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Feeling Uneasy on Easy Street: Decoloniality, Mental Health, and Social Culture Within a University Department of Music

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Feeling Uneasy on Easy Street: Decoloniality, Mental Health, and Social Culture Within a
University Department of Music

A Master's Thesis Presented

by

UCEE-UCHENNA L. NWACHUKWU

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Department of Music and Dance

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ABSTRACT
FEELING UNEASY ON EASY STREET: DECOLONIALITY, MENTAL HEALTH,
AND SOCIAL CULTURE WITHIN A UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

May 2023

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As a graduate student in a university music department, I have devoted a lot of time to working in associated yet also disparate realms: as a performer, a Teacher's Assistant, and a student. During this time, I have also begun conducting research examining the music department's social culture. I have observed my colleagues—meaning my fellow graduate students—sacrificing their mental health, physical health, and emotional wellbeing in order to meet ambiguous expectations that I will argue are often rooted in the coloniality of Western Art Music. I have observed and experienced conversations that neglect to acknowledge the ways in which speech and behavioral patterns that currently transpire in the music building support the perpetuation of anti-Blackness, situational color- and cultural- blindness, and white supremacy within the music department at this school, which I have chosen to anonymize as “New England State University (NESU).” Like the bourgeoisie in *Downtown Crossing*, the members of this music department tend to outright ignore the systemic and social inequities that exist in this space, instead consciously or unconsciously choosing to operate with blinders that protect them from fully realizing “the frightening things about...” this music department's “sense of reality.” Despite some well-meaning but largely superficial acknowledgments of the aforementioned issues, many members of this music department still engage in speech and behavioral patterns—both in public and in private—that I argue do not pursue a path toward these same people's stated goals of racial justice and musician health and well-being.

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Chapter I: “Stop Tap Dancing Around the Conversation”

A. Introduction

To watch the TV screen for any length of time is to learn some really frightening things about the American sense of reality. We are cruelly trapped between what we would like to be and what we are. And cannot possibly become what we would be until we are willing to ask ourselves just why the lives we lead on this continent are mainly so empty, so tame, and so ugly. These images are designed not to trouble, but to reassure. They also weaken our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are.

-James Baldwin

On Sunday, October 9, 2022, the day before Indigenous Peoples’ Day, I ventured out on a short journey to Boston, Massachusetts. I had no expectations for this trip, and I was not completely sure of the destination. However, I set a personal itinerary to read Anna Bull’s book *Class, Control, & Classical Music* while watching the autumn leaves turn in color, feel the sun kiss my melanated skin, and get some fresh air after recovering from a sickness. When we arrived at our destination, my companion parked the car and said to me, “I’ll be right back” and I responded with, “okay, see you soon.” A few moments had passed, and I decided to take a second to observe my surroundings before returning to my book. The car was parked on the right side of a narrow street, about 15 yards away from overlapping street signs that read, “Milk St.” on “Washington Street.” To the left, I saw young adults, parents, and children— all dressed comfortably— confidently strolling along the sidewalk. To my right, I saw a coterie of cyclists navigating their way down the hill in the bike lane. I also saw caffeinated millennials and Gen Zers actively praying to their phones (Spalding, 2018), hyper focused on the metaphysical reality of technological engagement, but disconnected from the physical and spatial reality of existing and pondering the streets of Boston.

It's a beautiful, brisk fall day in Boston, so everyone must be layered up, equipped with a warm pumpkin spice flavored beverage in hand, and enjoying the turn of the season, right?

To say that I wholly believe in this exnominized declaration (Lewis2002) would be an untruthful assertion. I use "exnominized" in George Lewis's sense of the term, to point to the way such an observation can create a false universalism within which problematic truths are rendered invisible. Meaning, in addition to observing the bourgeois of this space enjoy fall weather in Boston, I witnessed impoverished beings sleeping on the sidewalk to the right, behind a passing group of happy cyclists. One person had huddled themselves and their belongings into a corner, next to a dark brown building with a "Greco Greek Cuisine" sign plastered in bright yellow letters above, while the other person laid in the middle of the sidewalk—directly in front of the "Birthplace of Franklin"—where the happy strolling people passing by would have no other option but to step around or directly over this individual to get by and continue their journey.

The uneasiness emanating from the sight of cold houseless people sleeping on the sidewalks of "easy street" (Downtown Crossing Boston) did not seem intense enough to disrupt how the city's bourgeois occupants operated in this space. Some glanced (for no longer than a few seconds) and that was as much acknowledgment that they gave these individuals. However, they did not seem to find it as simple to ignore the historic "Birthplace of Franklin." Instead, tourist groups, young adults, parents, and children would make it a priority to stop in their tracks to gaze up (for much longer than a few seconds) at this renovated, sleek, brown building. Many of these individuals felt inclined to document this moment with their high-tech smartphones.

Amid all of this, something that I found gripping (but not surprising) was that almost everyone taking pictures tilted their devices upward, making sure to only capture this momentous “historic” building, thus excluding the evidence of poverty sleeping in the cold at the building’s base. At this point, it was difficult to return to my book when a covert example of one of “the frightening things about America’s sense of reality” had unveiled itself right before my eyes. This reality being the individual or communal behavioral pattern that allows exclusion of undesirable truths in order to preserve the desirable memories and ideals that sustain a systemically oppressive and unequal society. Although we are in a space—Boston Massachusetts located in North America— where many citizens pride themselves on the importance of equal opportunity and individualism, the members of this society are (whether consciously or unconsciously) inconsistently subjective in the ways they choose to acknowledge moments of inequality that are derived from systemic oppression. No one in the space of Downtown Crossing was obliged to assist the people sleeping in the cold, but I also speculate that most of the people in that space did have the capability to empathize with the dreadfulness of being poor and having to sleep on the street. Yet, the tourists, families, and cyclists passing by chose to operate “blindly,” in a manner that allowed them to create epistemic, social, and physical distance from “the frightening things about America’s sense of reality.” Instead, as this is the land of the free, they have chosen to focalize on the “images...designed not to trouble, but to reassure.”

Similar images and tableaux are of course ubiquitous across the U.S., and the systemic pressures that generate them have been widely studied, critiqued, and debated. In this thesis, however, I trace the path some of these issues take when they enter a social

sphere that is not normally considered in this discourse, namely, the music department of an underfunded state university. I argue that these images do not only exist in the situational context of general society (like Downtown Crossing in Boston), but they also exist within the social structure of music institutions within higher education and are upheld (consciously or unconsciously) by the members of this social culture.

As a graduate student in a university music department, I have devoted a lot of time to working in associated yet also disparate realms: as a performer, a Teacher's Assistant, and a student. During this time, I have also begun conducting research examining the music department's social culture. I have observed my colleagues—meaning my fellow graduate students—sacrificing their mental health, physical health, and emotional wellbeing in order to meet ambiguous expectations that I will argue are often rooted in the coloniality of Western Art Music. I have observed and experienced conversations that neglect to acknowledge the ways in which speech and behavioral patterns that currently transpire in the music building support the perpetuation of anti-Blackness, situational color- and cultural- blindness, and white supremacy within the music department at this school, which I have chosen to anonymize as “New England State University (NESU).” Like the bourgeoisie in Downtown Crossing, the members of this music department tend to outright ignore the systemic and social inequities that exist in this space, instead consciously or unconsciously choosing to operate with blinders that protect them from fully realizing “the frightening things about...” this music department's “sense of reality.” Despite some well-meaning but largely superficial acknowledgments of the aforementioned issues, many members of this music department still engage in speech and behavioral patterns—both in public and in private—that I

argue do not pursue a path toward these same people's stated goals of racial justice and musician health and well-being.

Indeed, in this thesis, I argue that, despite the mainstream development of the movement to "decolonize" classical music and the music school, colonial power structures reinscribing white superiority continue to plague music departments like this one in unmarked manners. As a result, common responses to discourses of decolonization take place through unconscious or conscious acts of epistemic violence. Instead of creating new structures that foster decoloniality, what I have observed to take place are short lived, grand initiatives that resemble gestural redressing (Davis, 1996). I have also witnessed a lack of care and compassion (Cheng, 2016) by way of/ due to color blindness or color deafness (Kajikawa, 2019), and continuous denial of the fact that decolonization is a continuous process that requires deliberate action for bona-fide change.

Pulling from my ethnographic study of the social culture of a graduate student string quartet, my experience as a graduate student in the music department, and scholarship from the fields of ethnomusicology, musicology, Black, and Indigenous studies, I will address these underlying issues (relating to race and decoloniality), along with issues relating to musician health and wellness more generally. As music students struggle to grapple with the difficult process of decolonizing themselves, their music, and their educational environments, they are still tasked with sole responsibility for managing the myriad unhealthy pressures imposed by the structures and expectations of the music school culture. These pernicious conditions can affect the institutional experience more invasively for students that identify as Black, Brown, or non-white, although I also discuss the way all students are impacted regardless of race. In short, I examine the ways

that the culture of musician training tends to minimize students' physical and mental health struggles and relegate responsibility for them to the private management of individual students. The project of decolonization is by necessity a collective project requiring individuals to learn how to relate to one another, to themselves, and to their work in radically new ways. Thus, I suggest that the individualized, highly pressured, and hierarchical culture of the Western music school makes it difficult if not impossible for students to engage fully with the project of decolonization.

Despite the existence of abundant scholarship that investigates race and racism in classical music practice, very little of it focuses on the specific sub-culture of graduate students in a music department. The primary work on race and the music school has most often come from the sub-field of music history pedagogy, where scholars propose ideas for “decolonizing” the way music pedagogy is approached and executed in the classroom and in curriculum. Similarly, while many ethnomusicologists have written sensitive and nuanced portraits of the Western music school, few of them have focused significantly on issues of racism, to say nothing of how racism impacts students' mental health and ability to care for themselves and one another. This thesis attempts to bridge this gap, using the ethnographic observation of a music department string quartet as its central case study. In addition, there have been few in-depth, substantial research/ case studies that investigate how a lack of active mental health awareness in music school affects the overall institutional experience of current graduate students. Within the field of music education and instrumental pedagogy, there have been some suggestions regarding potential resources that could be implemented in music curricula to aid with symptoms and root causes of mental health struggles amongst music students. However,

these offerings have either been structured in ways where the onus of implementation is left up to the individual student to situate or lead to music institutions (on a larger scale) not realizing and productively adopting these suggestions. Moreover, I propose that comprehensive ratification and active implementation of these proposed ideas could avert the mental health crisis that exists today amongst music students—more specifically amongst graduate music students.

This thesis will be divided into two main chapters, with each chapter focusing on one of my central topics: chapter one will focus on race and racism in the music department, and chapter 2 will examine musician health and wellness in the same department. In my concluding chapter, I will bind these two topics together, building off my observations in order to draw some larger conclusions about ways this musical culture is shaped and constrained by the larger culture of colonial capitalism it is a product of. The rest of this introductory chapter comprises a literature review of the most relevant scholarship that has shaped my perspective, followed by an explanation of my methodology as an ethnographer. Finally, I provide a brief outline of each following chapter.

B. Literature Review

The scholarly study of race and racism in classical music tends to follow one of two paths: either documenting the demographic failings of classical music performance ensembles, repertoires, and value systems (for example pointing out that the canon is comprised almost exclusively of white male composers or that the Metropolitan Opera has only commissioned two female composers in its entire history), or moving beyond demographics in an effort to understand ways that racism or sexism function as part of a

larger system militating against real social justice, both in music and in the rest of the world. Examples of the former approach include the canonical ethnographic studies of American music schools by Henry Kingsbury and Bruno Nettl, each of whom constructs a finite argument about diversity in classical music and music institutions with the intention of presenting “solutions” to that problem, primarily in the form of increasing the percentage of marginalized composers and performers who participate in this musical tradition. My thesis engages with some of these arguments but extends beyond the fencing of these discussions. For example, in my discussion of the racial demographics of my department, I rely on Angela Davis’ observations about multiculturalism in the American workplace. Following Davis, I construct an argument about how tokenistic programming choices ultimately have the effect of strengthening the existing system without doing-away with its exclusionary functions.

However, my thesis is also strongly in dialogue with scholarship of the latter type, as I seek to tie my demographic observations into “bigger picture” claims about the function race and racism play in the music school, as well as the kinds of solutions to these problems that more radical scholars have made the case for. In this regard, my main interlocutors are Dylan Robinson, Loren Kajikawa, and Margaret E. Walker. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson describes many examples of “inclusionary” gestures white programmers and composers attempt, in their efforts to work toward racial justice in their fields, particularly in their efforts to acknowledge and include the work of Indigenous people in “Western” style venues and compositions. These gestures are well-meaning and earnest, but ultimately Robinson argues that they inadvertently use Indigenous people as “raw material” to be mined for use in compositions and performances that don’t alter

anything structurally about classical music. Indeed, for Robinson, not only are such gestures empty, but they also actively worsen harm, by making it seem as though racist wounds are being healed when in reality they are being further deepened, only now in less visible ways. Like Robinson, I question the value of tokenistic “inclusion” in working toward racial justice. In my fieldwork, for example, I often observed these kinds of inclusionary practices, and yet in interviews with participants I found that most did not have a larger structural understanding of the role racism plays in the music they study and perform.

Similarly, in a recent polemic, Loren Kajikawa turns specifically toward the music department, assessing some of the ways race and racism work within music school curricula, teaching assignments, and value systems. With substantial influence from George Lipsitz’s “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness,” he states:

To own whiteness today is to be empowered to ignore the legacy of racial discrimination. It is the right of white people (or others who have acquired a stake in their privilege) to do as they please without any acknowledgment of the racist practices that contributed to the resources they enjoy.

And

Although it is important for students to improve at their instruments, to understand different musical forms, and to appreciate the achievements of various composers and musicians, music courses rarely ask students to reflect on the ethical and social implications of their work.

Kajikawa’s arguments have played a major role in shaping my own, as he similarly addresses the curricula and culture at a specific university music department and investigates the multiple and multi-faceted ways racism circulates in that culture. I am most influenced by his arguments about “the possessive investment in classical music.”

In my thesis, for example, I will demonstrate that, although efforts have been made to include works/performances of marginalized individuals in concert programming and curricula, the epistemic value system amongst most graduate students and teachers, as it relates to classical music, is entangled with a belief system that emphasizes white superiority. Thus, there is little room, here, for students and faculty to collectively develop a value system that recognizes and fully embraces decoloniality.

Margaret E. Walker raises many questions about music history in order to engage with decolonization. A pressing question she poses is, “whether decolonizing existing university music history courses is even possible or whether the only way to decolonize is to decenter the Western art music canon so radically as to rewrite music history entirely” and a possible solution (one that she deems as obvious) “is to advocate that the whole Bachelor of Music be radically rethought, decanonized, decolonized, and perhaps indigenized” (Walker, 2020). Here, although she is speaking to the curriculum for undergraduate students, her perspective is still formative to my research, as the graduate and undergraduate curricula in most music departments are strongly related. Walker also speaks to my argument that, outside of private instruction, music history classes shape the way performing musicians in music school critique and prioritize Western and non-Western art music. So, aligning the arguments of Kajikawa and Walker, I argue that if graduate students are not exposed to the history behind colonial structures in classical music, they will not be able to mindfully engage and participate in decoloniality as an active practice and process in the music department (or even in their outside lives). Following Maldonado-Torres (2016), in the present day, as coloniality continues to uphold power structures and epistemics (ways of thinking and knowing) that are products

of colonization, decoloniality is the constant process that requires individuals and collectives to commit to the real work of deconstructing these social and institutional structures. In place of this, the goal is to generate approaches that cultivate a sustainable environment (not exclusive to a particular time and space) for decolonization to take place.

The primary scholarship that has shaped my second major topic area—mental health and student well-being— is “Infusing Health and Wellness into the Music Curriculum” (Pierce, 2012). Pierce argues, “they want information on how to keep themselves healthy as they work towards deepening their skills and love of music...students’ hunger for this kind of knowledge, and many who are already experiencing difficulties are aching for solutions.” Through my ethnographic study of the graduate string quartet at UMass, I found that a generalized condition of dreadful mental health struggle has been normalized within this subculture. These students all wholeheartedly love what they do as performing musicians, but for most of them consistent support concerning anything, but their performance studies are not there. Additionally, due to schedules packed with mandatory obligations, it is often literally not feasible for students to seek professional help for mental, emotional, and medical struggles. In my thesis, I will illustrate the multiple ways mental health challenges manifest in this music department and the role music instructors can play in either exacerbating or relieving symptoms/root causes of mental health issues amongst music students. Following Kris Chesky and William J. Dawson (2006), my work assumes that “music faculty, more than any other group, embody the critical determination for establishing social and cultural values and beliefs that are so important for influencing students.”

Along with arguing that mental health practices should be incorporated into the music curriculum, I will argue that the failure to explicitly address the underlying issues dealing with decoloniality and mental health has prohibited music students from holistically engaging in the amelioration of these issues.

