A Conversation on Racism and Computer Music

By The Honourable Elizabeth A. Baker, Jessie Cox, Joy Guidry, Yvette Janine Jackson in conversation with Eric Lyon edited by Christopher Haworth

Preface

In its call for contributions to the Fall 2021 issue of Array Journal, the editors asked why the ICMA has so few members who identify as Black, given the considerable debt that the field of computer music owes to musical and technological innovations of Black artists. This article provides a set of responses to the question posed. Virginia Tech invited four Black artists whose work might be considered computer music (this piece puts pressure on borders implied by the term "computer music") to participate in a conversation. Perspectives not often heard within ICMA discourse are shared herein. It is hoped that this conversation will lead to self-reflection on the part of the ICMA membership, and to further conversations, ultimately motivating the ICMA to adopt policies that will make the organization a more inclusive association than it is currently.
This is an edited down version of the original interview, thematized under 'institutions', 'technology', 'genre', 'skills', 'rhythm', 'art music', and 'ICMC'.
Thanks go to Eric Lyon for organizing and conducting the interview.

Institutions

Guidry: Maybe we should make Black coding camps for music. I've started learning how to do this. I've always had a lot of respect for you all but it's so hard. Ableton is so hard. Everyone wants to charge so much money to teach me how to do it, and they talk in these huge words that I have no idea what they're saying. It's just been coined in this way that makes it almost impossible for people to even know that most, if not all of this music, comes from Blackness. I think so many things have to be torn down. But starting with the aesthetic being torn down and giving correct representation and credit. Then the other things will really start to fall into place.

Jackson: In the past couple of years, I've been asked a similar question by different groups, "How can we attract more people of color to our organization?" My response may be cynical but, "Why should people want to join your organization?" It's one thing to put up the invitation, "You're welcome to join", because I think a lot of people don't feel welcomed by many organizations. But don't expect for people, who may have been historically excluded, to be excited to then join just because the doors have suddenly opened. Why do you want them to join? Is it to help with your optics so that you can control the narrative? We've all seen this since last spring [after the killing of George Floyd] - the proliferation of organizations putting out various statements about how they care about everyone and want to include everyone, but then shy away from doing the work to enact the change described on their websites.

Baker: To stay with Yvette's comment, I feel like this is being done really well by King Britt with Blacktronika, where it's not just a class, it's a whole movement of going into schools and saying to kids, "Hey, you can go to college for this." Because a lot of Black kids don't know that you could go to college for computer music. I think the representation within the Blacktronika movement has a huge amount to do with it. Because if you can't see yourself there, then you're not even going to register it on your radar.

Guidry: You can put out these statements and invite people, but is the space ready for us? You can even give us a $100,000 fellowship. But we'll need a million dollars from the trauma we're going to have after doing that fellowship. When I was at Peabody, they had Computer Music. But I didn't know what that was. I remember seeing it on the application and I was so confused, and that's all I thought computer music was until I had my Black awakening. But I would listen to this music and see laptop orchestras and think, "There has to be more to it than this." But representation is so important. If you don't see yourself, how can you see yourself there? Put that on the flag.

All these organizations are built on the structure of academia. Within academia, the power structure needs to be Black, Brown, and Indigenous. A white person does not know about diversity because they don't have to be a

part of it, and that includes white queer, and trans people. Everyone has white supremacy in them in that community and race. They don't need to just hire Black artists because oftentimes, if they invite us onto panels, they only talk about us fighting the whites instead of all of the training and the art we produce. At the conferences, at least the bassoon ones, there are reviewers and journalists. Have Black reviewers, have Black journalists, have Indigenous reviewers, because white journalists don't know what we're trying to say with our art. It really struck me, especially with Black Mirror, there was the Black Museum episode. It covered slavery and abuse in slavery, just all the violence, and a lot of white reviewers were like, "I didn't get it" and it's like, sure you didn't get it. That's why we need Black reviewers and journalists everywhere.

