material that follows draws upon present-day interviews and participant observation, as well as historical accounts and oral history.

Steel Pan

Steel pan developed at the turn of the last century as a response to European suppression of African drumming, and is thus a music that was created and celebrated by the working class in spite of incredible hardship. The importance of the historical link to drumming was made clear by various informants, since drumming is perceived as representing African ancestry and nationhood. In some contexts drumming is even seen as *creating* this nationhood, particularly when certain rhythms are played that are believed to be African in origin. Black Grenadian identities are heavily influenced by the imagined¹⁸ and real memories of Africa and the trauma of slavery, and many Grenadians attempt to create meaningful relationships with one another through musical expressions of the African past.¹⁹ Informants and Grenadian media thus frequently drew associations between drumming and a distant African homeland. One such informant, an elderly Grenadian teacher and storyteller, told me that when she and other African descendants listen to African drumming, the “blood stir”:²⁰

Let’s face it . . . we are descendants of the African people. And the Africans’ early means of communication, when they came to the West Indies: sound of the drums. Sound of the drums. African descendants, when they hear the sound of a drum, the blood stir!

Interview with a teacher and storyteller
23 April 2011

As the informant above describes, there is a very visceral reaction to drumming, and an understanding that drumming functions as means of communication and acceptance even amongst disparate groups of African descendants.

Intrinsic to West African drumming and the steel pan that grew out of it are collective dancing and movement as compulsory performance idioms, which were historical ways of subverting oppression and control over black bodies. The conventions of pan music, which often include syncopated rhythms, quick melismatic passages and rolled long notes (eliciting a sustained “tremolo” effect), and a strong, constant beat provided by a rhythm section which might include a drum kit and other ancillary percussion instruments (such as congas and brake drum) lend themselves naturally to movement and dancing, which is almost always a part of pan in practice and in performance. The carefree attitude that is embodied in the movement and dancing juxtaposes the strident, metallic timbre of the pan, which conceivably invokes imagined or real memories of the worker’s plight, conjuring images of the enslaved past, industrialization, development, and the tireless laboring of the working class. This freedom in movement even today, for many, represents coming together and experiencing freedom from the oppression of systemic poverty, racism, and classism.

[Example: Coyaba New Dimension Steel Orchestra](#)

Collective musical experience and the subversion of oppression are experienced in other ways, too. Pan music can be arrangements of anything from contemporary calypsos—the most common type of pan music and encompassing a history of subjugation in its own right, as will be henceforth discussed—to popular socas,²¹ the Black Eyed Peas, Bach, or music written specifically for pan. As can be seen in the example above, pan is most frequently played in a steelband ensemble, and steelband groups nearly always play collectively. The richly-textured, melody-dominated homophonic nature of steelband music and similarity of tone color amongst the different types of pans can contribute to a feeling of “oneness” in group pan playing that is expressed by many pannists in Grenada. I believe that it is in this experience of coming together and “oneness” that we often have personally meaningful musicking experiences within which we feel more wholly ourselves—and empowered and validated in this feeling of unity and wholeness. Many aspects of steelband music, then, emphasize collective musical experience and working class narratives, making it ideal for appropriation by Gairy and his government, as noted by this interviewee:

Because steelband was working class; cultural things, he [Gairy] would promote it [to gain political support].

Interview with a former politician
7 May 2011

Gairy used steelbands to illustrate his power and ability to captivate—or control—the Grenadian public. He often, for example, employed pan music at political events to make an “entrance” and to enhance his showmanship as a politician, or to drown out his opponents, despite this being illegal. Indeed, after leading a steelband through an opponent’s political meeting in 1957, Gairy was disenfranchised for a period of five years. Another example of this is relayed by calypsonian Flying Turkey in an early-1980s discussion with interviewer Chris Searle (1983). He says:

So [Gairy and the masses] came over the hill, Market Hill that is, the steelband playing “Glory Alleluia.” At the head of the procession, walked a man dressed in the now familiar white suit, topped by an ankle length Cavalier Robe of black and vivid amber. In one hand he bore a massive Bible, and in the other a Whale Bone white walking stick. (49)

Here, it seems, Gairy is using steelband to simultaneously emphasize both his working class identity and his elite status amongst the working poor, concurrently eliciting images both of “everyday man” by walking down to the market to pan music; and also of “Savior”: clad in a suit of pure white, a hymn as his personal theme song, and an oversized Bible for good measure. He was a present-day, working class Messiah, and music was used deliberately to contribute to this effect.