C. Methodology

As this was my first experience conducting ethnographic research, I must first address my positionality as both a student and ethnographer in this study. During the time of this research, I was enrolled as a full-time graduate student in the music department of a large state-funded research university. In this study I adopted the ethnographic method of realizing data from an emic perspective (insider) and etic perspective (outsider). As many ethnomusicologists have expressed, although a social culture may be familiar to the ethnographer, it is important to create distance (between the participants and I) that allows individuals of the locus to exist organically and freely. This also allowed me to document authentic events and interactions. Existing in this role allowed me the ability to observe and collect data from the perspective of both an insider and an outsider, while also practicing self-reflexivity in moments that required me to seamlessly alternate between these roles. In doing this, I was able to capture authentic data for my ethnography, however I faced personal obstacles in balancing my positionality as an ethnographer, a graduate student, and a fellow colleague to the participants (members of the graduate string quartet) involved.

As an ethnographer, I was tasked with the responsibility of creating a timeline and a research plan in order to carry out the observation component of this research. In addition to navigating scheduling conflicts, I had to exercise the multiple formats of note

taking and other forms of documentation. Routinely, during rehearsals, I collected audio recordings of rehearsals and coachings, and video recordings of performances. In addition to observing rehearsals through audio recordings, I also took handwritten notes and used the audio recording to reference time stamps for moments of rehearsals that I deemed important. In situations that I assessed as un conducive for taking notes by hand, I adopted the habit of taking mental notes and then employing the method of creating “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1978) after the observed interactions. This involved finding quiet spaces to document the specific details of what I observed in my research journal. Henry Kingsbury shared his process of doing this during his study of Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory. In my study, I employed this approach after my experience of observing the string quartet as an insider (performing with members of the group as a violist, in substituting for their usual violist). My intent with this approach was to avoid disturbance in the interpersonal relationships that existed between group members and myself before the development of this study. However, I still faced challenges in balancing these relationships. As an ethnographic researcher, it is important to practice a healthy balance of self-reflexivity when engaging with the social culture. Since I was familiar with this community as an insider, it was a bit easier to navigate the social interactions and communication, but I was vigilant with understanding that I should aim not to disrupt the social dynamic and functionality of the studied culture.

Lastly, my positionality as a graduate student was a trait that worked in my favor for this ethnography. This encouraged the flow of communication between the ethnography and participants to occur with ease and transparency. I was aware that they saw me as an equal first and not solely as a researcher and I reciprocated this respect and

understanding. Unlike the experiences of Kingsbury and Nettle, in addition to conducting this study, I also had obligations as a full-time grad student taking classes, obligations as a teacher's assistant, and I also maintained two other jobs outside of school to bridge income gaps. My personal time constraints did not allow me the breathing room to give my undivided attention to this study like Kingsbury and Nettle, but I believe I made grounded discoveries in the limited time made available. In addition, with the hopes of remaining ethical in the process of sharing my research, I have initiated the process of gaining approval from my university's Human Protection Program (HPP) to use the data from my case study and interviews with members of this music department in this thesis.

D. Chapter Outline

In chapter one, I explore some of the ways race and racism, as well as antiracist sentiments and projects, circulate in the music department. Drawing on observations and interviews with members of the string quartet, as well as some of my own experiences as a Black music student and member of the string area, I construct a portrait of current pressures to "decolonize" this music and how that pressure impacts students. I also explore some of the ways "colorblindness" circulates in this culture, for example the music school often deploys values of "genius" and "talent" that, I argue, are aspects of a racist value system that goes largely unnamed in the music school. These values are breeding grounds for colonial epistemics to manifest through speech and behavioral patterns amongst the members of the social culture of the music department.

In chapter two, I turn toward broader questions about mental health in the music school. Obviously, the issues raised in the first chapter profoundly impact mental health when it comes to students of color, and yet I found that music students of all races,

including white students, struggle intensely with mental and physical health. In this chapter, I explore the condition of mental health in the music school, including asking questions about what kinds of support networks are in place for students, what kinds of unique pressures—relative to the rest of the university-- the music curriculum and traditional music pedagogies impose on students, as well as the kinds of impediments to receiving support and help the music school culture creates for students. Why is it so hard for music students to take care of their mental health? This chapter will explore some potential answers to these questions.

In my concluding chapter, I tie my two main areas together, seeking to explain how the pressures and problems of decolonization impact mental health in the music school, and how both sets of problematics are related to broader structural and social problems imposed by colonial capitalism in general. For example, in chapter one, I lay out some of the historical functions of race and racism in classical music culture, and document some of the ways contemporary efforts to “decolonize” this culture run up against a value system that prioritizes canonized “masters” and the various forms, techniques, and genres that developed within that canon. Similarly, in chapter two I lay out some of the unique characteristics of musician training, which include a hyper-focus on individualism and competitiveness, as well as a necessary condition of isolation (students must practice alone for hours each week). I argue that some of the practices, values, and processes that make the music school what it is also present major impediments to student mental health, as well as to the flourishing of the kind of communal care and identification that might produce a more supportive environment, one more conducive to decolonizing efforts.

Chapter II: Welcome to NESU

A. Introduction

New England State University (NESU) is an overpopulated and underfunded state school, surrounded by scenic landscapes, located near the heart of the New England area. The campus is quite the metropolis, and it is very apparent that the dominant racial and class population is mainly white and bourgeois. As students swarm the walkways and buses—many of which are accessorized with the school logo and words like “diversity” and “inclusion”—flood the streets during campus rush hour, I make my way to the music building to continue my ethnographic work and begin my day as a graduate student. On my way, I check my phone and am overloaded with campus promotional messages formatted as mass emails. The subject of some of these emails reads “committed to diversity and inclusion.” I notice that this “commitment to diversity and inclusion” has even influenced the recent name change of an essential performance venue—The Explorative Means building (TEM) —connected to the music building. This change involved renaming TEM after an influential Black administrator from a previous era. In addition, the dedicated performance space within the building, The Explorative Means Hall, has also been renamed to memorialize an influential, multifaceted Black performer, music educator, artist, and composer who was affiliated and deemed as instrumental to the shaping of various parts of the music program/department at NESU. This individual passed away in 2020 in the midst of the Covid-19 global pandemic and during the height of the most recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest/ uprising. In the following year, these name changes were one way the school responded to these events. However, when speaking to or overhearing conversations amongst the denizens of this

music department everyone still continues to refer to this building (and the performance space) as “TEM” with little correction or acknowledgment of its name change.

As I enter the music department, I register that despite these grand name-changes, there has been no corresponding change to the actual racial/ethnic demographic of this campus space. I also encounter students referring to the music building using its prior name with no acknowledgment of its change, when discussing rehearsal and/or practice obligations. As socially progressive as it may seem, at first glance, for a predominantly white institution to utilize rhetoric such as “committed to diversity and inclusion” and to initiate inclusionary gestures like altering the name of an institutional building to memorialize a Black contributor, these gestures should be closely examined before being labeled as productive moves towards social change within an educational institution. As a student observing these factors from a macro and micro perspective, it is apparent that forces within this institution —similar to the diversity management forces Angela Davis discusses in “Rethinking ‘Race’ Politics” —are making efforts to promote anti-racist sentiments in response to the social and racial inequality that persist in this social space. However, these inequalities do not seem to be explicitly defined or acknowledged amongst all participating members. Instead, a common theme I have observed is for discomfited members to become silent, avoidant, or choose to adopt a euphemistic communication style that softens the intensity of these social disparities. Another habit that seems to be common is for the attention to be directed (by some force of bureaucratic structural power within the university) towards celebrating the attempts made towards progressive change, with only surface level acknowledgement of how symptoms of underlining wounds persist.

Although these rhetorical efforts have been made, I will argue that material change is not reflected within the social culture. The general lack of racial/ethnic diversity across campus is still reflected in the music department's demographics. Additionally, it is apparent that grand inclusionary gestures (i.e., the "commitment to diversity and inclusion" that is advertised in various forms on campus) have not influenced a change in the way the music building is referenced.

As stated by bell hooks in "Theory as Liberatory Practice," "often individuals who employ certain terms freely...are not necessarily practitioners whose habits of being and living most embody the action" (hooks,1994). I believe we can see hooks' observation operating within the inclusionary gestures that I have described in the music department of New England State University. In other words, this is a sub-culture in which predominantly white people use words and phrases drawn from the political struggle against racism. We can also see this dynamic at work when we examine the calls (made in both musicology and the world of classical music performance) to "decolonize" our practices and institutions. As many Indigenous, African, and Black diasporic scholars have stated, to decolonize is to wholly commit to the ongoing process of ending the longstanding effects colonization has had on marginalized individuals in the post-colonial era. These commitments involve unlearning customs and discourses that reinscribe white supremacy, actively and self critically seeking knowledge rather than merely responding to superficial social pressure and intentionally creating spaces that facilitate a genuine process focusing on rehumanizing, actively acknowledging, and discussing the identities and contributions of the oppressed and developing the capacity to discuss difficult topics and work toward sustainable actions over solutions.

Furthermore, the potential outcomes for these actions are not clear cut and are not things that can be changed by proposing or implementing minute alterations of existing practice. They require individuals and collectives to go outside of comforts, going beyond structural ideals and expectations in order to unpack colonization—including its historical as well as its contemporary manifestations—before engaging with activities and speech aligning with decolonization. Rigorously engaging in comprehensive work (on a micro and macro level) is a fundamentally vital step in beginning to understand the ways in which coloniality persists within a social culture, including within this specific context of the music building. The perpetuation of coloniality's unmarked epistemics demonstrates the ongoing impact colonization has on social relationships, economic activities, and cultural products like music.

I want to draw a distinction between the material facts of colonialism (one country imposing on another, appropriating, and exploiting another) and coloniality, a more complicated concept used to explain how people and society are shaped by the material facts of living in colonialism. Maldonado-Torres puts it very clearly when he writes:

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.” (Maldonado-Torres,2007)

I find the concept of “coloniality” useful in explaining the particular culture of an American university music department. In this thesis, I am interested in examining the unmarked forms that colonial epistemics take in the circulation of musical values and

practices, as well as the relationships music students have with one another and with themselves, that on their surface may seem to have little to do with the brutal material realities of colonization. Uncovering the hidden coloniality on which so much of this specific musical culture rests helps reveal tensions and contradictions between the rhetorical commitment to diversity—even to “decolonization”—and the actual practices and material actions that take place here.

In the rest of this chapter, I will examine these claims via an exploration of my main case study: a graduate student string quartet that operates within this music department. Additionally, I will also share investigations I have made through interviewing two music students (who are not directly linked to the quartet ensemble) from the string department and two faculty members currently active in the department as well.

I will first introduce the participants of this ethnography, and detail my research methods, which included rehearsal observation and individual interviews. Then, I will return to the questions about diversity, inclusion, and decolonization with which I opened the chapter, examining the ways these discourses impact (or don't impact) the perspectives and practices of the students in the quartet. How does each member perceive themselves in the larger departmental community? How do they understand terms like diversity and decolonization, and to what extent do they feel obligated to pursue these political goals? After exploring these questions, I take a step back, and begin critically reflecting on what I have observed. Drawing on work by scholars in political theory, Black, and Indigenous Studies, in addition to work by musicologists and ethnomusicologists, I ultimately suggest that when a culture—institutional classical

music—so rooted in coloniality tries to escape this condition with rhetorical gestures toward diversity, it not only fails to solve the problem, but also introduces new problems which require new critical apparatuses to adequately address.

B. The Participants of the Study

1. The String Quartet and its Members

Checking my phone for the time, I realize that the participants involved in my research will be arriving to the music building for rehearsal, and it's time for me to go meet them. These individuals are four graduate students in their early to mid 20's who have been studying classical music, both academically and informally, for over a decade of their lives. They are all full-time students at New England State University studying instrumental performance in Classical/Western Art Music and have been assigned to this quartet by the director and chair of the strings department. Their job is to rehearse and perform chamber music as part of their Graduate Teaching Assistantship/ stipend agreement. Outside of this assigned group, they each also have different obligations within the strings department that are designed to fulfil the other portion of their student employment agreement, but they all cross paths through their obligation to be in this group.

Through rehearsal observation and individual interviews, I discovered that, although they are connected through their involvement with classical music, they have all had different educational and musical experiences during their time studying at New England State University. I will provide brief snapshots of each student participant, trusting that more details will emerge as I pursue my observations. Just as I have with the name of this university, I have anonymized the names of each student.

Violin I- J.C is a second-year master's student studying violin performance at New England State University. Music was a big part of his family and home life, but he did not begin studying violin until he was around the age of 11 years old. He grew up in the southeast region of the United States and was raised by both parents, and he understands his family and upbringing to be upper middle class. He racially identifies as white, but culturally identifies as Hispanic. His involvement with this specific string quartet began during the final semester of his graduate studies.

Violin II- Violet is a first-year master's student studying violin performance at NESU and is from the Northeast region of the United States. She does not come from a musical background but since the age of 5 she has expressed an interest in violin. Her initial exposure to the instrument took place at a performance she witnessed in grade school. From that moment she was enamored, and she was persistent in asking her parents to enroll her in private lessons. She states that she racially identifies as "Caucasian" and culturally identifies as American ("Caucasian" is Violet's word; in this thesis I will use the word "white" throughout). Her inception with this graduate string quartet took place during her second semester of graduate school.

Viola: Werty is a first-year viola performance student studying at NESU who is also from the Northeast region of the United States. Similar to Violet, he also does not come from a musical background, but his parents have strongly supported his music learning. He started out learning the violin, but during the final year of his undergraduate studies he transitioned to viola. Werty racially identifies as white and culturally identifies "proudly" as Irish. He was involved in the string quartet during his second semester at NESU but will be receiving a second master's degree in music performance.

Cello: Suji is a second-year international master's student studying cello performance at NESU. Her musical engagement was initiated at the age of 7. After exploring other musical instruments, she says, "playing cello gave me a lot of joy," so that is why she stuck to it. Her parents were very involved in making sure she was disciplined during her musical endeavors. Suji identifies racially as Asian and culturally as Korean.

2. String Department Students

Outside of the string quartet and its members, I had the opportunity to speak with two music students who were open to participating in an interview for my thesis project.

Suzan O'Connor was a graduate student studying violin performance at NESU. She started playing violin at the age of 8 because her mother—who was once a violinist but did not continue it as a career—had a strong desire for Suzan to take on violin as a serious profession. Suzan's own interest did not fully develop until she was in middle school. Around this time, her middle school orchestra teacher became really influential in sparking her love for the violin and for playing with others in an orchestral setting. Through this experience, she decided that she wanted to be a music teacher for the public school system. Suzan identifies racially as Japanese and culturally as Japanese American. During the time of Suzan's interview, she completed her degree and took on the status of an alumni of NESU. We managed to meet before Suzan officially moved back to the city she grew up in in the northeast region of the U.S.

Ezekiel is an undergraduate student studying violin performance in his 5th year at NESU. He identifies racially as African American and culturally identifies with a mixed heritage: his father is African American and his mother is white Portuguese, Polish, and

German. Ezekiel is from and went to high school in the farm coast area of New England. He started violin as a public-school student and did not start taking private lessons until he started youth orchestra at the age of 12. He was inspired to play violin through seeing his older brother start the instrument when he was young and was encouraged to continue studying the instrument by his teachers and parents.

3. String Department Faculty

As this research seeks to understand the social culture of a string program within a department of music, I also interviewed and observed instructional periods lead by two string faculty professors at NESU.

Professor Pearl is the violin instructor, the head of the string department, and is a co-organizer of the chamber music program at NESU. She identifies racially as Asian and culturally as Chinese American. Professor Pearl has been playing violin from a very young age and has established herself and is active as a solo, chamber, and orchestral classical musician who has toured and performed around the globe. Along with her position as the primary violin instructor at NESU, she also teaches violin and viola at the preparatory division of Augustus Conservatory located in the northeastern region of New England.

Professor Goldmann is the cello professor and a co-organizer of the chamber music program at NESU. He began playing cello on his 7th birthday after consistently asking his parents to begin studying the instrument, as he confirmed in his interview, “and my first cello lesson was on my 7th birthday.” He has taught Master classes at other universities and conservatory in the United States and internationally. He has also had an extensive career as a solo performer and a chamber musician and is still active in this

work. Professor Goldmann identifies racially as white and culturally as Ashkenazi Jewish and Northern German.

C. Research Methods

I will begin this section by providing context for my positionality, the development of the topics in this thesis, and some of the ethnomusicological approaches that influenced my fieldwork navigation. In addition to my role as a researcher in this case study, I was active as a full-time graduate music student studying (in an interdisciplinary manner) music performance, musicology, and ethnomusicology at New England State University. Originally, I entered the string program at NESU with the intention of pursuing a master's degree in music performance, however, due to abysmal and complex circumstances—both inside and outside of my life in the music school as well as relating to my identity as a Black individual—I made the decision to change degree tracks from performance to music history.

