

## **Identity, Belonging and Struggle: Mobilizing Community and Transforming Individuals through Music**

ANDRÉ DE QUADROS

Music Education Department, College of Fine Arts,  
Boston University (USA)

**Abstract:** This paper explores the multiple dimensions of identity, belonging and struggle as they relate to two dissimilar locations and contexts. In so doing, the paper searches for threads of convergence. Specifically, in American prisons, and Israel and the Arab world, the following research questions are posed. How is identity provoked in music making? How is identity frequently unrecognized or just neglected in artistic work, intercultural collaboration, educational vision, and project development? How does alienation factor into music making, and can this be alleviated by making conscious decisions about artistic practice? How can community music lay bare the full extent of struggle, give genuine expression, console, create bonding and binding, and provide processes in which community can be created? How can community be generated through music when enemies, adversaries, and competitors are present?

**Keywords:** identity creation and formation; community and belonging

### **Identity, Belonging, and Struggle**

If there were three key words to represent the history and reality of Jewish people, these words would surely belong among them (Atzmon 2011, Krausz and Tulea 1998). But these are hardly unique to the Jewish experience. Indeed, these three key words would readily invite resonance with many Arabs (Phillips 2016, Yiftachel 2006). And, from my experience, these three words would be central to the ways in which African-Americans have experienced their realities for the last four centuries. Thus, these words are common but culturally diverse constructs.

The questions guiding this paper revolve around these three central constructs – identity, belonging, and struggle. How is identity provoked in music making? How is identity frequently unrecognized or just neglected in artistic work, intercultural collaboration, educational vision, and project development? How does alienation factor into music making, and can this be alleviated by making conscious decisions about artistic practice? If one accepts that all human beings must deal with struggle at some

time in their lives as individuals, there are several populations and communities for whom struggle is deep, irrepressible, and embedded in the psyche. For such groups of people, how can community music lay bare the full extent of struggle, give genuine expression, console, create bonding and binding, and provide processes in which community can be created. How can community be generated through music when enemies, adversaries, and competitors are present? These are some of the questions we must wrestle with if we are to make sense of our world today and to harness music in the creation of a better world. Much of the literature on music and identity is framed around consumption patterns and creative output, rather than the link between music making in community settings and identity. However, this is an area of increasing interest to both scholars and practitioners alike (see, for example, Akrofi, Smit, and Thorsén, 2007).

It is perhaps important to state that, in spite of numerous visits to Israel and the Arab world, I am not an insider, but rather an outsider. Likewise, in reference to the other story that I present, I am not African-American and have never been imprisoned. However, my outsider perspective is valuable. It is neither superior nor inferior (Liamputtong 2010). As a person growing up in India, the insights of outsider-visitors to India, on cultural habits, behaviors, social systems, and power dynamics, always surprised me. While, frequently, I found ways to rationalize these observations, and convert them meaningfully into an insider perspective of immense value, they also caused me some discomfort. Importantly, as an outsider artist, researcher, and activist I can step away from constructed dichotomies, and narrow limitations to enrich this enquiry. For me to recognize my positionality is central to the writing of this paper (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008).

Who, then is this outsider, André de Quadros? In the framing of this narrative it is important for me to tell you a little of my unofficial biography. My family has experienced what it means to be political refugees, and we have lived in hiding. My uncle was the victim of an attempted assassination by letter bomb in the 1950s. I was smuggled by boat illegally as a child. And, finally, when I received my first passport, there was a notation that I was not allowed to visit Israel. I present this autobiographical peep as a way of adding complexity to my positionality in the ensuing discourse.

I illustrate my enquiry into identity, belonging, struggle, and community by focusing on two of the many areas of my work: American prisons, and the Arab world and Israel. My purpose in focusing on these two quite different areas is to demonstrate that the urge or perhaps the need to build community exists in diverse locations, forged by the need to belong, and the creation of identity in light of imposed identities.

## **The American Prison – Harshness and Humanity**

In the first of these two examples, there are history and context that frame the nature of the musical and pedagogical process, as will become evident later. Together with my colleagues, I work in two prisons on a continuing basis. One of them is a men’s prison, a medium-maximum security prison housing approximately 1500, about half of whom have been sentenced to life. The women’s prison is the only such facility in the state of Massachusetts. Both prisons have different histories and current realities, but they are all part of a catastrophic situation affecting America, which continues to imprison people at a rate higher than any other country in the world. Since 2012, my colleagues<sup>1</sup> and I have been leading groups with a mixture of whites, African-Americans, Latinos and non-Americans, a significant minority of participants of whom are African American Muslim.