In using steel pan, Gairy effectively aroused imagined collective memories of the enslaved African past. He did this by promoting, and in some cases, manipulating the music that had formerly been suppressed by European slave owners and stigmatized in post-Emancipation Grenada due to the European social ideals that lingered in Grenadian society. Steel pan thus functioned as an excellent tool for the charismatic Gairy to promote himself and foster unity and solidarity amongst the working class: in using steel pan music, Gairy was effectually saying, “I share your ancestry; I share your plight. I am one of you.” Grenadians, feeling belongingness in their understanding of and relating to pan music, and empowerment in its sudden distinction, embraced the black working class identities that accompanied this music and also—importantly—the political leader who promoted it and endorsed its acceptability.

generally political or satirical in nature, and expresses values and worldviews prevalent amongst the working class and incorporates analyses of social issues. Calypsonians privilege the articulation of lyrics by way of employing a moderate- or slightly up-tempo speed, and by using rhythms that follow speech patterns; for example, syncopated rhythms for text emphasis may be used, or multiple words may be sung over one repeated note that is periodically accented to assist comprehension of the text in song lyrics. Moreover, calypsonians often sing melodies in a somewhat forceful way that both carries the sound and aids in textual clarity. This way of singing perhaps also indicates the nature of the lyrics: the voice is frequently not gentle or what some may consider lovely sounding, and neither, commonly, is the message—and the timbre of the voice reflects this.

Table 1: Examples of Grenadian Calypso Music

Lord Melody, " Janet " (1956)
Mighty Sparrow, " Grenada Crisis " (1964)
Flying Turkey, " Freedom Day " (1981)
Black Wizard, " IMF " (1989)
African Teller, " Political Monkeys " (1991)
Lady Samo, " Struggle on Black Woman " (2012)

Meaning is also found in the well-known origins of calypso music, which are largely based on legend and oral history but are nonetheless widely known and accepted as truth in Grenadian society. Enslaved West Africans brought a tradition of history and social commentary through music, and used song extensively to protest or satirize their enslavement.²² Knowledge of this history, which directly links the calypso song form with the African past, means that calypso carries within it stories of African ancestry and nationhood, as well as of resistance, power, and subjugation. This made calypso ideal for appropriation, since Gairy and his supporters also wanted to convey these notions: that the working class should be unified in their collective past, and that in this unification they should fight oppression and those who were responsible for it.

Calypso music is culturally understood as an influential medium for negotiating Grenadian morals, ethics, and ideologies. Grenadians understand its history, context, and overt and covert meanings, and identify with it since it addresses contemporary issues. As one older interviewee remarked:

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People would identify with [calypso] because it's current . . . the lyrics are simple and related to people.

Interview with a former politician
7 May 2011

Many of my informants described calypso as being a unique, dynamic, living musical genre that, as this interviewee said, documents the history of “our” people:

You can trace all of West Indian history through the calypsos . . . take all the calypsos from any year and just listening to the content you could tell when. What period. Or something like that. Because it documents the history of our people over the years. And no other culture has that!

Interview with a former calypso judge
11 April 2011

Another interviewee explained to me that calypso is seen as a reflection of contemporary issues in Grenadian society:

So the calypso, is a mirror of the society. In the calypso, you get all the social issues, the political issues, the economic issues.