As simple and straightforward as my description of this situation may be, it was not an easy process and these events have shaped the intention and execution of this case study and thesis project. Later in this thesis, I intend to explain these circumstances in greater depth and use them to support my argument, but for now, I will continue to expand on how I arrived at my decision to examine the social culture within a department of music and a student string quartet.

The beginning stages of this ethnography took place while I was still a performance student with performance obligations. I was in this place where I was, technically, obliged to continue fulfilling the requirements necessary to earn a master's in music performance, but I was in the process of changing career and degree tracks that

aligned with ethnomusicology and musicology. Having to exist in this type of ambiguity came with a plethora of challenges, but a factor that that I am appreciative of is that this positionality allowed me the ability and access to analyze interactions and relations within this department of music from multiple perspectives that I would not have been able to see if I was exclusively situated in the field of performance. Stepping out of the bubble of being a performing graduate student and making attempts to view the social composition of the music school as an outsider, who was once an insider, allowed me to see issues within this social culture that have tended to go unmarked by its active members. Through encountering Bruno Nettl's ethnographic approach of conducting "ethnomusicology at home," I was drawn to the idea of exploring a social culture that I am well acquainted with. From my understanding, Nettl's suggestive approach to study one's "home" is an attempt to break away from the more common dynamic where researchers from Western culture analyze and produce knowledge about music and cultures of the Non-West. The implication of this common practice is one that Nettl touches on in his book, *Heartland Excursions*, where he essentially explains that an outsider cannot always catch and accurately depict the nuances of a culture that an insider, with lived experience within that studied culture, can. He also highlights how a lot of field research done within Anthropology and Ethnomusicology focuses on studying the Non-West more than the West, to the degree that social practices within Western culture have gone unmarked or misunderstood. Within this context, Nettl is primarily focused on mapping out the social culture through multiple institutions of music with the hopes of illustrating a skeletal framework that is common amongst each school's social culture, and broadly could be applied to the social culture found amongst most music

institutions in Western culture. Unlike Nettl, I was not in the position where I could examine an entire music institution's social culture, let alone multiple schools at that, so I settled on the decision to focus on one department and area in an institution. In trying to situate my specific research focus, I found that not much research had been done on the study of string quartets as a social culture and on, specifically, a department of music within a large state school. So, I saw this as an opportunity to investigate a "path less traveled by."

Despite my positionality as a fellow student, colleague, and friend to the members of this string quartet, I made it a priority to conduct these interviews in an ethical and unbiased manner. I wanted to provide space for participants to answer questions in an authentic way with no exterior influences. I also carried this same attitude and intention as I navigated conducting interviews with students and faculty members from the string department at NESU. During this process I prioritized receiving consent from all individuals before recording rehearsals, performances, interviews, and classroom instructional periods on my electronic devices. In situations where I was unable to record, I adopted Clifford Geertz's anthropological method of generating a "thick description" after events and interactions that I saw to be potentially significant to this case study.

D. Observations

Although I observed many significant interactions and issues that arose during my fieldwork, in this section I will focus my comments on observations concerning Suji, Suzan, and Ezekiel, the three students of color who participated in my study. I will begin with observations about the student string quartet that Suji participates in; then I will

discuss Suzan, a graduate student who did not participate in the string quartet; finally, I will conclude with a focus on Ezekiel, an undergraduate.

As part of their Teaching Assistantship, the string quartet is required to meet, at minimum, six hours a week for rehearsal and one hour a week for group coaching with a faculty member from the string department—this does not include their personal practice time or other ensemble and rehearsal requirements. During the sessions for which I was present, I frequently observed that Suji rarely spoke during rehearsals and coachings and, most times, when she did make efforts to vocalize her thoughts she was often interrupted or spoken over by other members of the string quartet in rehearsal spaces. I perceived this as a struggle involving language barriers and a general lack of active awareness in communication among the members. From what I observed, Suji tends to understand what others are saying to her and when she doesn't understand completely, she will ask for the information to be repeated and will quickly translate it on her phone or write the word down to translate it later, but it did not appear that the others reciprocated this amount of care and energy in working to fully understand Suji or to be understood by her.

As English is not Suji's first language, she has to take time with translating her thoughts (from her native language) into English before verbally expressing herself in a multitude of settings at NESU. She explained in her interview that completing her academic assignments takes a lot of time, not because she does not understand the material or what's going on, but because she has to translate everything from her native language to English. She also expressed how she does not have this kind of time within quartet rehearsal because of time constraints and how others operate within rehearsal and

performance settings. In her interview she said, “there is so much ego in this group and they fight about things that are not about the music.”

To be fair, I have witnessed moments where quartet members attempt to give Suji the space to speak her thoughts, but even then it is unclear how deeply they end up understanding her. For example, during one rehearsal I sat in on, Suji was trying to explain a musical idea/gesture that she wanted everyone to potentially capture as an ensemble and it was very obvious that people did not understand what she was trying to communicate. Instead of spending time trying to understand more deeply, a group member said, “I think what you mean is...” and then went on to explain it in a different way, using very different words than the key words that Suji kept repeating in her description. When these situations surfaced in later rehearsals, someone from the quartet would say, “Suji, can you just play what you mean” and, with no hesitation, Suji would do her best to convey her thoughts through her playing. The reaction and response were usually “Ohhhh,” but even then they did not always replicate what she demonstrated, so it was still unclear (as an outsider looking in) whether Suji was ever fully understood. Other times, both in rehearsal and casual conversation, quartet members would state bluntly, “I don’t understand what you’re saying” and nothing more would occur in attempts to translate what was said to fully understand Suji. The room would grow silent, and usually another member would slowly make a statement insinuating that the rehearsal should move on to focus on a different aspect of the music or something else.

All verbal communication used in these settings have been in the English language, and it seems that, specifically for Suji, she’s often left to adopt practices from the saying, “where words fail music speaks.” But what if neither her words nor her music

is entirely understood by others? What else can take place in these types of circumstances? And are her colleagues invested enough in this collaborative setting to make sure everyone is fully understood? What steps are taken to ensure that everyone feels seen and heard, despite their background or pre-existing language barriers between all parties? Is it truly group collaboration if these limitations are not directly addressed and given the true space to be processed and understood?

In a similar light, in Suzan's interview, when asked "do you think the string department at NESU is a conducive place for music students to thrive?" she says:

I can't speak for other students...I don't know, I also had a lot of personal issues when I was a student there and you know Covid didn't help anybody...and you know I think maybe it was just...it wasn't the right fit for me at the time and I think it was just wrong time wrong place.

Suzan then goes on to talk about the many complications she had with an overloaded schedule and her disappointment with her experience at the university, and she further says that it was,

time consuming and it required a lot more outside time and effort. Also having another job, it was just...and me being a little too independent as a person. I wasn't really trying to seek out help or seek out resources to like to get help I guess, which was obviously my own fault, but it ended up not really working. I wasn't happy there and I wasn't exactly thriving there, but I can't say that that's a fundamental issue with NESU. I can say that it's a depressing ass school, but at the end of the day maybe it was because I was in a bad head space. It just wasn't the right time.

In response to this, I ask Suzan, "so, if it was the right time and if it was the right place, what would that look like? Because right now, from my perspective, it sounds like you're saying the struggles you faced were all because of you, so I'm wondering what a conducive situation would've looked like for NESU and Suzan to work well as a match?"

Suzan goes on to say:

Well...I guess you could say that then it wouldn't be the same experience. I just felt like very isolated there and I think that was a little bit of a fundamental issue for NESU because of the nature of the small department. You know, it's kind of like if you don't click with everyone there then you just kind of... let's just be honest all these fucking white kids. I was just like, how do I talk to you, you know? ... and so, in that way I felt like isolated. And that made it more difficult for me to reach out for help from people, but from what I heard from other TAs it's not like I was the only person struggling with those sorts of issues. I guess in a dream world, I would have felt a lot less isolated at NESU...I would have felt like it's a comfortable community...It was weird because it wasn't like unwelcoming like the whole conservatory thing where you feel like you're not good enough to be there, but it was a different sort of (I can't place my finger on it) it was like...it didn't feel like a very POC safe space I guess...There was just something about it that made me feel like I didn't belong there.

As Suzan works through her process of sharing her experience as a graduate student at NESU, it is apparent that the struggles she faced, primarily her feeling of being isolated, were tied to the institution being predominantly white. This demographic is also reflected within the smaller sector of the music building and string department. In this portion of her interview, she felt that the institution did not feel like a safe space for people of color (POC), thus making it difficult for her to find comfortability in reaching out when she was struggling. She says she cannot speak for everyone, but also recognized that she was not the only TA that felt this way amongst other graduate students. And with how small and isolating the string and music department felt she found it even more difficult to find community within the institution.

As much as this institution attempts to expand via diversity initiatives, students like Suzan are still pushing through their degree programs feeling more depleted than they are feeling fulfilled. In these types of situations, how are students to navigate institutional spaces that feel (or are) unsafe for people of color, despite such spaces' claims to be working toward "diversification?" In what ways are these DEI initiatives

productive in providing safe spaces for POC students to exist and to comfortably—without barriers relating to racial disparities—work towards their degrees like their white colleagues and classmates? What sustainable changes will need to take place for this goal to be actualized and implemented?

Originally, Ezekiel’s interview was scheduled to take place the week prior, but unfortunately it had to be canceled and moved to the following week. In a message between Ezekiel and I, he expressed sincere regret for having to cancel the interview due to having an awful lesson with Professor Pearl earlier in the day. He expressed that he had to take the day off because he was not in a good mental head space to participate in anything for the rest of the day. In the interview, he shared,

Yea, I think, (and this is very much where I’ve been this past week), specifically thinking about this, for a long time I think my go-to was to rationalize it and to look for justification whether it’s on me, if it’s I’ve had a negative experience with a teacher I’ll be like, oh well they were thinking this, they meant the best for me. They wouldn’t have said this if they didn’t care. I’m coming around to the thinking of well that doesn’t really matter. They made me feel this certain way and that’s just the reality...more specifically having had a couple very negative experiences last week with Professor Pearl was a wakeup call in the direction that she did not intend. Where she was trying to light a fire under my ass for my recital and it lit a fire under my ass to leave NESU.

I went on to ask Ezekiel, “Is that a conversation that came up later on?” he responded, “it didn’t come up, but it’s...like I walked away in tears. Um, we’ve had a couple brief interactions since and it’s just like dust in the wind. It’s road kills, like that never happened. And it’s like I can’t keep doing this is kind of my feeling.”

Although Ezekiel is in his final semester of his program, he was planning to return to NESU to receive a performance certificate where he would be primarily focused on taking lessons, collaborating, and continue honing his craft—the violin. However,

after his recent experience preparing for his recital and having consistent lessons that have been emotionally and mentally taxing, he has decided that he will not be returning to the string program at NESU. Instead, he will be finishing the final movement of a piece written by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and plans to seek other opportunities on his own time, without the assistance of Professor Pearl or the string department.

It is important for me to note that at the time of Ezekiel's interview, he was the only Black person in the string department at NESU. When asked, "what has your experience been being the only Black person in the string department?" Ezekiel says:

Um, well I feel like there's a definite pressure. I've always felt and feel a pressure. I mean, you know this as well as I, that, and especially being mixed race, I always have the feeling of being an ambassador. I mean, now with decolonization, teachers trying to get... in my recital I'm playing Bach and Beethoven, then I'm playing William Grant Still and Florence Price, and it feels like whenever Black composers come up it's on me to understand. It's on me to decipher... And so you know, I would say oh I try not to think about it every day, but I'm always aware of it. You know, I have to... (the code switching is real) I have to be aware of the way I talk to people. Normal human interaction is different when you're not talking to people of color.

If diversifying the campus and its departments is a priority of NESU, why is Ezekiel the only Black person in the string department at this institution? Is this not viewed as a problem and/or a contradiction to the university's commitment to diversity on all levels? Is the white population of this institution or department concerned or invested in this ongoing problem, or will it be left up to the marginalized to cope and attempt to rectify this issue? What efforts are being made towards real change here? And what would "real change" even look like, in this context?

E. Decolonization?

In addition to observing what I consider to be “raced” dynamics in the functioning of the string quartet and amongst marginalized students from the string department, I also noticed that at the level of repertoire and programming, issues of coloniality circulate amongst this student group. The strings area at NESU is—like most strings’ areas in most departments of music—very much oriented around “the canon” of “great masterworks” by primarily nineteenth-century composers. In musicology, much critical attention has been paid to the canon and the ways it helps circulate values of white supremacy and patriarchy: the composers enshrined in the canon are all white, and mostly all men. One of the goals of my fieldwork was to ascertain how members of this music department thought of the canon in their studies and in their lives as musicians.

When asked, “the canon in classical music, what does that mean to you?” J.C responds:

Yea, that’s a complicated question...I would say, certainly, NESU has brought up...this issue.... was not apparent to me in my undergrad, but I think this has also been more of a pressing issue even more lately especially over covid, Black Lives Matter movement, and things like that and certain things.... that hadn’t been talked about. At my other university it was not, but here it’s very well known about and it’s something to bring up and something to talk about. Um, I would say my relationship with the cannon is like...well first of all it was mended in a place before you even knew about it. My upbringing, it was already there...of course when you look up violin pieces the person you look at is Bach. I looked at Mozart, but then now you grow a love for it without knowing about the inherent issues about it because it’s about my instrument.

J.C goes on to talk about how his instrument (and its virtuosic and musical capabilities) is tied to the canon and describes how fascinated one can be with this realization while still not fully understanding the discriminatory implications of the canon. He continues to say:

And you end up developing a love for it, but I didn't love Western classical music when I started the violin. I thought it was boring and long winded for a long time...And my perspective started to change when I started studying violin more in depth. I realized that there's something really beautiful about taking the journey, trying to interpret the composition, and like actually being able to do it is a feat in itself... In the canon in general, I feel like there is so much that needs to be done, you know what I mean? But there is undeniably great music in it, but there's also great music everywhere that needs to be discovered.

I used this opportunity to segue into my next question, "So there's this whole concept of decolonizing classical music, what exactly does that mean to you?" J.C responds:

Yea, I don't know. That's a...I don't know of a particular solution but what I know...what we can do as artist is to perform works that are less known and underappreciated and works that we believe in, and also the concert hall in general is just a stuffy place. I do think it does have its place though for serious listening like I wish we could look at in a different way, like you go there to listen and respect the art. You're not distracted by other things; you go there to listen but that's a very specific kind of thing. There are other ways that this music can be transmitted in a lot more casual ways, so I think some parts of the old tradition should stay and other parts need to be broadened. It has nothing to do with decreasing the seriousness of the music or whatever our commitment is to music, but it's about trying to transmit it in a way that we are not stuffy people, like we're elitist and everything.

When asked "the canon in classical music, what does this mean to you" Werty responds:

Well, this is a tricky one because uh... as a string player there is this canon that I deeply deeply believe in...that I have a deep emotional connection to. Um, and I think it is something that should be studied and that can be studied, still, broadened, and still engaged with because there's a lot we can take with it still and learn...On the pedagogical side of string playing and how strings evolved...It's important to know where stuff came from...However um, I do appreciate the move that has been made in the greater classical world to include voices that have not been included.

Unintentionally similar to J. C's interview, I use this opportunity to ask Werty, "what is your understanding of decolonizing classical music?" He responds,

A lot of the stuff that we do comes from a very small, tiny place that is treated as the entire history of music, yet there are so many cultures that have contributed to a global history of music that isn't touched upon enough. And it's tricky because if you go to conservatory to play violin you probably should spend majority of your time studying the history of the string instrument because it's that type of repertoire. Because it's important and it's what you're going to be asked to do in the real world. That's what college is supposed to prepare you for. I do think it leaves out a lot of very important stuff and I wonder where the time and place is...to include it equitably. Um, one thing that I have really been on board with is, as a performing professional musician, the inclusion of music from Non-white, non-male composers. I deeply deeply believe that if you have a solo recital you must include non-white, non-male composers and.... like Florence Price, Samuel Coleridge Taylor, George Walker...Kenji Bunch all these amazing composers. All these amazing composers who haven't really been in the spotlight. In that sense, I feel very optimistic I guess because I feel like I've personally discovered all this new music. Um and making connections with it. I think that's a good way to look forward from where we are now.

As an attempt to explain the complication he sees in implementing decolonial methodology within string pedagogy at NESU, Werty states:

I find that the stage that a lot of people are at in their musical journey does not allow them to really branch out... even though it may be expected, so I understand why a lot of the faculty here lead people down the path...or don't think to include um...they have a method, they have a history, they know how pedagogy is supposed to be for this stuff and how it evolved. They want to follow that because it's important and you have to have that. If you don't have that you're not going to take it seriously. However, I do think there are ways along the way that you can include music that is not included. I understand why... they operate on canonical expectations...I feel like there could be efforts made to expand it. It thinks it would be successful I think.