I provide details on American incarceration, assuming that the average international reader may welcome such contextual information. Current statistics show that with five percent of the world’s population, the United States has approximately 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. The full scale of the war against the poor and the minority populations of African-Americans and Latinos is well documented (Drucker 2011, Loury 2008). One in six black men had been incarcerated as of 2001. Based on current trends, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime, while one in 100 African American women are in prison.<sup>2</sup> Nationwide, African-Americans represent 26 percent of juvenile arrests, 44 percent of youth who are detained, 46 percent of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58 percent of the youth admitted to state prisons. About 14 million Whites and 2.6 million African Americans report using an illicit drug. Five times as many Whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of Whites. According to Essie Justice,<sup>3</sup> while one in four American women have a family member in prison, one in two African-American women have a relative in prison.

Community music is reasonably common in several prisons worldwide (Cohen and Silverman 2013). In our case, the culture of the classroom stands in sharp contrast, a dichotomous polarity, to that of the prison culture (de Quadros 2015). The creative communal process calls for risk-taking as an indication of vulnerability. We have found that conventional music education and choral music approaches do not serve this context

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<sup>1</sup> My principal co-leaders in the prison music program have been Jamie Hillman, Emily Howe, and Trey Pratt.

<sup>2</sup> For further information NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet: <http://www.naACP.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

<sup>3</sup> Essie Justice <https://essiejusticegroup.org> is a non-profit organization representing the issues of women who have family members in prison, and seeking to highlight the injustices of mass incarceration.

and demographic. Therefore, we have developed the Empowering Song approach, which fosters a subversive, expressive, transgressive, and disobedient approach to music making.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge the difficulty in actualizing such an approach based on critical pedagogy within the restrictive, oppressive culture of the prison (see Castro and Brawn 2017). Nevertheless, it is an approach in which vulnerability can be experienced deeply. One of the prisoners commented on the approach with,

It really made me think about [...] how my life can go [...] I've never written any music or poetry in my life, so it was a new and uncomfortable experience [...] I feel weak, vulnerable, and helpless [...] Every day is a struggle. It's embarrassing, but I'm more comfortable in the streets than in a classroom [...] I did my best to express that [...] but I feel like it correlates [...] to the theme.

This vulnerability is in sharpest contradiction to the prison environment, as explained by one man, “If we can bleed, then we can be killed. And if we show emotion, then they know we can be broken.”

My colleagues and I have found that the exploration of the interwoven nature of the arts has been able to provide for multidimensional expressivity. While song is central, it serves as both a channel and springboard to other art forms. For this reason, it has now become usual to take visual and theatre artists in to the prisons to work with us.

Some of the work transcends themes. In February 2015, one of the men remarked that some of our activities such as joining hands in a circle to symbolize and exemplify community could be regarded as unmanly. The same young man who noted that there were problems in some of the class activities, had this to say:

When someone spends their entire life creating walls that they believe will protect them, the idea that perhaps they no longer need to stand behind these walls is not only a foreign concept, but it's also revolutionary. In fact, the same qualities that make this class difficult, make it impactful [...] In our case, by re/evaluating our own Fears [...], we were forced to re/define our own individual character. For example, my willingness to perform here [...], to speak out about the issues that concern, and to appreciate the sincerity in our most vulnerable moments, Are all aspects that developed throughout my participation in your class room [...] I don't know a single person who is not a better individual after experiencing your class [...] People become more open minded, friendly, less self observe [...] Most of us spend our entire life [...] fading into the shadows of joy [...] We've lost the ability to project healthy memories, self-images, and even relationships. We've lost the ability to trust, feel, and make Ethical or rather Rational decisions [...] The creative

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<sup>4</sup> The Empowering Song approach has resonance with the work of Augusto Boal (1985, 2006).

process that takes place is not the Singing [...] it's the reviewing of our minds, our spirits [...] to give us back the innocence that was once taken from us.

I encourage the reader to read the previous quote a few times, to understand and savor phrases such as, “our entire life [...] fading into the shadows of joy” and “it's the reviewing of our minds, our spirits [...] to give us back the innocence.” These statements are deep, profound, and transformational, and is directly attributable to the dismantling of conventional power dynamics between teacher and student, conductor and singer.