We want it to be different, but this is just how it is. It can change, but it's not going to change until we just dismantle academia. I believe Black people, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, Asian and Pacific Islander, all these people, we can make our own massive community. We still will not have the funding because, again, capitalism rules all of this. Until we get more people as deans, as provosts and presidents of universities and heads of departments, it's just not going to change. But that's also going to take 50 years to happen. I think so much of the change for the present and just more respect of Black artists is continuing the support from other Black to Black artists, and then from there, building relationships to other non-Black POC and Indigenous people, and getting rid of the problems between our intersections, and then we all support each other. Because at the end of the day, we are going to have to make our own structure, because white people are never going to look at us outside of just, "That's a nice beat. Okay, go on the street." We just have to keep showing support because that is what I've seen the most in this last year of white people freaking out and having to figure out how to do food stamps, how to do unemployment. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people definitely struggled this last year, but we didn't have to relearn any systems. I feel like that's why some of us really were just okay. We're not on the same playing field, but things are a little different right now. But the amount of support I've seen my friends show me and just our community showing other communities support throughout this last year, it's amazing, especially in the art world, and that just absolutely needs to continue. People have to also know what is

their place in this support. Some people are grant writers. Some people are great public speakers. Some people are good at curation. Some people are good at being stagehands. When we're creating our own structures of support and organizations, we also have to know these things. But at the end of the day, we have to go to therapy to learn that we are valuable. We created this music and we are the root. Until that is instilled and somehow someone makes a pill to get rid of impostor syndrome, I will buy 50 of them, 50 million pills. It's such a long road. It's a very possible road, but it's going to be interesting.

Technology

Baker: Why does academia hate Pro Tools and why are they complaining that it crashes all the time? Because people are telling them, you can't run it on a computer that doesn't have these very minimum requirements. But the price of Pro Tools for the student is not very expensive. It's $10 a month. People could figure out how to subsidize that for students so they'd have access to more of these different tools. I really think it's a matter of letting people have access to things but also collective support as with Joey's student who needed a bassoon to go to college, so there was a GoFundMe and it provided way more than was needed pretty quickly. Treating systems whereby there's a share of resources, both economic and actual tools and software, so that people can have their hands on the best things that they can have. I find a lot of people that get into computer music with Ableton or something like that. Ableton is pretty inexpensive compared to some of the other options, but it might not be the right choice for their first thing given how their brain works and how they like to interact with music.
Part of my thing on tours is, I'll go to elementary schools, middle schools around the country, and let children touch my gear, which seems really scandalous. But you know, a theremin's very safe. They're not going to knock it over, and they make sounds by not touching it. For those kids, it changes their life because it's like, "Oh, we don't just have to play cello, we can do a whole bunch of other stuff."

Guidry: Lisa Harris also does the theremin in Houston, she has so many of them. I think she hosts a camp or workshop every so often. The first time I played a theremin, I was like, "What is this?" I couldn't imagine being eight and having that experience. You'd think, "I have superpowers" because you're not touching the instrument. It just needs a bit more access.

Genre

Cox: Maybe we should unpack this genre question. On the one hand it says there's this non-genre possibility, but on the other hand, when we speak about people of color, specifically Black people, they are put in genres that are markers purposefully created, in the beginning with the classical vs. jazz dichotomy, and then going forward, to draw a sonic color line. This is a problem related to questions of representation, but also the problem of the foundational myth of computer music along with electronic music, and the absence—the purposeful erasure of people of color from that history. Which is why it's a colored myth or a non-colored myth. For example, we had this wonderful symposium at Columbia, and one of the artists that I absolutely love is Michiko Toyama. But we didn't know about her until Brigid Cohen began doing this phenomenal work of uncovering Toyama. The same was happening with Halim El-Dabh. Of course, this brings in the African, and El-Dabh purposely educates on the African roots of electronic music. Even within the stance of computer music being outside of genre (an uncritical view related to "colorblindness"), we're still bringing Black life in through a container. It's not investigating the problematic of computer music itself first.

Baker: I hate the term "jazz" because it was put there so that we can say, "this is Black people, and they can't be in this concert hall because that's jazz and this is a classical space." I always hate labels. Also recently this "Sisters with Transistors" documentary came out. I was very excited about it. I sat down to watch it. There was absolutely no representation of anyone who was not a white woman. Then they had a panel discussion and Moor Mother was on the panel and they let Moor Mother speak once, and then negated everything that Moor Mother said. To me it was the exact example of why I don't like to

associate myself as a computer musician. Because the people that are held up to high acclaim don't look like me and don't care about my voice.