Interview with a calypsonian
12 April 2011

The two latter interviewees, in referring to calypso as a method of documenting history and as a mirror of Grenadian society, respectively, evidently privilege calypso, and the calypsonian, as a means of getting truthful and important information. The calypsonian therefore acts as an authoritative reporter who ruminates upon, critiques, laments, fights, or celebrates political or ethical situations, disseminating this information to the Grenadian public in a way perceived to be honest and inspiring to the people for whom he (or, less commonly, she) is singing. Calypsonian Ajamu discusses this role in his song, “My Calypso”, in which he envisions himself as fighting wickedness via the medium of “sweet calypso”:

[Example: Ajamu, “My Calypso” \(1991\)](#)

The widely held public opinion that the calypsonian is a trustworthy source of information and a person committed to fighting immorality, oppression, and wrongdoing was apparent in multiple interviews, and is also articulated by the calypsonians themselves in various calypso songs, as seen in the example above. The calypsonian, evidently having a vested interest in presenting oneself as a

valuable member of Grenadian society carrying out valuable work, writes and performs lyrics that convey this sentiment. Indeed, calypsonians perceive, and in fact perpetuate, the idea that the people are dependent on them for information and also to uplift. Calypso music is therefore often used to broadcast political news and social commentary, and is seen, as Morgan (2005) observes, as a “barometer of public opinion” (2). It is both a source of information and a voice for the disenfranchised:

It’s the poor people’s, we, we are the poor people’s messenger.

Interview with a calypsonian/soca singer
15 April 2011

As the popularity of calypso music grew in Grenada at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, calypsonians were strongly “persuaded” to sing in favor of Gairy; any calypso that was seemingly against his rule—or, if you prefer, his dictatorship—was perceived to be a threat to the affirmed “Gairyite” identity of the working class, and consequently, to Gairy’s political success. Various informants described to me that many calypsonians such as Mighty Bomber, Brother Valentino, Lord Melody, Mighty Unlucky, Joe Joe, and Mighty Tadpole wrote calypsos with lyrics supporting Gairy and his government. One such calypsonian, Mighty Caruso, wrote a number of pro-Gairy calypsos, including “Rum Gone Down,” a song about Gairy’s Grenada United Labour Party lowering the rum tax, and “Rule Mr. Gairy,” in which Mighty Caruso exhorted Gairy to rule, and suggested that if “Mr. Gairy” resigned, Gairy should make Mighty Caruso the Prime Minister. The lyrics that follow were written out for me by an informant, since there are no recordings of these songs—as is frequently the case with calypso, which is often written anew for every performance or competition in the calypso tent.

Rule Mr. Gairy
Rule Mr. Gairy
Rule Mr. Gairy, rule
And if you resign, you must remember
(Use your head)²³ and make me the Prime Minister

“Run Around GNP” by Townman, another calypso from this era, is an anti-Grenada National Party song; the GNP was a political party for and of the middle class and landowners in Grenada—those that largely opposed Gairy and his Grenada United Labour Party:

Run around GNP, run around
Run around GNP, run around
If you hear what we leader say
Day by day

With ah piece ah rope and ah mango tree
We go' hang up GNP²⁴

These calypsos are evidence of the popularity of singing in favor of Gairy's rule and indeed, the calypsonians responsible for these songs enjoyed distinction within Grenada and were treated well by his government.

However, the "artistes," as they are called there, who opposed Gairy were ostracized, not invited to sing publicly, and not given airtime on the radio. Their tapes were lost, destroyed, or flat-out refused. Some artistes, according to Flying Turkey, were threatened or even beaten when they went to the sole radio station on the island to, as he said, "plead, protest, cuss" to get their music played (Searle 1983, 50). McLean (1986) outlines some of the suppressive and authoritarian actions that the Gairy government took to censor calypso music during this time:

The 1974 Public Order Act imposed a \$500 fine or six months in prison for the use of abusive language or slogans which were likely to stir up hatred . . . Radio Grenada, the only station on the island, was not available . . . to anyone with opposing views. The station was state-owned and under Gairy's personal control. (88)