### **The Arab world and Israel – Working for Hope**

Israel and the Arab world pose challenges of integration, inclusion and identity that are perhaps greater than any other single region, and these challenges show no sign of easing. The divisions in the Arab world stem partly from the secret Asia Minor Agreement (also known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement) of 1916 (Russell and Cohnl 2012), in which the British and French colluded to divide the Arab world into British and French areas of influence. This, in turn, gave rise to the 1917 Balfour Declaration (Schneer 2011) by the British Foreign Secretary, endorsing the formation of Israel in a letter to Baron Rothschild and the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. As a consequence of the 1916 Agreement, parts of the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant were divided into several separate countries. While the Sykes-Picot Agreement has passed into history, forgotten by many, understanding this piece of the past is essential to appreciating the present-day fractures in the Arab world (Wright 2016). One needs to be reminded that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has declared that one of its key objectives is the reversal of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1948, and the creation of the state of Israel, the divisions in the Palestinian population have deepened, with a large number of Palestinians living in Jordan, and both Syria and Lebanon becoming destinations for Palestinian immigrants and refugees. Many Arab villages in the British Mandate were absorbed automatically into the Israeli state, with their inhabitants automatically receiving Israeli citizenship, holding Israeli passports. These Arab Israeli citizens stand in contrast to the Jerusalem Palestinians, many of whom hold Jordanian passports without rights of residence in Jordan, and the residents of the West Bank, who are not permitted freedom of movement outside of the walled enclave, similarly to the residents of Gaza (Gröndahl 2003, Van Esveld 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> See Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in this YouTube clip calling for the end of the Sykes-Picot borders <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCpAkTfkRQU>

Consequently, when I was approached about ten years ago with the possibility of funding for a project in this region, I thought not about an Israeli-Palestinian project, but rather of an Arab community project. In 2008, my Jordanian-Palestinian colleague, Shireen Abu-Khader, and I created Aswatuna: Arab Choral Festival, to bring together community choirs from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. This was a critical time – the Iraq War was in full swing, and we had to bring one of the choirs out of Baghdad by road, and back safely. We did. What was most striking, and the connection to my presentation, was the strong feeling of Arab identity that this festival generated. There were Arabs from all over the Levant whose destinies had been separated by political realities, and singing together allowed them to experience Arabness in community in a way that was impossible to predict.<sup>6</sup>

The divisions in Israel are also enormous (Yiftachel 2006). The Pew Center’s Report (2016) on Israel stated, “Deep divisions in Israeli society – not only between Israeli Jews and the country’s Arab minority, but also among the religious subgroups that make up Israeli Jewry...” (p.5). Native Israelis, Olim from all over the world, the Mizrahi, and others, live in the diverse microcosm that is the Israeli state (Tsameret 2002), a country where religion is both a cultural glue and a divisive force. Amira Ehrlich’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Pray, Play, Teach: Conversations with Three Jewish Israeli Music Educators* powerfully illustrates how culture and religion mediate decisions about music and education. Referring to Rivlin’s speech of 2015, Ehrlich writes,

Rivlin described the new Israeli social order as a construct of four tribes living in conflict, naming the four main sectors of society as secular, religious, ultraorthodox, and Arab. Since 2015, this concept of conflicting tribes has become an explicit and dominant feature of Israeli public discourse. Living in Israel, one cannot avoid the ongoing public debate among these tribes as they battle over public resources, social and cultural legitimacy, and the allocation and design of public spaces. The three Jewish sectors further struggle over the rights to proclaim who and what is Jewish or Israeli (p.1).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the diversity of Jewish Israeli society, but purely to recognize that it is a pervasive force. Outsiders, and, frequently, insiders, see the problems in Israel and Palestine as binary. The segregation, divisions, and polarizations invite a consideration of the multiplicity of interpretations and the multidimensionality of the problems. This deeply divided and segregated world has continued to pose a major challenge to those of us who seek to use music to give voice to

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<sup>6</sup> A documentary film of the festival is available at <http://blueion.com.au/aswatunathefilm.html>

struggle, to create identity and to build community. If projects in the Arab world pose challenges, then projects between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians reveal the fault lines of social and political fragmentation and fracture.

Over the years, I have observed and been part of projects where there have been false starts and non-starts, and unpredicted conclusions. At the same time, it is important to honor the countless Israeli and Arab musicians and citizens who have used music and other community activities to resist injustice, to speak truth to power, and to recognize what Dochy Lichtensztajn calls the “asymmetry of power” between Israelis and Palestinians in her paper, “Peace Pedagogy in Power Asymmetries”<sup>7</sup> (see Brinner 2009). As a collaborator with local people, I acknowledge their stewardship and leadership of the two projects that I have chosen to describe in this paper. The first is the Community Heartsong Project that had its genesis in the collaboration between Efroni, a Jewish youth choir from Emek Hefer, conductor, Maya Shavit, and Sawa, an Arab choir from Shefa-'Amr<sup>8</sup> (also known as Shfar'am), under the leadership of Rahib Haddad.<sup>9</sup> The Community Heartsong Project had numerous joint activities between these two choirs, but, since then, the project has extended its reach beyond building bridges between Jewish Israelis and Arabs, to the West Bank with community leaders and children who live in the Occupied Territories and in refugee camps.