Black computer music is anything made by a Black person. Same answer I have for me, Black music. We honestly have this thing, I'm laughing because I've heard it from both white people and Black people, "Elizabeth, your music's not Black." I'm like, I'm a Black person making music, so by virtue of those two definitions, it is Black music. I think one hierarchy is at the root of racism and really all oppression in the world, so we should not be trying to label anything for any reason. We should just be allowing people to do what makes them feel fulfilled as an artist, as a human. If they happen to be Black, it's Black computer music. I feel like when you try to put rules on things and create rules of what things are, you're going to leave out a lot of people who have some really unique and beautiful expressions and it's just not worth it.

Skills

Baker: With that, there's this disconnect for me because I was in production school and not academia. In production school, it's a whole different culture. If somebody needs help, you help. Skill share is a thing, it's just how you learn. Now that I'm out of production school, I work with the same people professionally. I see a lot of people doing recording and engineering work in schools who are not what I would consider to be an engineer. They know enough to carry academic applications, but they're not engineers for whom this is their craft, this is what they do every day. A lot of the Black engineers are on that other side - this is what they do every day. They're mixing, they're mastering, that is their specialty. There's a huge disconnect because there's a lot of white folks in positions of recording technology in universities who should not have those jobs, but don't want to de-access those jobs to the Black people that should have those jobs, and this creates this culture where they don't want to tell you any information because they don't want you to possibly get ahead of them. That whole mentality is just ripe for destruction and not helping people and not advancing the industry as whole.

Guidry: I will bet the price of my bassoon that so many people who do computer music that have asked me to help them with samples have no idea where to place the one mic on the bassoon at all. There's this level of God complex when you try to correct someone. It's terrible and that also it needs to be a part of these conferences, especially for white people, on how to communicate with other people and how to collaborate, because you don't know everything. You can learn so much from every single person that you decide to make music with. But also all of these institutions are saying, we're pro Black, we're pro Indigenous sovereignty and we fight for immigration reform, but they're not anti-capitalism. As soon as you start to break that down, skill share will be the way of the future because we're all broke now. Corona wiped us out and we still have to learn. We need to start teaching each other, especially Black people. That's why we make all of our own groups. It is just unfortunate that after we make our groups, these other organizations don't really want to involve us, and then we lose access to large amounts of funding. At the end of the day, to me, it's just so rooted in capitalism, and a lot of racism is also rooted in capitalism, and capitalism is rooted in racism. It just goes into this endless cycle. It is an impossible question of, which one do we tackle first?

Jackson: [F]or the people who are holding on to the power, a lot of them do not want to let go of that. It's easy to put on a rhetorical mask of saying, we welcome everybody, we want to see diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. But it's a different thing to actually step back to make space for others at the table.

Rhythm

Cox: One needs to remember the way that beats or rhythm is used to mark a primitiveness of African or Indigenous people. One of my favorite composers, Stockhausen, said something in an interview, and that shows what some of the founders of this computer music, the wide computer music mythology or whatever this is we're thinking of, said. He said something like, "I really appreciate all these producers, but they're too much hung up with post-African

rhythms." There is this underlying idea that this is not high art. This is why it's so important to think about the history of computer music because there are these racist ideas that are baked into it. Another important point is something that Joey mentioned very early on: aesthetics. This includes the way that certain aesthetics are trying to be seen as the ideal for sonic production or music-making. We all know the work concept and how it has been used as a way to endorse the colonial project. Relatedly, in computer music, I've rarely heard a discussion about the fact that how sounds sometimes are isolated is attempting to recreate a way of listening that ignores the eyes and ignores a lot of factors to make a certain claim about sound. That also is part of the colonial or coloniality.

Baker: I also want to point out that Afrofuturism doesn't necessarily have to have a beat. I have issues with these conferences that say "we're going to do a concert and it's all Black music." That is literally separate but equal, and I have such a huge problem with these concerts. We're going to make Blackness or Indigenous identity the theme of the concert. I understand that it's done with the best of intentions but it's problematic from the beginning. Nobody wants to be tokenized. We want to be seen for what we do and put on the same playing field as everyone else. When you're moving forward and you're trying to diversify your programming, you don't have to go to someone and say, "I'm looking to do a concert of music by under-represented composers." You can literally just say, "I like your music, I would like to program it." I think that these are very important intentions that need to be had at the beginning of trying to make change, versus trying to put the diverse people in a box and we'll just look at them like they're in the zoo. That feels really wrong and horrible to me.