Calypsonians who wished to sing about political struggles sometimes therefore had to be very careful with their words and successfully use satire and double entendre (common idioms in this genre) to get their message to the people. If they were unable to do this effectively, they would have the microphone taken and potentially also get "licks" (a beating) for their transgression (Searle 1983, 53). As Flying Turkey describes, the dictatorship's method of subduing the people was to "[thief] the artist's head":

It was always Gairy's aim to subdue the voice of the people, and calypso was really rising. So he tried many things. He tried to boost "culture" with strings attached. At a particular period, for you to go into the savannah and be successful, you had to sing in favor of the dictatorship. The judges were carefully chosen and some artistes were favored. So some calypsonians sang "Grenada is nice, Grenada is beautiful, we have no problems, we are a comfortable people, everything is nice." That was the dictatorship's method of calming the artistes—"Thieving the artist's head" was the local expression—and keeping them from expressing negatives and protest, getting them to paint a false image and then turning around and convincing followers that since you are saying that the voice of the calypsonian is the voice of the people, the calypsonian is saying that things are good, then what more do you want? (Searle 1983, 49)

This stifling occurred in other ways as well: informants described to me how foreign recordings perceived to oppose the dictatorship were banned, for example. In these cases, Gairy's government was concerned that certain types of

music would lead people to no longer identify with Gairy or his ideologies, which could be very dangerous for Gairy's political position.

Calypsonians are regarded as communicators and commentators. They critically analyze and challenge social realities, and tell stories of governmental decisions, moral codes, and social struggles at the local level as the calypsonians perceive them to be. Since calypsonians function as investigators, as a conscience for the decision-makers, and as resisters, agitators, and skeptics, they can, as one interviewee put it to me, "transform" the way people think:

The culture of Grenada too, it can be, it's very political. Where it regards music. Especially when it comes to calypso music. Where, calypsonians, normally, are the transformers in the way people think about the government. Or change their government if they need to change the government.

Interview with a jazz saxophonist
20 April 2011

Indeed, culture, as Pool (1994) articulates, is regarded as the fundamental basis for shifts in ideology in Grenada. In combination with Gairy's manipulation and charisma, working class Grenadians were inspired by the pro-Gairy calypsos approved by his government. Gairy conceivably owed his success therefore in no small part to the pro-Gairy calypsonians and pro-Gairy calypso music during this era. However, the political pressure to sing or play only pro-Gairy calypsos was also made increasingly apparent to the public as Gairy's reign went on, as just described.

Gairy, then, used music as a form of manipulation and control, as with employing steelbands to drown out his political opponents or oppressing oppositional calypsonians in sometimes very violent ways.²⁵ He also used music as a means of empowering black Grenadians—or, at the very least, making them *feel* empowered—by promoting musicking that evoked commonality of working class experience through imagined and real collective memories of Africa, slavery, and oppression. Musical forms such as steel pan and calypso were (despite the efforts of the white bourgeoisie) elevated by Gairy and his government and became considered important and powerful: representing the culture and identity of the black Grenadian majority. Such political moves, through the exploitation of the transmission and performance of music, were hugely beneficial to Gairy's political career.

"I put my Pride up on the Shelf; I Bless this Question to Myself":²⁶ Toward New Ways of Thinking

Global and historical accounts of what is prioritized in the teaching and learning of music—and for what reasons—can illuminate issues of inclusion and exclusion,

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empowerment and disempowerment, and access and denial in our own classrooms and contexts. When I first went to Grenada to study music educational practices there, I had no inkling that issues of the transmission of music would be so incredibly complex. Conversations with informants about musicking frequently came back to themes of its utter cruciality within Grenadian culture, and its ubiquitous presence in any discussions of Grenadian identity. What began as a study of music teaching and learning in Grenada thus turned into a study of people and their stories—stories of their musicking, yes, but at the same time much more than that: stories of *who they are*. This historical case study might therefore be seen as a crucible in which are worked out the understandings between the relationships of musicking to the themes of identity and power, and how music transmission and performance can function to bring people together, or alienate them. It is here that I would like to articulate my emerging thoughts on the usefulness of this ethnomusicological research to my own teaching practice.