One example of the work in Jerusalem and the West Bank stands out from a visit in 2015, when I conducted workshops with children's choirs, children, and community choral leaders. The children asked me spontaneously to teach them a song from my country. (That's always confusing for me. Which country is my country?) Assuming that they meant the USA, the first song that came to mind was an African-American spiritual “Walk Together Children.” I led them through a simplified version of the song, the text of which is:

Walk together children, don't you get weary (three times)  
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

I asked them what they thought the song might mean. In particular, I asked about their understanding of black people from West Africa, and of the history of slavery in the

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<sup>7</sup> This was a paper given by Lichtensztajn on July 12, 2012, at the Community Music Activity Commission Seminar XIII, International Society for Music Education, in Corfu, Greece. See <https://www.isme.org/sites/default/files/documents/CMA%2B2012%2BSeminar%2BGuide.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Shefa-'Amr is a town in the Northern District of Israel. The town has minority Christian and Druze populations and a Sunni Muslim majority.

<sup>9</sup> One of the earlier collaborations has been described by Noam Ben Zeev in Soundbox/Working in Concert <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/leisure/soundbox-working-in-concert-1.263923>

USA. I was surprised that there was so little knowledge of slavery, and therefore, decided to create a narrative for the children. A transcript by Carol Frierson-Campbell<sup>10</sup> of some of the discussion follows:

Someone said, "hope." Someone else said, "if we work together we can accomplish the impossible."

AdQ: Let me tell you a story. White people from America came to Africa, and captured black people. They put them in ships and made them cross the ocean and didn't give them very much food. And they made them work as slaves. They took young people, children, etc. they left their land behind. They missed their land. They were longing for their land, for freedom, for home.

Girl: When you say "hope" it's very important because that's the only thing that keeps these people alive. They are depending on hope in their lives because they have nothing else.

AdQ: Someone said it is like your land [...] how is it like your land?

Girl: How they arrest our kids and our young men for [...] because they defend their country. They arrest them for nothing. These kids are in jail and they are depending on hope because they have nothing.

AdQ: Behind every song there is a great story. Songs can give you hope, songs can give you a way of feeling good, can offer you ideas.

The quoted dialogue speaks for itself, emphasizing that the song text was a means through which identity was conceptualized by these Palestinian children in the Occupied Territories, and seeing a connection between their circumstances and that of African-Americans (Kook 2002).

The second project I discuss is Common Ground Voices (CGV),<sup>11</sup> an Israeli-Palestinian-Swedish choir. In 2015, when I was in Israel, I was privy to numerous conversations about the possibility of a choir of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. In all the conversations, it became clear that that the time was not right, that collaboration would be difficult, and that people either did not want to collaborate or did not want to be seen as collaborating. In March 2017, Common Ground Voices had its second residency, this time in Jerusalem. Common Ground Voices seeks to build understandings and to create a model for musical interaction that challenges existing power dynamics and seeks to establish a shared artistic common territory. I liken this to cooking food together; ingredients from different cultures are shared and the cooking process is collaborative and the final result belongs no longer to one particular group. In musical terms, CGV has

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<sup>10</sup> Carol Frierson-Campbell is an associate professor of music and the coordinator of music education at William Paterson University, USA.

<sup>11</sup> For further information on Common Ground Voices, see <http://www.ericsonchoralcentre.se/common-ground-voices-an-international-choir/>

adopted a unique model of taking music from one culture and transforming it by another culture’s influence. Each of the three groups choose songs that belong to their tradition, but on common human themes. And then the others play with these songs and the act of fusion of musical cultures becomes the central point of the process. So, an Israeli song takes on a Palestinian identity and the music and theme become common ground. Furthermore, the singers are joint creators of the material, and I, as the conductor, act more as a facilitator.

### **Concluding commentary**

There are common threads in all of the work described here, even though the contexts are dissimilar. In certain circumstances, musical interactions can defuse tensions and bring people together for conversation. This is not always the case, and not a natural outcome, which is why we have to build processes that work for such endpoints. The struggle for community music leaders and music educators is to find processes that make sense for specific contexts. For the two areas of work that I write about in this article, music seeks to mobilize communities and to find ways of personal expression. I emphasize again the three constructs of identity, belonging, and struggle. It is in the crucible of struggle, that identity and belonging are forged, expressed, dignified, and reframed. It is in the power of musical generosity and communal creativity that identity is understood and accommodated, and it is within the safety of a loving musical environment, that belonging is deeply felt and nurtured.

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