Guidry: I just think everyone who does not like hip hop, or everything hip hop has influenced is anti-Black. There's people who look at hip hop and they say it's aggressive, it's too harsh, it's too loud, and those are the labels they put on it. I don't understand why they're so afraid of grooves. When people hear electronic music with beats (I also agree Afrofuturism does not have to have beats) they don't see this as art, they see it as entertainment because a lot of times Black artists are not considered artists, we're considered entertainers.

It's just so rooted in worldly anti-Blackness but especially in this country. But it is such a shame because it's the aesthetic of contemporary art and electronic music and composition. Contemporary to me means music or art of our time and that includes R&B, it includes dancehall, it includes all of these things. White people just don't want to admit that it is very hard to write a really amazing verse and then put that on top of a beat.

Cox: As Halim El-Dabh points out, much African-music has been a form of electronic music for hundreds of years because they do all this synthesis of sounds in those musics and with those instruments. There's this problem that I'm glad came up here again—this boxing of Black artists into the Black space that is other (whether it be via genre markers or otherwise). Similarly, Black critical theorists have pointed to the fact that often what Black thinkers or artists do seems to be put into a box so that it is apparently only relevant to Black people but it's actually not the fact. Instead, what really is the fact is that this work is relevant to our times, and to what is happening in the world. This is one of the ways in which racism is bad for white people, in the sense that some will disregard the reality that is at play at the moment.

Art music

Jackson: In and around 2016, I attended seven electroacoustic/computer music and experimental music concerts in, I think, five different countries. Most of the music sounded the same. If it's peer-reviewed, that's a problem with curation. Secondly, the problem is why does everything sound the same? I suspect it's because you have a generation of students just mimicking their teachers instead of learning to express their own voice or that the expression of individuality is suppressed at some point in this system. Again, this pattern was observed over multiple events in different countries (in North America and Europe), and everything just sounded the same.

Backer: Everyone uses the same sound libraries. That's part of the reason why everything sounds the same. Because people are not going out and making their own samples. They're just using the same sound libraries and so every-

thing, of course, is going to sound the same.

Jackson: When Joey was talking especially about rhythm and stealing rhythm, I was thinking about computer music and technology being used to steal these rhythms. Not just from sampled recording, but also with drum machines that make it easier for people to borrow and profit from rhythms from the African diaspora. I was reminded of Evan Williams' article "The African American Male Voice in the Electroacoustic Works of Steve Reich and Jacob ter Veldhuis," where he addresses Steve Reich's "It's Gonna Rain" and sampling of the Black voice.

Baker: Reading about how Steve Reich feels about those particular individuals that he sampled is also the grossest thing ever. He feels no financial obligation to them. He feels like this was something he himself discovered. Steve Reich's only really done one thing his entire major front-facing career, and that is, take from African American, and African culture and just recycle it with a white name, and that's the thing. It's so frustrating.

Guidry: Also, I hated "It's Gonna Rain" being played in music history and contemporary class because people make fun of it. White and non-Black POC make fun of it cause he's using it to make fun of Black voices. If anyone else in the class doesn't care, don't play this anymore. But with these composers, they get so much clout for such mediocrity. I just can't tell you how many times I've seen "Music for 18 Musicians" programmed. For what? What is the point at this point? It's very long, it's very uninteresting. The concert was supposed to be before Corona and that school prides itself on diversity. David Mannes opened with the phrase, "This school is for Black people." But the concert actually let go of all these statements and everything was Philip Glass and Steve Reich. It's just like they get programmed all the time for, I'm not going to say bad music, but not the most interesting thing on the face of this planet. It's just all stolen, like Bartok. Just so much is stolen from Blackness and it's at the point where until there are Black people, Indigenous, and Latinx in positions of power in every institution on earth, these people are still going to get programmed.