Throughout my research, I was able both to observe and to experience the multiplicity of ways that people make music in Grenada, and explore to what ends music was and is taught and learned there. In Grenada, as everywhere, music is transmitted for very specific reasons, including perpetuating and passing on knowledges, values, and identities. Musicking, including the activities involving the transmission of musical knowledge and practice—that is, music education wherever this occurs—impacts and informs social ideologies and is inexorably intertwined with politics and positions of power. In living in a culture whose identity was seen as constantly precarious due in large part to its tumultuous sociopolitical history, and seeing just how central musicking was to claiming that identity and to matters of empowerment and disempowerment, I learned to see with a much sharper perception what music might mean to my own students for whom identity is also precarious or beaten down, whether this be ethnic identity, gender identity, socioeconomic identity, countless other identities—or those who are disenfranchised in other ways.

In my own educational context in Southern Ontario, students can come from a diverse range of backgrounds, often comprising varied socio-economic statuses, ethnicities, sexual orientations, family relationships, academic abilities, religious and moral viewpoints, and, of course, musical tastes and interests. Irrespective of these differences, adolescents in particular often engage with music outside school for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways for many hours every day: consuming music through .mp3 players, music television stations, and YouTube; creating music through video games, computer programs, and composition apps; and by using conventional instruments or singing. Music is therefore a pervasive

and important aspect of daily life for many young people, and the musicking they take part in is intrinsically bounded to their identities, at once reflecting and constructing how they perceive themselves, and how they want others to perceive them. However, in spite of the varied musical narratives of our students, the Ontario music curriculum, which largely privileges the Western classical canon and musical literacy, is still mostly taught in a replicating and reiterative process—often leaving room for little else save for a tokenistic nod toward other musics and ways of knowing and experiencing music.

Music can seemingly serve to empower or disempower entire societies of people sometimes very acutely, as I have just shared with you in this historical case study of Grenada, and I reflect now that in acknowledging and uplifting the musicking of our students, we are also acknowledging their values and identities. We have the ability to empower them—or to disempower them—in potentially very influential ways.

However, just as Gairy was concerned that certain types of music would lead people to no longer identify with the ideologies of his dictatorship, which could be catastrophic for his political position; so too perhaps are we concerned that if we acknowledge the musics meaningful to our students, that our position—that is, the position of cultural, economic, and racial privilege—will be compromised: our music, and us, too, no longer considered “superior”. But ignoring, and worse, diminishing the musics of our students can serve to further disempower those students who are already marginalized. In so doing, we are effectively saying that not only is our students’ music unimportant and not worthy, but, since music is so bound up with identity, that the students *themselves* are unimportant and not worthy of knowing or trying to understand. In disregarding or trivializing our students’ cultural histories, life experiences, and identities, and the music which negotiates, nurtures, and expresses these things, we render engaging, dialogic, and meaningful teaching and learning difficult, if even possible at all.

I am not alone of course in stressing the importance of acknowledging and lifting up the musics of our students, which is so intertwined with their identities and the sense of who they are, but from my immersion in the musicking of Grenada, where music has had and continues to have such a profound significance in a context of sociopolitical trauma and uncertainty, I can begin to see more clearly the significance of this shift to really taking the musics and perceptions of my own students into account. Approaching the teaching and learning of music from these perspectives, rather than from that of the still pervasively prioritized musical excellence in the Western classical canon, can enable us to empower and to include. It is my hope that this historical case study of Grenada, where music was deliberately used as a means of power and control,

can shed light upon the power dynamics that are at play when we uplift certain musics in the classroom, and silence others—and what this means to our students, some of whom will thus also be lifted up, and others, effectively silenced.