Later in his interview, when asked about how his culture aligns with his identity as a classical musician, Werty pauses for about 15 seconds to gather his thoughts and goes on to say, in a soft-spoken voice,

As a white man, I have grown up with a lot of privileges and a lot of innate privilege that just comes from not having barriers that a lot of other people have, and in that sense I have opportunities to sort of...I have this liberty to be whatever I want, which a lot of people don't get, and I try to

appreciate that and in that sense in choosing to be an artist, in choosing to be a violist is to understand that it is my responsibility to bring lots of voices to the table. So, in that sense I feel like I have that...empowerment. To say what I want, explore what I want, and make artistic statements in that sense. Do I have crisis on whether or not if I am the person who should be making these artistic statements, yea. I talk to teachers and mentors about that, and I say I'm not the one. I see all these amazing people...that should have the opportunity to lift up their voices, and I feel like I should step back...So, in that sense my culture does have that alignment there. I can recognize... I find that I don't think this is the time for white men, does that mean that I...I have to completely shut myself out forever, no. Um, does my culture give me opportunities, yea. There are a lot of things I can just do. I can just come to a master's program. I can just come, that was nice. I did nothing. I just sent a response to an email and called a professor from the department three days later and said yea I'll do it...I don't know, does that answer all your questions?

When asked, "how do you define decolonizing classical music within this music institution" Ezekiel states,

Well, I think we can all agree that classical music is a white/European tradition that no longer represents who is listening and who is participating in classical music. Um, so when you talk about decolonization, the first thing I think of, not necessarily defining decolonization, but the first thing I think of is changing the narrative in classical music to be inclusive, like simply put.

I go on to ask, "can you say more about why you think about changing the narrative first, like within the setting that you are in why it is this way?" Ezekiel responds,

I think the reason that I'm thinking of that principally is because...I don't think there's even recognition that there is an issue. Um, I don't think everyone is in agreement that decolonization is even something that needs to occur...or that there is an inherent problem with the way classical music is presented and marketed.

I continued the conversation by asking Ezekiel what he thought would need to take place for a genuine process of decolonization to take place within the music building and he states,

I think having choice in what you perform, and it is not framed by what white men at old white institutions want to hear is a step. Um, I think

having these conversations is a step whether it be in music history, whether it be in writing...I think these are just things that need to be talked about regardless how comfortable it makes people.

I followed his statement by asking, “so are you saying that even outside of performance, curriculum needs to change as well?” he responds,

Yea...I mean I've had negative experiences in my music history courses where, for example, we were talking about Debussy, and we were talking about the cakewalk...and our professor showed us an example of a cakewalk and failed to mention that the performers were performing in blackface, and I'm not even sure if she even realized that was the case. Um, it's little things like that, it's like it seems like such an insensitivity and when it's something mentioned...when any decolonial methodology is mentioned...when anything regarding a disenfranchised group is mentioned it often feels not genuine...I don't know, it feels like something that is an afterthought and not a core part of the learning.

Later in our conversation, Ezekiel and I talked more about identities within Western Art music, and he states,

First and foremost, I am African American. My family has been in America since the 17th century, so when we talk about Western Culture, that's me...I'm an American, first and foremost and it's really this tough thing where it's not necessarily Western vs. Non-Western. It's really representative of the same struggle we have in the day to day outside the world of music, where we're not even included in the Western identity.

Ezekiel raises a strong point here. Beyond representation, marginalized individuals have contributed to the shaping of the canon in various and vital ways. So, are the identities and contribution of these individuals currently accurately depicted within this set schema of canon in classical music? Some participants in this case study believe that, within the canon, some things should stay, and some things should be added but what about the things that are falsely represented or entirely omitted from the historical telling of the canon? Are these problems critically considered as some participants say that the canon should stay, and avenues should be created to include underrepresented voices?

I will now turn to Professor. Pearl to hear her thoughts about the canon in classical music and how she has made sense of this call to decolonize western art music.

On an early morning in her music studio, I ask Professor Pearl, “the canon in classical music what does that mean to you?” and she responds, “well, that’s what I was brought up on. It’s the tradition...maybe starting in the baroque period and up to...I mean I play a lot of New music, but up until my early 20’s I didn’t really. I studied mostly older music, yea.”

I then go on to ask her about “canonical expectations” and how she would define/interpret this phrase. She says,

I think it’s interesting what’s going on with creating new repertoires, but there is something to be said with the way we traditionally teach the violin traces the history of the evolution of violin. So, we often start with Vivaldi...we move on to easy Bach and then we gradually move on to the romantic period and so we actually almost teach through chronologically, like the way violin literature evolved. So canonical expectations, like I don’t use that word myself but, I think...pedagogy has more or less evolved teaching in that way—along the timeline of the violin’s evolution.

I was inspired by her response, so I additionally ask, “what characteristics do you think define this or are involved?” Professor Pearl replies, “I guess...the canon evolved very organically with what was happening compositionally overall, and in the way the instrument was handled... and I think part of the reason why it works to actually teach chronologically is because... at the end point you have followed how everything had developed.”

I then move on to ask Professor Pearl, “what does decolonizing classical music mean to you?” She goes on to say I think that the uniformity of the programing is changing, that a good thing. I do feel like it’s happening a little fast in the sense that there

hasn't been time for that many composers to come up and then some of the female composers from the past that we're playing, first of all they are white mostly...and we're ending up celebrating a few names...I think we need to do a little more digging because there's not a lot of balance right now. So, yea..."

F. Critical reflection

The string quartet is an ensemble tradition that evolved around the late 18th century and that was valued for the way it enabled musicians to play together in small, intimate settings, usually in someone's home. The practice has expanded over time, yet the intimate relationships between musicians it requires have remained. As Violet put it at one point, "it's like being in a relationship with 3 other people" and as Professor Goldmann described it, "this is a place where lifelong friendships and connections have emerged for me." As meaningful as these experiences certainly are, they are also not necessarily experiences universally shared by everyone who plays chamber music.

I started the observation section of this chapter discussing a common theme that seemed to occur in regard to Suji's communication and collaborative experience in this graduate string quartet. In Dylan Robinson's book *Hungry Listening* he critically examines the ways in which "colonial structures" continue to impede on western art music practices' ability to decolonize. He argues that a vital fundamental step towards this real change should prioritize "examining normative and unmarked forms of listening privilege within settler colonial listening positionality and the larger category of critical listening positionality" (Robinson, 2020). He goes on to define "settler colonial listening positionalities" as "particular assemblages of unmarked structures of certainty that guide

normative perception and may enact epistemic violence” (Robinson, 2020). Within this context, Robinson is explicitly speaking to the injustice that Indigenous “knowers”—those who are primary sources of specific information through cultural and lived experience—often face when they are in situations where the listeners are “settlers”—individuals or collectives who are not native to that land, and who thus occupy a radically different, albeit often unmarked, perspective. Here, Robinson is making the claim that the settler perspective becomes an unmarked norm that social and lived experiences must conform to in order to be made easily accessible to settlers, and that this is a form of epistemic violence.

I define epistemic violence as the (intentional or unintentional) act of refusing to hear knowledge or perspective shared by someone whose ways of knowing are different from the listener’s. This refusal may be active and intentional, or it may result from profound ignorance (e.g., of other cultures and other ways of knowing). This act of refusal occurs when a listener does not entirely accept the information for what it is, due to predisposed ideas that they are more inclined to believe in, through their enculturation in a radically different value system and social relations within which the knowledge being shared can find no purchase. Thus, diminishing the credibility of the speaker/knower and the validity of the knowledge that they have presented.

With this theoretical framework in mind, I made attempts to draw similarities between this form of injustice that Indigenous people face in the context of sharing knowledge with settler listeners and the struggles that Suji faces when it comes to communicating her ideas in the collaborative setting of the string quartet. I am not saying that the English speakers of this string quartet are purposefully committing acts of

injustice to a non-native speaker of English, but what I am saying is that there are similarities between the epistemically violent moments of knowledge-erasure that Robinson writes about, and the systemic disadvantages that Suji faces as the only person of color in this string quartet and the only non-native English speaker who is required to communicate in English. Unlike the rest of the quartet, Suji must go through multiple steps of translation before communicating her thoughts to the members of this ensemble. The others have the privilege to not have to go through the same steps as Suji to communicate, but there still seems to be some kind of disconnect between Werty, Violet, and J.C's understanding of this complexity and how they engage with Suji during collaborative moments in rehearsal. By this I mean, they are present and able to understand social and musical cues that are not obvious, yet they are unable to take a step back and see their privilege as English speakers in the moments where Suji is having a hard time translating certain things into English. In addition, it is clear that there tend to be gaps in their understanding of Suji, but yet they still move forward with conversation and rehearsal as if everyone is on the same page or they push what she has said to the side. If chamber music is a place where relationships and connections are built, how are the other members of this quartet building connections with Suji, as a whole human who is also a musician, if she is not fully understood in these private settings of rehearsal?

In this case study, I found it particularly interesting how white music students were more comfortable discussing their “responsibility” to contribute “as artists” in the movement to decolonize but were discomfited when asked to talk about decolonization outside of the context of what they should contribute as musical artist. I saw shifts take place through subtle stunned reactions as a response to the question “how have you made

sense of decolonization” as well as trepidation when asked about their racial and cultural identity in relation to their involvement in classical music as current music students. In contrast, they were able to regain confidence or become more serious when talking about the importance of the canon in classical music and managed to somehow discuss its importance rather extensively.

In other words, I observed that white students were unable to discuss decolonizing classical music without centering the canon and its prominent figures. They tended to navigate conversations in order to suggest that non-western music should be included in the “set pathway”—the current manner the canon has been taught despite its inherent alignment with white supremacy—the canon as a “solution” to a realized “problem.” This positions decolonization as a solution to pre-existing social inequalities that have been longstanding in the realm of classical music before decolonizing western art music was established as a mainstream movement. But as decolonial scholars Tuck and Yang state, “decolonization... is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve” in “our societies and schools.” The authors argue that turning the radical demands of decolonization into pragmatic plans for improving existing institutions not only fails to move us closer to decolonization but also “makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler move to innocence, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck, Yang 2012).

Applying Tuck and Yang’s critical analysis to this case study, it seems as if participants who are not directly impacted by racial and social inequalities, operate as if decolonization is a metaphorical solution that has the potential to absolve symptoms of coloniality that shape the traditional practice of Western art music. In addition, as it

specifically relates to the string department at NESU, the current manner in which decolonization is discussed is similar to Angela Davis' argument that "multiculturalism can become a polite and euphemistic way of affirming, persisting, unequal power relationships by representing them as equal differences (Davis,1993). Just like multiculturalism, the word decolonization can be made compatible with terms like "assimilation, diversity, and integration" which Davis has explained as common terms that imply, "'overcoming' racism without necessarily shaking up structures that are expressed through and that constitute the social context of racism" (Davis, 1993).

The critical inference that I am making here is that within the social culture of this string department, it is common for decolonization to be understood and/or discussed as a hypothetical, and even a possible solution to acknowledged problems, but decolonization is never conceived of as "a process not a product" (Attas, Walker 2019). Meaning, people within the culture of institutionalized classical music are often willing to recognize that racism is a problem, but they tend to formulate this problem in superficial terms of representation and access. The "problem" is seen primarily as a problem of content: the canon and the student body are insufficiently diverse. If this is the problem, then the solution is also about content: we must add some music by non-white people into concert programs and implement diversity scholarships or outreach to "underserved communities" in recruiting new students into the institution. In this formulation, the desired goal of "decolonization" is a "product"—a more diverse student body or concert repertoire. To instead conceive decolonization as a "process" would look quite different and might entail long-term activities of un-learning the values and perspectives of white supremacy, which might mean critically interrogating our commitment to ideas of

“talent” or “excellence,” our beliefs about what constitutes individual “success” or “failure,” or the way we experience social bonds and social responsibilities. The process of decolonization would thus also entail dismantling the institutional structures that promote and benefit from white supremacy, which would mean things like ending the university’s investments in fossil fuels and military development, making college free for everyone, doing away with boards of trustees made up of real estate magnates and bankers, etc. These kinds of processes, however, would trouble (and perhaps ultimately destroy) the institutionalized practice of classical music as it currently exists. Thus, the pressure to “decolonize” must be articulated in the form of “diversity and inclusion,” in other words, as a product-oriented solution that helps the institution continue functioning much in the same way it always has, and that allows members of the institution to continue learning, playing, and enjoying most of the same music in most of the same ways as they always have, and the attitudes and rhetoric around these discussions (whether conscious or unconscious) are conducted in a manner where I argue that systemic/ institutional problems are acknowledged but there is no critique on how the institution itself needs to be changed, instead people are saying that things need to be added or slightly changed and that this will be the answer to this call for decolonization. I’m also trying to say that people find the word decolonization discomfoting so they are insisting that this inclusionary gesture is a great solution because they want this issue to be resolved so that they can return to their happy lives of playing classical music and adhering to the canon.

I question what real radical fundamental change is taking place here that suggests a genuine process of decolonizing Western Art music? To be fair, their intentions are

important, and they do come from a good place, but how is one supposed to engage with a radical movement towards racial and systemic change if they are making detours around having uncomfortable discussions and unpacking events relating to the sources of the wound? How does one position themselves as an ally for radical, racial, and systemic change if they are continuously discomforted by discussions focused on recognizing the historical and contemporary manifestation of the symptoms of these wounds?

Currently, there is no formulated or proposed curriculum within the string department or the music department at NESU that explicitly states that it intends to contribute to the process of decolonization. There have been efforts and claims made by the larger university's DEI organization, but those efforts have not contributed to changing the experiences of students of color in this department. As evidenced in my ethnography, such students still express the feeling that they don't belong, and they still speak to the need to regulate and commodify their communication and their ways of being in order to adhere to social expectations that are structured around whiteness. We can see this in Ezekiel's statement, "(the code switching is real) I have to be aware of the way I talk to people. Normal human interaction is different when you're not talking to people of color" and where Suzan expresses, "let's just be honest all these fucking white kids. I was just like, how do I talk to you, you know? ... and so, in that way I felt like isolated." As these symptoms of coloniality persist within this department, I see similarities between the struggles that Ezekiel, Suji, Suzan face as people of color in the music building and the problematics Angela Davis untangles concerning "diversity management" in the workplace. As she puts it, "workers may look different and talk (even signify), eat, dance, and act differently from one another, but they will be expected

to be as productive ‘as if’ they were all the same” as their fellow white graduate and undergraduate classmates and colleagues.

As it relates to Suji, when she was asked what “decolonization” means to her, she shared that our interview was the first time that that word had been mentioned in the nearly two years she spent studying at NESU. In fact, she asked me what the word and movement meant and (as we were already using a smart phone for translation purposes for both Suji and I) I typed in the word on her phone, and she shared that this is not something that was commonly discussed during her studies in Korea. I find this to be particularly concerning because as Suji was a member of this string quartet she was required to perform at a ceremony held in the music department that was intended to be a contribution towards decolonization and this ceremony took place well before my interview with Suji, and even after that experience and being required to play a piece by an influential Black composer, Suji still somehow entered and left that musical performance not understanding the purpose and meaning of the performance’s ostensible goal, beyond the fact that it was a performance expectation and that there was music by a 20th century Black composer who was no longer alive. In addition, there are currently no consistent resources within this music department’s curriculum, specifically for graduate students, intended to help combat these types of issues and gaps in knowledge and understanding. Despite the absence of any real infrastructure intended to clarify the goals of “decolonization” for the department, Suji’s experience demonstrates that students are nevertheless required to participate in this political goal. This raises important questions and problems to which I will return in my conclusion.

I will share my findings of how faculty members have made sense of what it means to decolonize classical music in the Western Art tradition, but first I will explain how the student teacher relationship have been defined by anthropologists of the past who have examined the social culture within schools of music. *In Music, Talent, and Performance*, Kingsbury explains that through his exploration of a music school's social culture he found that studio instructors had major influence on the type of culture that developed in a music studio. In the next chapter, I will talk about my findings applying this theoretical framework in the context of mental health and musician health and wellness, but for now I will discuss how this framework could be applied in attempts to understand how impressions of the canon could transpired from studio teachers to students. I've observed that studio teachers at NESU do recognize the importance of the call to decolonize western art music but are very much unsure of what this means within the contest of this string department. If this is the case, are people in this string department comfortable vocalizing their contribution as "artist" to decolonize classical music with this much of having a lack of understanding of what the movement means outside of the context of music performance? It's unclear to me how some white students in this case study can feel optimistic with the trajectory of decolonizing classical music without having consistent supporting elements like a music history curriculum that centers decolonial methodology, but can also say/insinuate in the same breath that without learning the history of the canon in classical music student will not take learning a string instrument like violin seriously and that learning the canon in a necessity in developing a professional career. So, does decolonizing classical music not have that same importance that an academic curriculum is not necessarily required?