About the Author

Danielle Sirek instructs in the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor, where she teaches music and drama education classes to undergraduates and preservice teachers, as well as graduate-level courses in assessment. Prior to teaching in higher education, she taught preschool through grade 12 music in Canada and Grenada, West Indies. Sirek received her Ph.D. from the Royal Northern College of Music (UK). She also holds a Bachelor of Music from Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada), and a Master of Music from the University of Toronto (Canada). An active singer, Danielle sings professionally with the Canadian Chamber Choir and has performed as a soloist with several notable ensembles including the Windsor Symphony Orchestra, the Northern Sinfonia, and the Toronto Philharmonia. Her teaching and research interests include teacher education, the intersections between music education and ethnomusicology, musical narratives of identity, and arts education for social justice.

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Notes

¹ Here, I take Small's (1998) explication of the term.

² "Transmission" is constitutive of teaching and learning by formal and informal means in and out of school.

³ I conceive of identity as the convergence of socio-politics and the historical past, and including within it the values, beliefs, and ideologies of oneself and one's

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culture(s), as well as characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and race.

⁴ A rhizome is a non-hierarchical mass root structure, usually found underground. Rhizomes have the ability to constantly grow their roots and to send out new shoots below or above ground. If a piece of the rhizome is separated, a new plant can grow from the separated piece.

⁵ Identity as a phenomenon that is constantly shifting through relational experiences has similarly been asserted by numerous postcolonial scholars including Edward Said (1978), Stuart Hall (1990), Homi Bhabha (1994), and others.

⁶ Grenada was granted independence from Britain on 7 February 1974, becoming the smallest independent nation in the Western Hemisphere, despite not obtaining the customary two-thirds majority in a referendum (Payne 1984). The move to independence was purportedly vastly unpopular, and in the months preceding independence, Grenada experienced opposition drives pushed daily by groups comprised mostly of young people as well as multiple strikes. McLean (1986) notes that calypso was heavily censored in the 1976 election following independence.

⁷ Regional division.

⁸ Sometimes referred to as “sky red” in Grenada. Sky red was prevalent at various times of social unrest in Grenada, particularly between 1951-1979. The acts of arson were generally directed at old estate homes to erase reminders of the enslaved past (e-mail correspondence with a music teacher, 3 June 2013).

⁹ Lyrics of these political songs were provided by members of the SpiceIslander Talkshop.

¹⁰ Taylor (2008) notes that this song is an adaptation of “We’ll Never Let the Old Flag Fall”, a marching song about the Union Jack from the First World War era.

¹¹ According to Singham (1968), calypsos highlighting Gairy’s excessive spending habits, such as “Squandermania” by Trinidadian Mighty Zebra in 1961, were popularized by the opposition—inasmuch as they were able under Gairy’s censorship:

The Chief Minister of Grenada
Spending money like fire
He got a piano for three thousand five
And some Grenadians can’t eat enough to stay alive

He run country into bankruptcy
Spending all tax payers' money
Oh, Oh Uncle Gairy
What you doing to we
You fooling the Grenadians one by one
And killing them with starvation.

¹² “This song is for love of country” is a lyric from Grenadian Papa Jerry’s (2011) calypso “[Love of Country](#)”.

¹³ Grenadians often refer to musical genres or cultural forms as “artforms” (usually spelled as one word rather than two); i.e. the calypso artform. Folk and grassroots musics (sometimes also referred to as “traditional” music) in Grenada are African- and European-based syncretic artforms that are culturally significant to the black working class population. They are dually comprised of a) the African customs and cultural features the enslaved retained to cope with the trauma of their situation, and b) the European customs and cultural features that the French and British colonial masters brought with them to the island. Broadly speaking, grassroots music in Grenada includes artforms such as calypso, steel pan, and other more recent—but not generally considered to be “modern”—musical forms that convey ideas and identities of “everyday people”. Folk music (which many identified as also being “grassroots”) includes folk songs in English, patois, or a combination, as well as music to accompany folk dances which could feature hand drums, string band, guitars, tamboo bamboo, and other percussion instruments.