Returning to Dylan Robinson: if Robinson's arguments are correct, then it means the currently dominant attempts to "decolonize" classical music or the music department can only be doomed to fail, because they can only be acts of epistemic violence. "Inclusion" is not the same thing as "decolonization," in fact they are radically opposite. It was clear that white students had well earned thoughts but found it difficult to explicitly discuss the manifestation of racial inequality as it relates to specific identities such as Black, Brown, and Indigenous, and essentially and in general resided in this place of neutrality through their statement of "a lot needs to be done," but never specifying what exactly needs to change.

At best, I infer that members in this social culture are only able to engage with decolonization by vaguely acknowledging its problems and gliding over to "optimistic" ways of moving forward, but I question how can we move forward with any decolonial approaches when denizens of this space are unable to critically reflect and realize the ways in which coloniality continues to persist in the social culture of this department of music in unmarked ways? Are we truly moving towards radical change or are we just moving for the sake of moving and in response to outside social pressures like BLM during the global pandemic? I will return to these speculations in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Chapter III: MUSICIANS & WELLNESS

A. Boundaries

Around early morning, I make my way through the hallways of the music building. I notice a few of the teaching studios have posters depicting faces of composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn. As I turn the corner, I see Suji who exclaims, “Uceeeeeee” as she runs to give me a big hug, She continues to say, “It’s so good to see you” and—returning the welcoming embrace—I respond, “how are you?” She then goes on to express how tired she feels, and I ask, “are you getting any sleep my friend?” She says, “I try but I have a lot to do with the semester.” Moments later, Violet approaches us and says, “Hi friends!” and we hug as well. I ask how she is also doing, and she says “I’m extremely hungry and I haven’t had time to eat” as she quickly unwraps a homemade sandwich and attempts to consume it quickly as we wait for the other two quartet members. I continue to chat with Violet about food. I ask her if she meal preps or makes sandwiches as a go-to during busy days and in response she explains that on a good day she tries to make a sandwich, but with how busy school is she can find herself getting “hangry”—irritability caused by hunger—and (as she chuckles and glances at Suji) she notes that when she gets hangry it’s not a fun time for other people in rehearsal.

In this chapter, I examine another aspect of existence in the music building that poses a related set of problems, specifically, the difficulty music students have in setting boundaries, and caring for themselves physically and mentally. In my observations and interviews, issues related to health and wellness arose constantly, and I came to see these issues as subtly related to the problems surrounding diversity and decolonization explored my previous chapter. In the rest of this chapter, I will return to my observants

with to the intention of illustrating the mental health challenges students in the music building commonly face. Then I will conclude with some critical reflections tying my observations to scholarship concerning mental health within general university settings. I will also include scholars that specifically discuss and advocate for changes in the ways that the current mental health and musician health and wellness crisis amongst music students is handled.

In a personal interview that I conducted with Violet, I asked her “what does musical health and wellness mean to you?” and she responded (in a joking expression) “I don’t know what that means.” She proceeded to laugh, and she then said, “I mean, I do know what that means. I would say...so I injured myself junior year of college. It happened two days before my junior recital and I just...” (she begins to laugh again) “heavily medicated myself so I could play for my recital. It probably made things worse, but I couldn’t...I was also recording an album with my quartet at the time. It was just all over the place. I was not eating well; I lost a lot of weight. It was the epitome of ‘you’re not taking care of your mental health and wellbeing at all.’”

She explained to me that this was part of the reason she took a gap year between undergrad and NESU. As she puts it, “I took a gap a gap year because the injury lasted all the way through. I tried a lot of things. I cut out alcohol, I cut out meat, I went vegan for a little bit. Also, during covid I was at my parents’ house. I would work, apply to jobs, drank a lot of coffee” (Violet starts to chuckle again) “and got an ulcer. I would say I’m not doing well in terms of musician health and wellness.” During her gap year, Violet made attempts to prioritize moving her body and not hyper fixating on her body as much,

but she struggled because all the approaches she tried lead her back to being over observant of her body.

In a personal interview with Suji, she shared some challenges that she also faced as the only graduate student studying cello at NESU. Suji explains that before she entered the master's program at NSEU she knew that she wanted to set aside some time to take care of herself. From her perspective she believed that, as an international student receiving funding from NESU—in exchange for serving as a Teaching Assistant—that she would be allotted the time to focus on developing her skills through practice and personal endeavors, as well as to dedicate time to attend class outside of her TA responsibilities. However, she states “there is very limited time to improve my skills and practice because there are consistently things going on every single time. So, my expectations to improve a lot is taking more time on cello and it didn't work out as much.” Although she did not get the experience she was looking for, in regard to improving on cello, she is happy she has been able to receive teaching experience through her teaching responsibilities, but even those responsibilities have been overwhelming at times. She says, “maybe it's because I'm the only graduate cello student” at NESU. In addition to the issues concerning lack of time to adequately complete tasks, Suji shares problems that have occurred within the string quartet in regard to personal boundaries. She explains, compared to past chamber ensemble experiences, certain members of the quartet have the tendency to not respect others' lack of desire to do certain things within rehearsal settings. She says, “it's one thing when an idea comes up and it's tried out and not everyone likes it, so then that's when you come to a mutual agreement of some kind, but it's another thing when an idea is presented and

even though not everyone likes it one person keeps pressing everyone to do it.” Suji explains that there have been situations where members of the ensemble press for people to rehearse and meet outside of the designated times that they had originally agreed upon.

When speaking about personal boundaries and group dynamics, it was quite evident that Suji was not satisfied with the outcome of previous events. For example, she states,

there’s always so much fighting and everyone is so concerned with what they want personally, and even sometimes during rehearsals it gets to be difficult to focus on the music. Like no one is respectful! It feels like they don’t respect me, so I’m not sure how I should respect them. There was one coaching where our instructor just left out of frustration, and I had to go and apologize to him because it was not right.

At some point in Violet’s interview, I also asked her about boundaries: “do you think personal boundaries exist in your field of studies?” She responds,

It’s kind of a hard question. Well, I think it’s hard to have personal boundaries in a string quartet.” She continues, “And this is coming from someone who, for my undergrad I was in the same string quartet for four years, so I feel like I learned a lot about that. Like, I mean, you have to create a situation that can be good long term, but also it’s like you’re in a relationship with three other people all the time, so in that sense there are no boundaries. But you have to create boundaries to continue. It’s easier for boundaries to be crossed.

Violet’s interpretation of boundaries is very interesting, but it’s not entirely clear if they are things that she commits to exercising and respecting for herself and others. It’s clear that she is aware that boundaries do exist, and it is important to set boundaries to, hypothetically, create healthy environments and relationships with people, but within the context of musical collaboration, within this specific context of the string quartet, there are no boundaries although the ensemble cannot exist without people, relationships, and the cultivation of an environment. So, I wonder what is the exception here? What is so

significant about participating in a string quartet that leads Violet (and the other individuals as well) to omit and rationalize not staying true and rooted in the belief that boundaries exist and that they should be asserted in all human interactions, not just ones that are outside of musical contexts? Also, is Violet insinuating that within interpersonal relationships boundaries do not/cannot truly exist? I will continue to discuss what other members of the quartet had to say in responding to questions about boundaries.

In Werty's interview, in response to the question "do you think personal boundaries exist within your field of studies as a performing musician and a violist" he responded with,

that's an interesting question. Yes they do exist. I feel like the best musical creations I've made aren't just purely professional...I feel like all the best musical experiences I've had have been with people that I have become great friends with, and when I think about my dream quartet I think about when I went on a camping trip with my best friends from Pinewood Conservatory.

Pinewood Conservatory is the music institution that Werty attended for his undergraduate studies. It is considered a prestigious music institution offering a rigorous curriculum for various disciplines within the performing arts. Located on the east coast of North America, Pinewood is known to produce some of the most prominent artist within the Western Art music culture. Here, Werty is discussing a particular quartet experience he had that he has rationalized to be an ideal situation for him as a chamber musician and violist. He explains that they were,

two violins, cello, and me (viola), and we were like we should be the Apex quartet because I wanted to play with people that I care about because then I understand what they're doing... when you're playing you're saying so much about yourself, I think—the way you hear something, and it doesn't always come across at first. You really have to get to know someone to see how their playing mirrors yourself or the fact

that playing is your expression. I don't think it's obvious, I think it's something you have to find.

Werty takes a moment to gather his thoughts and continues to say, "When playing with people, it's important to bond and to really have that level of trust and interest to be like I like playing with you or I have an interest to do this." He then takes a moment to explain how in playing there are times where trust is ignited when ensemble members are able to communicate their musical ideas and be understood by other members through playing together, without a need for verbal communication. Essentially there is no need to remind each other, verbally, of what to do during specific parts of the music that is rehearsed or performed. He continues to say, "I guess this is just in a playing together sense. There are other ways that there could be boundaries." He goes on to ask me to guide him in how he should answer this boundary question, so I say, "I guess I mean in a more schedule formatting context." He says, "boundaries exist until they don't, right?" He chuckles a bit and states,

and it's really hard to put them back up again, so I believe that I can be a bit more casual with those types of things in that sense. I want to have casual relationships with the fellow graduate students and the undergrads that I work with and also with professors. I think it's important to break those boundaries in a way. Sometimes I wonder if I've gone too far. I feel like I do try to break boundaries... and I'm quite personable with the people I work with, coach, and teach... In terms of time... there are some people that I feel like I do have to be like yea no that's not going to work for me.

He asks if he could use examples and I say, "yea go ahead." so he says,

Like our orchestra director reached out about something that in any other circumstances would be a paid thing, and he asked all of us to do it and it was an instant no because I was not available.

I asked, "did he ask everyone in the orchestral ensemble to do it?" Werty responds,

It seemed to go out to anyone who was not in the current orchestra setting. Um, and it was a sort of thing that I was like if I was available...I might consider it... but I was no longer in this class... and it was just a time thing. For other professors that I would want a kind of, you scratched my back so let me scratch yours type of setting and throw me some bones... And they do throw me some bones quite often... so I am happy to break my boundaries and be flexible for those kinds of people because we have this give and take relationship...this push and pull, like you got my back and I got yours. And that's kind of the way I feel when it comes to fellow grad students. I'll work for free for another grad student...I feel like we should be supportive of our fellow grad students in that type of way.

He adds, "especially if that means that they are looking for another violist like me because that's even great because that means I get more exposure." Boundaries seem not to be a fixed black and white topic for Werty, and he seems to feel it is important to, specifically in this institutional setting, support fellow graduate colleagues and professors who are able to compensate him in return. In his last statement he expresses that he is willing to work for a fellow graduate student for free, and an added bonus would be that he would gain the exposure he would need as a matriculating performing violist.

However, there was a situation where Werty asked me to sub (this means to play as a substitute for) him and perform at a wedding gig with the graduate string quartet. I will insert an excerpt from the "thick description" I wrote, recounting this event:

From my understanding of the situation, Violet asked members of the quartet if they could perform at her cousin's wedding in early April. She made sure to specify that this was a paid gig opportunity, and everyone agreed. As we get closer to the wedding date, Werty confesses that he is no longer available to play for the gig because he was invited to play for a gig he favored more. At the beginning of a rehearsal that I was present for, Werty exclaimed, "Hey Ucee, wanna play at an awesome wedding gig that's paid?" I respond with "Uh, maybe? But I'd have to check my calendar. When is it?" Violet interjects and says, "it's my cousin's wedding and it's happening in early April." Long story short, I agreed to do the wedding gig as an act of helping some friends out. Violet then goes on to say that the wedding is in Northern New England, and I respond,

“Ohhh, that’s far. I don’t want to drive that far.” Violet turns to J.C and says in a timid and kind voice, “J.C??” J.C responds with a slightly cheerful tone, “Sure, I’ll drive!”

In this situation, Werty is clear that he does not want to participate in this performance because he has another performance opportunity that he would rather do, which is fair. But in his interview with me he explains that he would work for a fellow graduate student for free because it is important to show up for his colleagues in that way and he also said that if it’s a mutually beneficial situation—where compensation takes place through exposure or monetary exchange—he would help out. Here, Violet, a fellow graduate student of Werty’s, is offering a paid performance opportunity that seems mutually beneficial for both parties, but Werty does not see this as a necessary opportunity despite his previous comment in his interview. Is this not the type of situation that Werty explained earlier? What elements of this specific circumstance influence Werty to be unwilling to participate in this performance opportunity? Also, Werty and Violet seem to have very similar perspectives when it comes to defining boundaries as a general concept and how this takes place in real life. Are these personal beliefs ones that are rooted in their own thoughts, or are they influenced by contradicting definitions, theories, and practices that have been adopted and perpetuated within social cultures within Western civilization?

B. Mental Health & the Department of Music

I will now go on to analyze what relationship Ezekiel and Suzan had with mental health and how they understand their relationships with the subject matter as performing musicians as well as music student at NESU. As students of color, I was particularly

interested to see if their struggles or opinions differed from those of the white students in this case study. In addition, I will also share the perspective of Professor Goldmann and Professor Pearl and how they understand the function of mental health and musician health and wellness as instructors and how they have realized this topic amongst undergraduate and graduate students within the string department of this social culture—the music department.

Turning to Suzan, when asked “do you think personal boundaries exist in your field of studies as a performing musician?” she responds, “I guess personal boundaries they vary from person to person, but at the end of they are what you view as behaviors that are acceptable for people to express towards you. Behaviors are words or speech and what not...To put that in a simple definition: things that are okay or things that are not okay.” She laughs a little then continues to say,

I think that traditionally in the field of Western Art music and academic music there's (at least for performers) the aspect/idea of boundaries is not really accepted, or it's not...I don't think it's really a thing. For example, it's only recently that people are establishing boundaries between the teacher and the student when it comes to things as basic as like your teacher asking permission to touch your arm to adjust you, you know? That's really only a recent thing...I think something that still needs to be worked on in the academic music field is...teachers understanding how and when to push their students and by that I mean learning to encourage students to put more work, I suppose. Put in more effort and work harder into their instrument without doing it in such a negative way. Because I think traditionally it's built around guilt and shame which doesn't work for a lot of people. It works for some people, maybe, but honestly it's because people are just traumatized into feeling like they need to be better than everyone.

She laughs a little after this statement. There was a brief pause in our interview and then Suzan interjects,

oh, and one last thing about boundaries, I'm sorry. I think there's this idea of personal time and that not being a boundary that many people respect.

Like... taking time off... The violin teacher used to always give me shit for not wanting to have a lesson on weekends or holidays, and I'm just like I'm sorry but like as much as I appreciate your wanting to teach me more, I need time off. You know not wanting my schedule to be 8am to 8pm being full of rehearsals it's like... sure this is a wonderful opportunity, but you wanna know what else is a wonderful opportunity to not let my body just like collapse... So, this idea of time, personal time, and energy, is not a boundary that is not respected.

I went on to ask Suzan, “do you feel comfortable expressing your boundaries with teachers and students?” as well as “do you feel more comfortable in one situation more than the other? Suzan goes on to say, “No not really, I'm definitely a ‘yes man’ sort of person, that's definitely an issue—a long lasting issue for me in general. It's kind of an Asian thing, really you know. Just be like nice and...” Suzan then goes on to codeswitch into an accent that resembles that of an Asian person, and says in a soft-spoken polite tone “yea, okay.” She scoffs and rolls her eyes a little bit and continues to say, “yea but that was also part of my issue of like biting more off more than I could chew when I was at NESU. There were too many things that I committed to and then I just... did everything shitty.”

Between her statements, Suzan would shallowly laugh at moments where she was criticizing herself for not wanting to participate in situations that would require her to neglect her well-being in exchange for meeting what others (like her violin professor) desired of her performance as a music student, although she had circumstances that made it difficult to participate. She shares that she does not feel comfortable expressing her boundaries with anyone and how her personality trait of being a “yes man” does not help this issue. She also expresses how others expect her to be automatically cooperative and keep a good attitude with everything that is asked of her. Echoing Angela Davis's description of the “multicultural” workplace, which I will explore in more detail below,

Suzan also points out that ingrained social stereotyping of Asian people contributes to the frequent pressure she feels to behave “as if” there are no additional challenges or burdens she faces as a student of color. Suzan feels that as an Asian-American she is somehow expected not to have a life that is complex and that includes negative emotions. Even if she does experience turbulent situations she feels she is expected to operate “as if” those situations do not affect her ability to complete tasks in what is deemed a “normal” fashion.

When discussing how she went about asserting boundaries and responding to boundary-assertion by others, Suzan shares, “I was definitely much more candid to my colleagues, to my fellow music students. You know just because I felt more comfortable with them...and that was really situational too. I felt like, especially in the second year of our graduate string quartet...” Suzan begins sharing an experience she had as a member of a chamber music ensemble she played with during one of her semesters at NESU (a different ensemble than the case study this project has focused on thus far). Suzan is also intentionally choosing not to name any names in the example that she is sharing. She talked at length about this issue:

There were times where there would be one individual (I won't say their name) was not comfortable doing what the rest of the group wanted to do and so in that situation I would try to be more reserved just to not pressure this one person into feeling like they had to do something, like they had to do this rehearsal, they had to play this piece. Just because...I understand how it feels to like to feel that pressure from everyone outside. Feel like you have to do something. With professors it was more like the same situation where I would just fuck up a lot of things and then at the very last minute the professor would be like what's going on? And I'd be like I'm very sorry I didn't reach out to you. Honestly, most of the time it would be the professor trying to get me to talk to them about my issues, which was nice because it felt like they were actually looking out for me. Honestly, it was a thing where I struggled a lot with expressing what I was struggling with. That just comes with (I don't know, maybe it's just a me thing) but I

feel like a lot of people just feel like in college this pressure...or like in grad school...they feel this pressure to be perfect all the time and not need help from people. I don't know maybe that's just a general societal thing or something...And then there was this one instance for my final [she shallowly laughs] I was supposed to do a research paper to finish my degree, and I didn't because I just like struggled to find sources. So, then I told my violin teacher. She was like where is this? And I was like yea I haven't done it because... I was honest with her at that point, like I was almost done, and I stopped giving a shit about...I already fucked up so much and was like I don't fucking care anymore [she laughs again]. I was like I don't have it. I really had a hard time finding sources and then I just gave up. And she was like well why didn't you ask me for help earlier. And I was like I just felt bad. I didn't want to bother you, you're just so busy and stuff. And then she was like why...Why would you not ask for help when you need help?

When asked, “do you think people respect your boundaries?” Suzan says,

I think it's a two-way street. I think...the short answer is no but I also think that I don't do a good job—a lot of the time—of establishing my boundaries...Like I think it's a two-part thing. I think I'm not clear enough about vocalizing these things, but I also feel like, internally, I feel obligated to—for example—be available to rehearse whenever. I feel like there's this unseen pressure to like to be always willing to do. To, I don't know, make my schedule available and things like that. So, I feel like that goes back to the question of “personal boundaries in the field of music” and what not. I feel like that's kind of like a sort of thing that is weirdly understood by everyone you know. Like you have to be available to rehearse or else you don't love music, you know? Or you're not committed to the music if you don't want to be with the violin all the time. It's like no, that's really not true. I work hard...I just don't want to do it all the time...I would rather not be surrounded by people who are only fixated on their instrument because to me that's boring. What do you not have other interest? You know, what, you're not good at anything else? Okay that was mean...

We both take a minute to laugh, and she continues to say, “You know what I'm saying?

Like I've already done music so much of my life. I want to experience other things and I want to be surrounded by people who are interested in other things and not just like...”

[she says in an animated mocking voice] “oh Jascha Heifetz, oh Tchaikovsky.”

Suzan goes on to explain that she did not have words to say to her violin teacher and that the situation was actually kind of funny in the end. Despite Suzan’s humorous tone, I’m curious to know what type of environment her instrumental instructor at NESU created that lead Suzan to feel like she could not ask for help when she was struggling with an assignment that impacted her ability to graduate? It is nice that the instructor was able to talk to Suzan about her struggles after the fact, but why did Suzan feel like the struggles she was facing in the midst of completing her degree were not on the same priority level as her professor’s busy schedule? Were these attitudes of “you must be perfect as a graduate student” upheld solely by Suzan, or is this a mind-set that is unmarked and perpetuated through subtle and/or obvious interactions within this social culture?

1. “Never Say ‘Die’”

In this next section I will be making direct comparisons between of the ways all students in this case study respond to the questions, “Do you think NESU’s string department prioritizes musician health and wellness or is this something that is up to the individual to decide/figure out?” along with “do you feel supported as a student at NESU.” My purpose for this approach is to see how responses resemble or differ from one another, and to understand how/whether each student’s institutional experience at NESU has impacted how they are able to balance mental health and wellness alongside their responsibilities as full-time performing music students at NESU. I am also curious to know to what degree—if any at all—do students feel supported at this institution.

I go to ask Suzan “Musician health and wellness, what does this mean to you?”
She answers:

Um, I don't know probably...you can't just make a class about that...It has to be more of like a fundamental fix/thing. I suppose regular mental health stuff is what it is, whatever that means. I guess dealing with the pressures of being a musician can be a lot for some people. Thankfully, I've never had performance anxiety, but for me it's been more of the pressure of like...doing well on a regular basis, as in lessons and rehearsals. That's always been more anxiety inducing to me than the actual performance itself, but I guess performance anxiety would be a part of that for some people.

Here, Suzan is explaining that she does have some form of anxiety as a performer, but it does not come in the form of traditional performance anxiety, which usually takes place right before or during the event of one's performance in front of an audience.

She goes on to say,

And then like, taking care of your body is obviously important for everyone, but for musicians it's a very large part of what performance is, so I suppose education on...I guess you would be surprised at the number of people who don't know how to take care of themselves, or like they do but they don't. Maybe it's because they don't have time or they can't afford it, let's be real it's like expensive to eat well. And if you're working all the time because you need to pay bills, so then you don't sleep. She giggles quickly and says, "or shit like that."

When Ezekiel was asked if he felt "supported as a music student" within the string department at NESU he responded,

Um, at the moment no. I mean, I definitely bounce between the like, specifically with Professor Pearl, I bounce back between the oh she cares so much for me and I'm so grateful to have her like have my back, but when it comes down to like the motherly side of I set this expectation and you didn't meet it, now you're worthless that's when it gets complicated. And that's when I feel very alone.

Here, Ezekiel is sharing an ongoing struggle he has been facing while studying at NESU with Professor Pearl. This interview was conducted a few days before his senior recital (a requirement he must fulfill in order to receive his undergraduate degree in violin performance). I then go on to ask, "do you think you can gain support from other places

in the music building?” He responds, “Yea and I hate to say it, but I think a lot of it comes from shared trauma. Especially in the string studios, everybody could just talk for hours about how their teacher had made them feel and like how their struggling week to week...like that is always a focal point in conversation.”

As a response to “Musician Health and Wellness, is this something that is up to the individual to decide/figure out,” Ezekiel says,

I think it’s very much up to the individual. I don’t think there’s any sense... I don’t think there’s any indication from the top that wellness is something that’s important or cared about. I’ve heard a professor brag about getting no sleep and criticizing people for wanting to not have late night concerts because they have to teach in the morning. His response is well I haven’t gotten sleep in 20 years and it’s like that’s not healthy... Um, like seeing people who have performance injuries not like get the thought that they deserve for you know not wanting to fully cripple themselves in order to practice a little more each week. Yea I think the wellness side of NESU strings leaves a lot to be desired.

I was inspired by Ezekiel’s response, so I ask, “is this the same attitude present outside of the string department?” He says, “Yes, I think. One of my roommates is a voice student and the things I’ve heard from voice student is definitely very similar. And I’ve also seen and heard similar integrations on the jazz side of things. So, I think, while it’s not a universal truth, there are definitely faculty members that take up a lot of space that has set the expectation of wellness is not important.” And I add on in our interview, “without actually saying wellness is not important and just seeing and feeling it in the ways they move forward in teaching and interactions.” Ezekiel responds, “Yes.”

In Violet’s interview, when asked “do you feel supported as a graduate student at NESU?” she responds,

Sometimes it feels like I’m free floating...wandering aimlessly. I feel like Professor Pearl expects me to structure myself, and it’s good because it forces me to structure myself and grow in that way, but with that comes me having to figure out a lot by myself. Sometimes I feel she expects me

to go and do things...and sometimes she can be compassionate, but it's more like tough love. So sometimes I don't feel supported. I know if I go talk to her she'll try to support me, but I don't always want to do that. I go on to ask Violet, "do you think it's easier to just keep going/keep pushing? Do you have time to slow down and have these conversations with your schedule?" Violet sips her coffee and answers, "Yes to pushing forward and no to slowing down."

Turning to J.C, when asked "do you think NESU string department prioritizes musician health and wellness or do you think this is something that is up to the individual to decide that this is a priority," he responds quickly, "individual." I then ask, "why do you say that?" He elaborates:

I feel like the schedules can be really rigorous. I think it's a matter of how one looks at it, but I find that a lot of my colleagues get pretty overwhelmed over sometimes the workload and just generally life, and I think what ends up resolving it is the student having to talk to the professor about how to do something about it. But I wouldn't say that they have measures in place. Of course, they'll send emails, but not the music department itself has measure in place if you are uncomfortable or having an issue. It's more like you talk and you try to work something out, but they seem to be incredibly accommodating when there is an issue and very to the point, at least in my experience.

In Suji's interview, I asked if she thinks NESU prioritizes mental health and wellness and she shared, "Well, I go to the acupuncture place at the University clinic, but scheduling appointments are always complicated." She then explains how the acupuncturist's scheduled times are often rigid and are often offered right before or right after she has an obligation within the music department. She also adds, "there is a university gym, but I don't go to it." Suji doesn't specify why she doesn't go to the gym, but I speculate that it has something to do with schedule conflicts between the operational hours of the gym and her late-night obligations as a performing music student. Returning to the interview, I go on to ask Suji, "do you think the music department prioritizes this,"

she quickly says, “music building? No, I don’t think so.” She then goes on to say, “I’ve never heard about mental health caring places in the music building, and even if the professors ask oh how are you doing? Is there any problem with somethings? I can’t tell them because they’re not actually asking for it. It’s something about here [the music building or potentially American culture] where they say it’s okay.” I ask, “so them (professors) asking is more to be polite, not really to talk about it?” Suji replies, “yea, because they’re busy too and it takes a lot of time to care about mental health. They didn’t come here to do that, they came here to do a lesson, right? If we had a class called mental health and wellness then they’d come forward because then it would be okay to talk about it, but that not what we have.”

I later ask Suji, “do you feel supported by the music/ string department?” and she expresses, “they are supportive, I can trust that they support me, and they are on my side and want me to be better and those things...I never talk about things outside of music. I never talk about something else” Suji then describes how she experienced a car accident in a previous semester, and Professor Goldmann came to help her with the accident, and she said, “that was very nice...Our faculty is so nice, but they’re really busy though.”

In the last portion of this observation section, where I explore participants’ responses to questions regarding mental health, I will insert the perspectives of the two string faculty members that I interview for this case study. Here, I hope to broaden the scope of how of mental health and musician health and wellness is experienced and perceived within NESU’s strings department.

Turning to Professor Goldmann, when asked “mental health and wellness, what does that mean to you and what does this mean in relation to the students you see here at

NESU?” His comments on this subject touch on many topics I find meaningful, and I want to quote them in full:

Yea, health, and wellness is psychological and emotional as much as it is physical. You know, it’s interesting...I think when we are university, student aged, college, or graduate...it’s a pressure cooker and I try to reflect back on my, I only did undergraduate but my, undergraduate days to figure out if I was as stressed as I see all the students being here. And memory is so flawed that I simply can’t conclusively answer that. I can’t say well no it was different. I’m sure it was different in one way or another...I certainly remember times of stress where I was staying up all night writing papers. I remember not being prepared and cramming and things like that. I remember having too many things on my plate, but I also remember just wonderful freedom and... I don’t know, I look back on those years as a wonderful time and I’m looking at the students here and I’m just seeing a lot of stress. I don’t know if it’s curriculum bloat that is keeping everyone too busy. I don’t know if there are just so many demands, maybe the world has more demands, you know. When I did my undergraduate, we weren’t staring at cellphones all day long. We didn’t have information constantly assaulting us with coming in. You’d be in a room reading chamber music [he says in an uplifting voice] (as you’ve probably heard me talk about hundreds of times) I’d be reading chamber music with my friends and unless someone knocked on that door or a bomb went off outside the window, we would not be aware of anything in the outside world. But now it’s like oop my pocket just vibrated and I’m going to check that. So, I think there’s this fast-moving world and it’s full of expectations for immediate engagement and all that stuff, so I think that is something that’s mostly emotional, right. Then the physical, I have students that come in and say I’m feeling some pain in my hand and wrist, I think I practiced too much...or I did something the wrong way. So that is something that I don’t think is any different from when I was a student, but it’s something that has to be so sensitively and mindfully addressed in order to make sure that people aren’t injuring themselves and having long-term injuries, doing whatever it is you are teaching them, so there’s that and then we also have that other layer of covid and everything that’s associated with that. In terms of health and all the implication (yea that’s physical health), but that has also had incredible implications on people’s emotions and levels of stress. So...I like to try to get as much out of my students as I can, but if I see somebody getting overly stressed or something like that, I love the feeling of saying hey, why don’t we just take a breather from this and approach it at a different speed when the time is right. And I think that’s how one should go through life. I can’t tell you how many students here I’ve said listen you’re doing a performance degree and you’re stressed out, why don’t you do a B.A and you can still go to grad school? You can still go to grad school, and you give yourself more

freedom, more breathing room to be able to do the things you want, and it'll cost you nothing. And I've said to students why don't we put this piece to bed and focus on other things right now, so you don't feel like it's hanging over you...and we'll approach it later. So, I love finding release valves that may contribute to one's better mental and/or physical health, and I feel like that can be done in this position that I'm in right here. I've even told students to twiddle down the number of places that they are auditioning for graduate school, so that you're not killing yourself trying to get to all these places and physically harming yourself and stressing yourself out. I think those are my thoughts for mental health and physical wellness.

I go on to ask Professor Goldmann, “do you feel like you are properly supported by the university to be able to support the students that you have right now in your studio?”

I think, for the most part, I haven't run into [he lets out a deep sigh] too many obstacles in being able to support my students. I think I take matters into my own hands also to be supportive...It's interesting we're in a culture where you have to document everything. If you want to get tenure or a promotion or something like that you have to say oh I just had an hour-long conversation with my former student (you know) and I wanted that to go on my record. I want credit for that, and I am just so tired of that, and I really try to be a minimalist in what it is I need to put forward...in that realm for my own advancement or whatever it is and I have so many more unspoken things that I feel that I do and think about in order to support my students on a daily basis. What we just talked about in terms of health and wellness and being sensitive to those things, um yea. I mean, I do feel occasionally constricted by various rules in the department like oh this person can give a recital, this person can't base on...space is limited this and that, and so they have to have structures for these kinds of things. However, it often comes as a frustration to me because I have students that I have students that would like to do more things but are not allowed to because it doesn't fit into the overall structure here...[I go on to say “whatever this ambiguous bureaucratic structure is here”]...Exactly and some structures have to be in place but I find that sometimes I can't figure out why, so that's that.

In my interview with Professor Pearl, I asked “musician health and wellness, what does that mean to?” she responded,

Physically understanding how to use your body so that you don't create unnecessary tension so that...teaching the fundamentals very well and if students comes in with a lot of built in tension I always go back and try to rectify that, and I'm also...I'm very involved in promoting good pedagogy from the beginning stages, so I bring in these Suzuki [a music

pedagogy method designed to assist parents in teaching their children how to master an instrument] people to do that. Which I think, when it's done well it can be...good elementary teaching will address that and the physical side. Psychologically, I think it's also an issue that the students need to just understand what it takes, which is a lot, to play well. And just also structure their practicing, and have realistic, but also high expectations. Also support each other. We do a lot of that in this community so that we have that together...So there isn't unhealthy competitiveness ...I think sometimes people can be inspired by each other, but I also feel like everyone should be recognized for the progress that they make and that's where the focus should be. That's to say for good pedagogy anywhere.

I went on to ask, "is musician health and wellness something that is up to the individual to decide, or do you think an institution should have a system in place to help support that?" Professor Pearl responds, "I think most teachers think about that, but we could always do more and have more...Some teachers offer Alexander classes and Feldenkrais to help with body awareness, but by and large the studio teacher has a lot of responsibility for that, with creating the atmosphere of the studio, yea."

C. Critical Reflection

I will begin the critical reflection for this chapter with an anecdote illustrating an interaction I had with Violet:

On a rainy morning, I walk into Professor Goldmann's teaching studio to observe a rehearsal meeting of the graduate string quartet. I open my backpack to retrieve my notebook and electronic device for recording. As the quartet members walk in one at a time, I take a sip of water from my water bottle. I look at the time and I see that it's getting close to when I should eat something, so I step outside to check my backpack for my lunchbox only to realize that I forgot it at home on my kitchen counter. I was a bit perturbed by this, but I went back into the rehearsal space and planned to just keep the

day moving. As I walk back into the room, I'm greeted by Violet who says, "Hey Ucee! How's it going?" I respond, "It's going alright. I left my lunch and snacks at home and I'm a bit hungry." Violet says, "Oh no! I understand that struggle. I think I have some almonds in my bag that you can have after rehearsal." I say, "Oh wow, really? That's so nice of you!" Rehearsal carries on and at the end of the meeting, as we were all making our way out the door Violet says, "Oh wait Ucee, those almonds. Let me just look for them." Violet proceeds to frantically search her bag and pulls out a crinkly sack of almonds with a brand I did not recognize. I ask, "Where did you get these from?" she says, I don't entirely remember and like I've had them for a while, but they're still good." I take a bite of an almond and my mouth filled with this undesirable taste of disgust. I say, "Violet, I don't think these are edible, honestly" she says, "WHAT?! There's no way." Violet proceeds to read the bag and say's to me, "actually you're right [she chuckles a bit] they expired about a year ago."