¹⁴ To further himself politically, Gairy embraced British etiquette and cultural forms when appropriate. As one informant, in telling a story wherein her relations were invited to a reception of some extravagance put on by Gairy, said to me, “We have a Gairy crafty and keen enough to know his onions . . . I don’t think drums were playing *that* night” (e-mail correspondence with a historian, 30 March 2013, italics mine). For a discussion on Gairy’s apparent desire to be accepted by the ruling class in Grenada, please see Benoit’s (2007) article on “ressentiment”.

¹⁵ Such as the Festival of the Arts (a competition that currently occurs every other year and that includes both “folk” and “classical” categories) and the Best Village Competition (a competition in which a different area was featured along the Carenage every night with cultural displays (interview with a former principal, 24 April 2011)). The Best Village competition, which showcases village beautification projects, cultural exhibitions, and the cooking of the national dish, oildown, was re-established in 2012 by the National Celebrations’ Committee (NCC) and occurs during the independence celebrations in February.

¹⁶ String band music is comprised of a combination of guitar, cuatro, violin, bass drum, chac-chac (shaker), mandolin, tambourine, and various homemade instruments of iron or steel. String bands historically performed at funerals or wakes, fetes (parties), the opening of shops, and other local events; and provided musical accompaniment for folk dances, certain Christmas songs, and other serenading. Quadrille is a traditional partner dance performed with violin, bass drum, and tambourine that takes its origin in 18th century French and English quadrille music and dance. [Example: Quadrille by a Carriacouan String Band](#) (Association for Cultural Equity 2011). Historically, there were three types of quadrille: Albert, Lancers, and English. [Example: Birchgrove Lancer Dancers.](#)

¹⁷ For example, the Gairyite group the Jolly Boys, which was perhaps the last string band in Grenada to play at funerals (interview with a music teacher, 8 May 2011).

¹⁸ By “imagined” I do not wish to imply illegitimacy. Indeed, these histories were passed down from generation to generation through story and song, and are indeed considered real and legitimate—though imagined—in this way.

¹⁹ The importance of the connection to Africa and the desired link to the African past in diasporic communities has been explored by numerous notable cultural theorists (see, for example, Brathwaite 1971, 1974, 1981, 1986/1993, 1992/1993, DuBois 1903/2007, Fanon 1963/2004, Gilroy 1993), and during the course of my fieldwork, it became very clear to me indeed that many Grenadians associate strongly with their perceived African past, and connect strongly with African diasporic identity.

²⁰ I avoid the use of [sic] in my transcriptions, as this convention implies that the interviewee has made a grammatical error. As Rebecca Miller (2007) notes, “Local grammar is correct grammar, and if we are to understand Carriacouan [Grenadian] culture, it must be on—indeed, in—its own terms” (28, italics mine).

²¹ Present-day soca music is a verse-chorus song form characterized by up-tempo melodies in 4/4 time on top of sparsely-textured, pre-recorded digital “riddims” (rhythms or “beats”) that are fast, driving, and highly repetitive; and assembled using drum machines, synthesizers, sequencers, samplers, digital multitracking, and autotune. Themes often revolve around drinking, erotic dancing, and sex. [Example: Otis, “Tornado” \(2010\).](#)

²² This custom of storytelling through song likely originates with the tradition of the West African griot.

²³ The informant who provided this song was unsure if the words “use your head” were actual lyrics, or childhood memories.

²⁴ These lyrics are copied as they were transcribed for me; this style of writing is indicative of colloquial writing in Grenada.

²⁵ As time went on, Gairy's aim to retain power became increasingly pronounced, through his exploitation of the Grenada Defence Force, the police, and his private band of often violent "police aides", popularly called the Mongoose Gang (see Feinberg 1992).

²⁶ "I put my pride up on the shelf; I bless this question to myself" is a lyric from Grenadian Ajamu's calypso "[Something Wrong With Man](#)" (Ajamu 2015).