As I reflect back on the observations I conducted for this thesis, I find this anecdote more and more meaningful. What struck me over and over again, throughout my conversations with the students and teachers in the music building, was the way so many of them seemed aware of their inability to take care of themselves in the way they were expected to, but also the way they seemed to accept this state of affairs as "just the way it is." When Violet offered me the stale almonds, I realized something else: the people in the music building also want to take care of *each other* but are similarly restrained by "the way things are." I see this as an example of a prevailing conflict in the music building, which I interpret as an inability to reconcile theory with practice. I will

return to this idea in more depth in the concluding chapter; here, I will introduce some of the contradictions the interviews in this chapter highlight.

The students I interviewed regularly spoke about not having enough time to eat, for example, and seemed both aware that this was unhealthy and helpless to do anything about it. When Violet noticed that I myself was not going to be able to eat lunch, she identified this as a problem, and despite facing her own struggles as a member of this department she still went out of her way to try to help me. I experienced this as a moment of authentic “care and compassion” (Cheng 2016), but I also saw how constrained and insufficient her gesture was for actually addressing the problem. A handful of almonds is not an appropriate substitute for eating lunch; furthermore, these particular almonds weren’t even edible in the first place.

The interviews I conducted about health and wellness suggest that the music building imposes a culture of individual responsibility on its members. Both students and teachers spoke to this, in different ways. Students felt strongly that taking care of their health was something they were expected to be solely responsible for. Most felt like asking for help was not an option, and they seemed skeptical about how much help they might receive even if they did ask. On the other hand, the two teachers I interviewed also seemed a bit at sea when it came to questions about supporting students’ well-being. Professor Goldmann described his role in similarly individualistic terms—when his students are struggling, he tries to take time to help them relax, or lift the burden of a particular piece or expectation. He does this out of “care and compassion,” and yet his individual acts of care for the few students in his studio are not part of a widespread network of care across the whole department; in other words, each student, and each

faculty member, must make their own individual choices about how—and whether—to care for and support one another. And yet, many of the struggles’ students described were *social* struggles: having to rehearse for too many hours or having too many burdens placed on you by a teacher, for example. These are difficulties that an individual can’t resolve on their own because the difficulties themselves come from social requirements and solving them would mean impacting others as well. In a sense, a music department becomes an even better place to observe the social ramifications of individual health and wellness than other departments at the university, because the work that students are here to do (perform music together) is by definition social.

I also got the impression that music department attitudes about health and wellness see it primarily in terms of how it impacts the “product” of the department, which we might identify as the level of students’ performance abilities. Several students spoke about mental or physical health struggles but framed them primarily as impediments to doing the work they were expected to do as musicians. Similarly, both teachers spoke about student wellness primarily in terms of impacts on student performance—Professor Pearl talked about protecting students from stress injuries that might impede their functioning as musicians, and Professor Goldmann spoke of the worry that students might develop “long term injuries” (meaning, performance-impeding injuries) if they don’t treat their bodies well.

In general, my subjects painted a picture of a musical culture where musical performance is the most important foregrounded value, and the primary social goal. Performing well, including performing well together (as a quartet, for example), is what everyone is here to do. Insofar as individuals have struggles, those struggles must be

addressed in a way that does not impact this primary goal. In some senses, then, this is a culture much like the workplaces Angela Davis describes, where individual workers are allowed to be “different” only so long as they are able to work “as if” they are normatively functioning.

These thoughts lead me to another one, which is the way the imperatives of the music building and of the university in general require individuals to think of one another in transactional terms reminiscent of Wendy Brown’s description of life within neoliberal culture generally (Brown 2005). Professor Goldmann spoke to this melancholy fact of life in his interview, when he described his exhaustion at having to “document” all his interactions with students, so that he can put them in the annual self-evaluation forms that are a primary means by which faculty receive merit pay and promotions.

In all these ways, the music building, as a sub-culture of the university, which is also a sub-culture of colonial-capitalist society in general, imposes a certain way of doing and being that must be ascribed to if its members—including both faculty and students—are to find success. And yet, my interviews reveal many contradictions and tensions in how my subjects view this culture and its imperatives. In my final chapter, I will examine some of these in an attempt to tie together the challenges this culture imposes on efforts to “decolonize” classical music as well as on efforts to improve musician health and wellness.

Chapter IV: CONCLUSION

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.
-James Baldwin

Imagine, if you will, you are a Black college student who has just graduated in the year 2020 from a music conservatory where you are one of the few, if not the only, Black face in predominantly white spaces. Your aspiration to become a performing classical musician has dwindled away through your four years of having to play music and learn the musical traditions of European figures that do not represent your identity, do not culturally empower you, and do not validate your ways of knowing and thinking about music. Imagine, if you will, the global pandemic has hit and many are sick, dying, or mourning the loss of a loved one. Government officials have instated an emergency lockdown and enforced state and district curfews amongst civilians. Masks are mandatory, social distancing is required, and the virus is alive and well, wreaking havoc on the world economically, socially, and holistically. All concerts and in person social engagements have been canceled and there is no work for performing musicians and artists, but you still continue to teach music lessons privately and decide to take a gap year while living at home with your widowed mother and younger brother (one of your five siblings) who has down syndrome and autism, as well as other health challenges/risks.

One day, as you are preparing a lesson plan for teaching, you receive a phone call from a professor at NESU. Before you graduated from undergrad, you briefly entertained the idea of going to graduate school to continue to pursue music, but after a series of

traumatizing, spirit breaking experiences in undergrad and the global pandemic you decide to take a gap year. However, this viola instructor—who you maintained contact with after a trial audition for a different university—is calling to inform you of an amazing—at least how it seemed at the time—opportunity to continue to study music and earn a master’s degree. In that phone call she strongly encourages you to apply and send in a virtual audition tape to NESU as soon as possible. So, after that call, you begin to prepare your cover letter, put together an audition tape (although you were not practicing at the same level as you were when you were in conservatory), and you manage to submit all your application materials (a personal statement, letters of recommendation, and your transcript) in a matter of four days. Three days later you gain acceptance to NESU. You receive this “amazing” news while you are in the presence of your (then) white boyfriend who later becomes the perpetrator that assaulted you during your first year of your graduate studies, thus leaving you with a back injury that changes your future as a performing musician.

After receiving a letter of acceptance followed by an award letter, you have to move quickly because classes have apparently already begun at NESU and the viola instructor who encouraged you to apply failed to tell you the timeline of the semester. You begin your process of moving to the New England area, a place the family members of the person that abused you have described as their “forever happy place.” Without understanding the entirety of what you will be walking into, you embark on a tiresome journey to find housing, only to find out that there is a horrendous housing crisis in the area that you will be moving to, and that racism and prejudice attitudes are alive and well, and perpetuate in unmarked manners--veiled by euphemistic phrasings and grand

inclusionary gestures that are intended to distract the eyes and minds from witnessing the truth.

Imagine...actually there is no need to continue to imagine because I will go on to tell you about my reality in this space.

Fast-forwarding to my third semester at NESU, I am now a second-year graduate student who is starting the semester feeling out of place (due to struggles with finding community as a Black non-binary fem) and out of touch (due to spending all summer struggling and recovering from a back injury that still persisted into the following semester and not being able to play viola like I intended to). A lot has changed, the professor that recruited me to come to NESU is no longer here and my experience with her as an instructor was quite traumatizing. So, her absence is both a relief and a complication to the consistency of my musical training within the string department. However, I try to create a different experience with this new/temporary viola instructor—James McLaughlin (but we just call him Jim).

Jim was an interesting instructor, to say the least. I made it a priority to communicate with him about my situation with my painful back injury and even went to the extent of being transparent and telling him specific details, despite my emotions, of what had happened to me and how I was still in physical therapy recovering from all of it. I remember telling him that I couldn't play for longer than 10 minutes without excruciating pain arising. He responded, "I'm sorry that that happened to you and that is really awful." He asked if I was receiving any other help and I went on to tell him how I was also seeing a therapist. He didn't say much really after that. We worked on a small

section of my music, then I told him that I had to run across campus to make it to my physical therapy appointment, as the lesson was coming to an end.

Before the semester had begun, I wrote Jim a detailed email about my schedule and my plans to pursue a certificate in Ethnomusicology. I also sent him a letter from the disability services sector of the university that specified that I would need accommodations due to my injury. I thought this information had been received and understood, yet Jim would continue to question my inability to play viola at the level he expected, despite having received all this information. The very first lesson I had with him he said, “Oh, you’re a master student? I thought you were a sophomore” then proceeded to tell me things that the old viola instructor had told him about me. It felt like he was subtly implying that he intended to navigate my lessons based on what she had told him. I remember a distinct occasion where he actually pulled me to the side and said, “so why is it that you have to leave early from studio class?” I went on to tell him again about the certificate and my interdisciplinary endeavors with trying to pursue Ethnomusicology at an institution (NESU) that does not offer that as a curriculum for graduate students. He responded, “yea okay, I get that, but you are a viola master student and as a master in viola it is disappointing of you to always have to leave studio class early. I don’t know what the class is, but you have to figure something out with the professor. I get that you’re trying to do all these other things, but you are a viola master student.” At that point I had no idea what else to do but leave.

I had to drive to a neighboring campus that was 30 minutes away from NESU for an Ethnomusicology class that was scheduled to start in 25 minutes. The viola studio class that Jim lead on a weekly basis was scheduled—that semester—on a day that I

notified Jim in advance would not work for me. He asked for all of our (students enrolled in the class) schedules at the beginning of the semester and made an impression in an email that he would find a time that worked best for all students, but it seemed that my colleague's performance obligations trumped my desire to pursue interdisciplinary studies at neighboring colleges. He, the professor, was only doing his job. But doing his job came at the expense of scrutinizing me for a schedule conflict that was out of my control and my change in discipline focus that I communicated to him well before the semester had begun. Jim was primarily focused on playing his part in order for the enterprise of classical music to stay functioning, alive, and well, within the string department and music depart at NESU.

The interaction with Jim that was really the turning point for me took place the same week that a racist email was sent to Black student organizations and members at NESU. The email essentially stated that we were unwanted, and that white people on campus (students, teachers, workers, and affiliates) were only pretending to want us (Black students) around for required diversity reasons. The letter ended with a reminder that at NESU, white people will and always will be the ring leaders and Black students are only allowed in the space out of required pity.

I read the letter a couple of hours before I had my viola lesson with Jim, and words could not explain how numb I became. As a Black individual who is studying classical music in music school, sadly, I am used to these types of events and this type of feeling. I was used to being expected to operate "as if" these oppressive incidents did not impact the level that I was able to perform, and even if they did affect my ability to work I knew that I was expected to find it within myself to operate "as if" this type of

oppression was not a strong enough reason to disrupt my ability to work "normally," to work like everyone else, in other words to work like my white colleagues. I was also well acquainted with the mass emails from the university assuring me this is not what this university stands for and informing me that the administration will not tolerate this type of behavior in this space. These emails assert that we are an institution that prides itself on cultivating and maintaining a diverse inclusive space. Such proclamations are often followed by emails sharing the institution's vague explanations for how it plans to act in the matter. Despite all of this, I knew that I had a lesson to attend, and I had to find it within myself to "operate as normal." However, what if you continue to operate as normal, but you are still scrutinized for trying operating as normal? This question is in fact important as I will continue to explain what I have described as "the turning point."

Before walking into my old instructor's studio for my third lesson of that semester, I take a second breath. I then go on to say in my head, "no matter what, your reason for being here is to play viola. You have practiced these specific sections and you have noted that these are the places that you will ask for clarification/help. No matter what you are feeling or what is happening, you are going in here to play viola." I knocked on the door and Jim opens the door and says, "oh nice, you made it. Come on in." I proceed to pick up my viola and all my belongings that I needed for the rest of the day. I walk into the studio and drop my heavy bookbag to the floor and put my viola case on a piano bench. Jim comments "wow that's a lot of stuff you're carrying." I respond, "yea, I have my ethnomusicology class today and a music history course here at NESU later in the evening so I kind of need to carry things with me" and he responds, "yea, okay right." He asks me what I had prepared, and I told him that I brought in the York Bowen piece

we worked on in my last viola lesson and I said I wanted to work on it with him. He goes on to say, “oh, okay is there anything else you want to work on” and I respond, “yea but I’m still looking for pieces that reflect the style of viola playing I enjoy.” Jim continues to say, “I think I have a piece that you would enjoy. I actually recently premiered the piece and there are no recordings available, so you would really need to focus and practice it.” I said, “Okay, If you send it to me I can look at it and see if it’s something I would want to play,” then he says, “yea, sure I’ll try to find a copy and I do think you should start learning it.” I proceed to take out the music and place it on the music stand he had positioned for students to use. He goes ahead and examines the sheet music. He asks why I wanted to learn this piece and I told him that I really enjoyed the piece and had only played the first movement in the past and wanted to work on learning the other movements. He says, “I see, alright let see where you are with things.” I began playing and after two and half lines my right arm starts hurting and cramping, so I stop and start shaking my hand out. Jim says to me, “what happened? Why did you stop” I respond, “because my arm started to hurt and my back...” He says, “I see well since you’re taking a break I want to make some comments on what you did so far.” He goes on to critique my tone and says that in general I needed to project more. He encourages me to pick up my viola and play a specific section a few times and then tells me to keep playing. I stop to ask him a question about fingerings, and he gives me an unclear response of “you can do this fingering or... actually no don’t do that. I don’t like that. Actually, start from this section let me see what you are doing.” I start from the section he points and play a couple measure, but he stops me to ask, “why are you doing that figuring there [a measure that tis not the same as the section I needed help there]” and I respond, “because

I like it and I feel like it makes it less complicated to get down to the lower register for this part [point's at a section of the music]." Jim goes on to say, "well, I don't like that [as he erases my fingerings and proceeds to put in new ones that he was still in the process of generating in his head]." He then goes on to say, "there now try this. I think that's a better fingering." I then attempt to play what he had written and was a bit unsettled that he erased my fingering that I had spent hours practicing and trying to perfect, but I still continued to show no emotion and before playing I said, "okay" in a monotone/neutral voice. I was having a hard time grasping his fingerings and he kept saying, "It's really not that hard" and attests to play it himself and is unable to illustrate what he was expecting from me without playing the measure more than one time to correct his intonation. I then try to play it again and was still unsuccessful and just kept playing until I had to stop because I was feeling pain. This time Jim said to me, "yea, you're going to have to practice this at home" and I respond, "I know, and I will." He looks at me in silence for 10 seconds and says, "okay let's move on to the next section."

We continue the lesson and it felt like he was telling me to stop every other measure and criticizing my fingerings. We actually reach a measure where he says, "that is such an awful fingering and I don't know why you would do that" and I respond, "you're actually the person who wrote and told me to do that fingering [points at music using my bow with my viola in my other hand] and he replies, "well, you shouldn't do that fingering [as he continues to erase that measure and the measure after that]. Here you should do this." I ask, "why should I do this one what if the other one works better for me?" he responds "It's better, this fingering is better and I'm telling you to do so. If/when you become more experienced you can come up with better fingerings if you like." At

this point, I was shutting down and felt like I was not heard, but again I was in a lesson and the expectation is for me to operate “as if” I was not struggling due to underlying racial and systemic “wounds.”

The lesson continues and he mentions at a later point that my bow was not straight, and I said, “I know, I’ve been working on it.” He then tells me to play a specific section and says out loud “stop, okay let me show you what you are doing.” He then attempts to demonstrate what I was doing so that I could see the error I was making and say, “do you see what I mean? I’m exaggerating of course, but do you see what I mean?” I reply, “I think so [I did not see what he meant at all, especially if he was exaggerating].” It was unclear to what degree I was making an error with my bow, and I didn’t know what Jim wanted me to do. He then tries to explain a motion I should think of while using my bow. He instructs me to do the motion, using my bow, playing an open string on my viola.

After trying multiple times and not meeting his expectation with this unclear bow exercise, Jim grabs my arm, without asking for consent to touch me, and tries to maneuver my arm to do the gesture he’s looking for and says to me, “do you feel that? Are you understanding what I mean?” I respond with a neutral tone, “sure.” Jim then says, “enough of that. Let’s return to the music” and instructs me to play from the beginning of the piece. After five measures, he stops me and says, “you need to be really intense here like this [he attempts to play intensely on the viola, and I was honestly not convinced] do it like that.” I say “okay, give me a minute.” I take a pause to look at the music and figure out how can I play intensely in this space where I have felt belittled. I did not feel like my thoughts were validated, my back and arms were radiating with pain,

and this old white man who probably would “live, breathe, die” for classical music was asking me to do more and I don’t know what more I could give.

Before I began to play, I shut down even more and adopted the mind set of—echoing Suzan— “I already fucked up so much... I don’t fucking care anymore” so let’s just get this over with. I continued to play my viola in my interpretation of “intensely,” also adopting a strategy utilized when Suji was misunderstood in collaborative conversations in quartet rehearsal. I tried to live the adage that “where words fail music speaks.” After playing halfway through the page, I stop and turn to Jim and say, “I need to stop now and go to physical therapy [looking at the clock and point to show that our lesson is over].” Jim responds, “okay yea, actually can you come sit down. We need to talk.” I sit down as he pulls up a chair, and he proceeds to say, “Okay, I don’t know what’s going on with you or why your lessons are going the way they are.” I say, “can you explain what you mean,” he continues, “I can’t entirely read you right now. I know that you have problems with doing fingerings and your tone/ projection needs work...actually that last time you played sounded really great, but I can tell that you were not happy while playing. It actually sounded very angry, and I don’t know if that anger was directed towards me or what it was. All I’m saying is that I’m just trying to do my job and I don’t know...you need to learn to love what you do because if you don’t you’re going to hate it and quit.” I respond, “Jim just like you are trying to do your job as a teacher, I am trying to do my job as a student, and I can’t be responsible for how you interpret things in this lesson. I literally woke up this morning and read an email sent out to Black students saying that we are unwanted at this campus. I played my instrument like you asked and tried to do your random fingering and I’m still trying to find music

that I enjoy playing. I don't know what else you want from me." Jim replies, "I understand that, and I know that must be hard, but I am advising you that you still come into your lessons with your most empowered self." At that point, again, I had nothing say so I start gathering my things to leave.

As I'm gathering my things, Jim continues to say more things about the type of music I could explore and how I needed to practice, but I'm not attentively listening. As I began to exit I say, "Okay, Jim I'll leave and try to figure out how I can bring my most empowered self in a program where I'm one of the only Black faces in a predominantly white space." As I left the room livid, Jim follows behind as if he wants to tell me wait, but I am too far gone with tears in my eyes and pain in my soul and body. I entered a practice room and proceeded to call a Music History professor I opened up to about the struggle and told him what happened. In our call I said, "Professor Leo I can't stay here. I have to leave. I don't belong at NESU. I can't play viola, and this is just how my experiences has been. Jim grabbed my arm without consent, and I just feel really triggered right now and I can't stay here. I don't belong here like I'm not good enough to be a master student at NESU." Professor Leo responded, "Ucee this is awful, and I don't think any of this is fair to you. Ucee you are more than good enough to be here, and I don't think this is a reason why you would have to leave the University. I will email people in the department, and we will figure this out. Ucee, I'm here for you and we fill figure this out I promise."

For confidentiality reasons I will not share what took place after my conversation with Professor Leo, just know this was the end of my time as a viola performance major and the beginning of my journey as a music history student with interdisciplinary focuses

in ethnomusicology and musicology. I will add this last bit: at the end of the night, that same day I received an email from Jim that stated:

Hi Ucee,

I found the other piece, take a look at the fingerings and bowings, see if you like them.

Following up from this morning, I just want to say that I can't imagine what it's like being black at NESU, I hope you can find support for what's been going on. Please try to find a way to bring your empowered self into lessons despite everything you're going through. I know that you can do this, I've already seen evidence of it, so go for it.

-Jim

The Baldwin quote that opened this chapter occupies a significant place within my existence as a Black (Nigerian native and American settler) individual in the United States, and has been embedded in my skin, as a tattoo, on the left side of my chest, as reminder of this significance. I made the decision to have this quote tattooed on my body during a discouraging time in my junior year as an undergraduate student attending a conservatory. This was a predominantly white institution where I was the only Black person in my viola studio up until my senior year of college and I was, usually, one of (not more than) four Black people in the symphony orchestra consisting of almost eighty people. Similar to Suzan, I felt like the institution—although being significantly smaller than NESU—was not “a safe space for people of color,” but I was not able to articulate this clearly at the time because it never felt like there was a time or space where I could express these thoughts to individuals who 1.) possessed the capacity to discuss difficult matters relating to race without pushing the conversation towards a temporary or “quick” rhetorical solution and 2.) possessed the emotional capacity to make space for others to

share their lived experience without interjecting, juxtaposing, or rationalizing it in comparison to their own. So, as a result I kept a lot to myself and kept moving forward in music school.

During my studies, I was routinely engulfed by the process of mastering the viola, which (at least according to a past instructor) required “eating, sleeping, and breathing viola” through practicing for at least six hours a day and listening constantly to the works of “great” composers like Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Dvorak. I spent a lot of time inside and outside of the conservatory, trying to prove my worth as an aspiring Black classical musician. In those four years, I went through cycles of neglecting my mental health and wellness in exchange for meeting the canonical expectations demanded by respected authorities of the conservatory. These expectations were to be met in rehearsals, personal practice, and all performances. In addition, I was trying to balance getting good grades, finding ways to fit into the conservatory’s social culture, trying to prove to my traditional Nigerian family that pursuing this degree was not “a waste of time,” all while trying to navigate the early stages of adulthood, transitioning from high school to college, and seeking an education in a predominantly white space where my ways of thinking and knowing—as a Black nonbinary fem—was not validated. In this sense, I relate to many of the struggles I observed amongst the subjects of this ethnography as they navigate their own experiences in the music department. As awful challenges arose, I kept pushing forward holding on to my aspiration to become a successful chamber musician and a pedagogue of viola.

Like Ezekiel, I started playing viola through a local youth orchestra when I was in elementary school, but our experiences differ in the sense that I didn’t start consistent

private instruction until I was accepted to pursue viola in a conservatory setting. Don't get me wrong, I did receive moments of support from teachers in music school, my mom, and consistent encouragement from my elementary school music teacher, but I don't think I can recall a single moment where an obstacle I faced or support that I received did not serve as a reminder of the systemic disparities that come with living as a Black person in America. Nothing was ever simple, and this caused me to adopt this meritocratic ideology that, as a Black person trying to pursue classical music and attending music school in America, this was just the fate of my existence due to my racial identity.

I believe that although I cannot always change the thing that I face, I do think there is power in understanding the vital importance of self-reflecting, critically analyzing, learning/unlearning/relearning, participating intentional actions, participating, and taking the initiative to have difficult conversations, and mindfully and actively advocating for the change in these processes. Authentically, "the revolution will not be televised" (Heron, 1970) and we are "doomed to fail" (Robinson, 2020) if we do not step away from euphemistic approaches of navigating the call to decolonize and mental health within the music department and strings department and NESU and institutions alike. Miranda Fricker presents two forms of epistemic violence that can take place in situations where there is a power dynamic imbalance that covertly manifest in normal social situations. She defines one of these particular injustices as "testimonial injustice- prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" and hermeneutical injustice-occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resource puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience." (Fricker 2007) Reflecting on the anecdote that I started this chapter

with, I found this framework to be grounding in making sense of what it was I was experiencing when I had to communicate or “prove” my lived experience as a Black person in classical music, a graduate student attending NESU, a survivor of domestic violence, and a musician who feels unvalidated in their ways of understanding and knowing music within the context of western art music.

An obvious example a situation where I experienced this form of epistemic violence was all my interactions with Jim, but the symptoms of the violence really initially started when Jim communicated his impressions of me based on what the prior viola instructor at NESU told him about me. Here, it seemed that whatever was said about me (consciously or unconsciously) influenced the way he conducted lessons with me, and since he is deeply rooted in the tradition’s canon of classical music—a practice that is rooted in white supremacy and coloniality—he had blinders on shielding him from critically reflecting on how his actions were perpetuating symptoms of systemic oppression. Also, since he is a professor within this enterprise, he also has institutional struggles that are impacted by bureaucratic ambiguity or “stupidity” (Graeber, 2015) when it came to the permanency of his position within the string department and the extent of his teaching obligations. Do I know the extent to which he struggles, no but I am aware that this is a struggle he was facing at the time.

Similarly, Ezekiel, Violet, Suzan, and Suji faced struggles (to one degree or another) with communicating difficulties with their music instructors at NESU and in the end we all navigated the situation in similar ways and had similar thought processes although each situation, person, and complex situation was different. I found that when things got difficult it was common for the students to reside in this place of polite or stoic

neutrality that was intended to keep things moving forward. I found this gesture to be similar to, something I've experienced and realized through becoming a survivor, self-blame in abused victims . My understanding is that when a perpetrator harms the victim, somehow the blame is put on the victim who did not initiate the abuse. Gaslighting can be a major factor in this dynamic, which is when abusers are in denial of their wrongdoing and instead construed the narrative to paint themselves as the victim and the actual victim as the perpetrator.

These sketches of how students of color navigate abusive or uncomfortable dynamics brings to mind Fricker's analysis of a social conception within epistemic violence, which she defines and identifies as identity power— "a form of social power which is directly dependent upon shared social-imaginative conceptions of social in the particular operation of power." Historically as well as in the present, teachers tend to have more social power than students within institutional settings. Among other criteria, the validity of their power is measured through their accolades, experience, and educational qualifications in comparison to their protégés. So quintessentially, the identity power dynamic between most students and teachers means that education is commonly not a leveled playing field. This influences the manner in which teacher are able to make decisions and take lead in their role and also is a very understood fact of life amongst most students in higher institutions of learning. This dynamic is arguably unusually pronounced in the music school, where studio faculty work with only a few students a year, and where instruction takes place in intense one-on-one practice sessions (Kingsbury et al).

From my perspective as a student within a department of music, there tends to be an underlying fear among students that if you do not perform well and meet your professors' expectations you will not be successful within and outside of your musical studies. So, with this in mind, it does not come as surprise that students feel unsupported, don't always feel heard or seen, and often adopt the mindset of "it's easier to just move forward" and "no matter what is going on I came here to play viola." Some teachers are aware of their power, and some are not, but within the context of this case study I often observed that there is a separation between theory and practice (hooks,1991) on everyone's part when it comes to addressing problems in the moment and adopting procedures to assist with future problems.

This separation between theory and practice can be observed in the mental health chapter of this thesis, where I examined how teachers and students made sense of musician health and wellness. Overall students and teachers were able to define what this meant theoretically on its own, but when participant discussed this topic within the context of music performance it quickly became clear that putting theory into practice was difficult if not impossible. Professor Pearl mentioned how students need to understand that there is a lot that goes into becoming better performers, and she insinuated that a lot of sacrifices need to take place in order to get good. Students often voiced similar beliefs about needing to sacrifice for their musical goals, except for them they were speaking from the light of not only having performance and school obligations, but also being individuals in their 20's living in a capitalistic technologically advanced society where the demands are high, and the rewards feel oh so low. I've observed that there seems to be a gap in active understanding of these complexities between teachers

and student within this social culture. Outside the context of music learning in this space, these complexities can be digested and understood in a genuine manner, but once they arise within this particular social culture in the process of creating “art” (western art music) it can only be addressed momentarily; here, the focus must go back to doing it for the sake of the art. It is as if real world struggles and classical music cannot coexist in this space and I find this unusual because the music, the art, is produced by humans who have real world struggles that they have experience with almost every day. I believe this is something that should be investigated further.

Although they found the move towards decolonizing classical music important and expressed the belief that “work needs to be done,” the white participants were not able to discuss the kind of radical social change that needs to take place beyond programming and repertoire. Also, they all had a similar belief that the canon and most of its traditions should stay as is—despite recognizing the canon’s direct and inherent link to white supremacy and how it’s manifested in the field of music.

In general, I found a lot of support, in my observations, for Ezekiel’s statement, “I don’t think there’s even recognition that there is an issue...when any decolonial methodology is mentioned...when anything regarding a disenfranchised group is mentioned it often feels not genuine...I don’t know, it feels like something that is an afterthought and not a core part of the learning.” Earlier in the interview he shared that when the topic of decolonization surfaces in relation to classical music he is more inclined to think of the simple inclusion of a few “underrepresented voices” rather than what it actually means to decolonize. Similar to the claims I am making in this thesis, he expressed that there are aspects of communication (such as avoidances, silence,

euphemistic phrasings) with white students and faculty that give the impression that the need to decolonize is not something that applies to this music institution. I witnessed this by seeing and hearing the change of tone when talking about the canon in classical music vs. discussing decolonizing classical music in personal interviews.

J.C explained that the topic of decolonizing classical music was not something that was discussed at his old institution, but it has been something really important here at NESU. I wonder if he had not come to an institution like NESU, or if covid 19 had not taken place at the same time as the Black Lives Matter movement's resurgence in 2020, would decolonizing classical music be a topic that J.C thinks of as "very important" or as a situation where "a lot needs to be done." I also found it quite interesting to observe that participants that were forthright about the need to program the works of marginalized composers did not actually program the works of marginalized composers for the singular or multiple recitals that they performed at NESU. I found this to be very similar to the attitudes that took place after lockdown and restriction of covid-19 were lifted and society was allowed to slowly return to normal ways of living. Before this return, everyone was required to stay indoors and could not do anything else except keep up with the news. This influenced/forced a lot of people to open their eyes and "learn some really frightening things about the American sense of reality" (Baldwin, 2016) . But even through learning and seeing this sense of reality, once we "returned to normal" their attention was redirected or restored by their normal ways of living, consuming primarily "images...designed not to trouble but to reassure" (Baldwin, 2016). I suggest that the western art music canon and its traditional modes of training and appreciation may represent just such a set of images.

We can see the parallel of these images through how students choose to adopt a polite way of discussing social and racial inequalities relating to the call to decolonize western art music. We see it in the inclusionary gestures that take place in programming music for recitals and performances, and within the greater institution as they name buildings after Black scholars in response to pressures related to on and off campus social injustices. We also see the separation between theory and practice in the way students talk about what they are responsible for as artist versus what they end up doing as performing musicians when they have the power to decide how to approach the call to decolonize. Once we were all allowed to return to society—echoing Kendrick Lamar—the “overnight activists” that were very present and invested on social media when it came to racial and social injustice are nowhere to be found in the context of normal everyday living.

In this project, I observed the social culture of a music department during a time of massive turbulence in the wider world. Doing these observations while also reading critical theory like hooks’ injunction to unite theory and practice as a means of healing wounds helped me fully see how wounded I really was, and how many of those wounds were inflicted by a musical culture I tried for years to love. Through my experience, I was able to find commonalities between the struggles I faced and the struggles that my fellow graduate and undergraduate colleges faced. Originally, I wanted this project to result in findings for potential solutions, but I realized that participants from this social culture do not really understand the extent/severity of the problem and if they did it was difficult for them to explicitly articulate their thoughts in interviews So I saw this as an opportunity to investigate why this might be the case. Although my research primarily focused on

capturing the perspective of music students, after unpacking and applying Kingsbury's conception of "pedagogical lineage" to my ethnography, I learned that teachers can/do have an impact on 1.) the students' musical and pedagogical experience within spaces that facilitate music learning and performance and 2.) some or most students do go on to become teachers and their approach/attitude towards what and how to teach as well as the environments they may cultivate in their own teaching spaces is most often influenced by their experience as a student. With this in mind, I thought it was important to include the perspectives of teachers from the string department as well. In doing this, I learned about institutional hardships that take place from the teacher's perspective and was able to make sense about how these difficulties may also impact the ways in which teachers are able to go about doing their jobs as instructors. This opened up a broader perspective on how issues of mental health and musician health and wellness are linked to greater systemic issues that have gone unmarked within the larger enterprise (NESU) that this social culture (the string department) is based in. I've observed that, to one degree or another, most students in this case study are not properly supported well enough to navigate wellness challenges as full-time music students, and professors also are not supported in a way where they can support all their students and carry out their obligations as professors in a balanced manner. As it relates to decolonization, this music department does not have the infrastructure for students and professors to engage with decolonization "as a process not a product" (Attas, Walker, 2019). I don't believe that the onus for addressing these issues lies within the abilities one person or subculture, but I do believe that through critical reflection (on the micro and macro level) and understanding

the historical and contemporary manifestations/symptoms of these issues could be a step towards real change.

This thesis was written in the spirit of critique that bell hooks suggest as the only real way to move towards healing and was inspired by Baldwin's creed of examining adversities within society with intentions of bringing about change. I tried to look this culture in its face, not turn away, not be comforted by reassuring images. I did this not out of hatred but out of a desire to heal, and no one can heal before understanding what's truly wrong. I hope that my findings within this case study can contribute and expand in future research.

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