Baker: Native instruments are doing a not-so-good thing when they put pre-programmed rhythms into their products, and so many people fall back on these stock things. With software and drum machines, specifically, newer made electronic devices, these appropriated sounds and rhythms are already programmed into your device, and so it's very tempting and super-easy to use them, even though you might not have any relationship with them. I think that a call has to be made from an organization like the ICMA to go to software manufacturers, and drum machine manufacturers and say, "We need to stop this because it's not ethical." It's nice to hear them, but I don't feel that belongs in a sound library and it goes back to where Yvette was asking the question of, why does it all sound the same? This doesn't speak to the diversity of membership, but is more an ethical call to action to say that sound libraries need to be diversified and they also need to be revised in such a way that they're not appropriating from any culture.

ICMC

Cox: Why would one want to go to the conference? If the reason for that is to get tenure, then why would Black people who will not get tenure—even Cornell West doesn't get tenure—why would they want to come to the conference? I don't know. This is, I think, a real problem. There needs to be a reason for wanting to be at a conference, if one has to invest one's own resources. There's also danger in this idea that there are these simple solutions and then we can have a diverse world. But really what one has to do is decolonize, or deal with racism, deal with whiteness and Blackness and what all of that means—the problem of the color line. W. E. B. Du Bois already articulated it over 100 years ago and we still have not really dealt with it in all the spaces, especially these kinds of spaces. This is why I didn't say anything because I don't really have an answer. It's a continuing task and we cannot really give simple answers that will solve the problem. It is not possible to solve racism with a simple "12 step plan" or something like that. At the same time one has to keep working with and on this problem.

Jackson: You can invite people and that could mean reaching out to organiza-

tions that are working with Black youth like the Willie Mae Rock Camp where its director LaFrae Sci has been introducing young women to analog synthesis, or the For the Daughters of Harlem: Working in Sound project. So you could work with organizations to let them know that you exist and let them know that people are welcomed and communicating the types of activities, but don't be upset if people aren't rushing to change their ways of doing and being.

Guidry: I think I would shut the ICMA down for a couple of years. You have to bring it down and just completely rebuild because I think I said it earlier, you can't take this structure and try to make it fit Black, that's when it was never made for Blackness, and Asian, Latin, it just wasn't made for any of us. So you'd have to start all the way from the bottom and make whole new structures of how people are represented. I do think applications should be blind. That will show that there was no tokenism happening. Just finding new structures, finding new ways to do funding, finding new ways to do education. What does outreach look like? Making sure that the people doing outreach match the demographic of the place where you're doing the outreach, and speak the language. Make sure they can get to know the community because they will be a part of that community. Just things like that, but shutting down for at least one year and just restructure everything, and maybe even change the name.

Baker: I'm for shutting it down too. I'm also for not having a conference of white papers because I find a lot of times when you are writing about these things in this academic way, it's like a lens, it's like putting a camera in front of your face. You're removed from the subject and you're removed from the practice, and I often would say to myself, as a person who is a practitioner, what can we do to create more opportunities to actually do stuff? So I'm in favor of shutting it down probably for more years than Joey, and getting people to go out and interact with other people outside of their circle, outside of their bubble and really understand what is computer music in this world today, and not just sit in an ivory tower and pontificate on what computer music is today.

Cox: What is the point of an organization that puts on conferences or journals? It's to create a space for people to meet. These people can be members or not, because it's an open public conference, a public journal where everyone can submit. So that's the first point. I don't think shutting it down would help because what if no one changes who is working for it or none of the values change in that time? Some of my values would be to make it truly a democratic place in the sense that it has to be decolonizing for it to be a really democratic place. It has to practice a type of education for its members to know what kind of systems they are in. To make informed members or citizens who are actually fit to decide on things, who can articulate questions of racism, etc. That requires knowledge, so that needs to be part of the goal. I personally, everything I do, part of my value is to decolonize. If I were president, that would be part of the core values of what this specific computer music organization does. To me, this is maybe a very personal answer, but I couldn't get out of that, it's impossible.

Lyon: As a longstanding member of the ICMA, I and some other members who have been in this organization for decades have asked ourselves if the ICMA is still relevant to today's music technological practices, which have changed so profoundly since the 1970s. A decolonization process may be necessary for the ICMA to maintain its relevance in the future. Part of that would be to better understand how the ICMA functions within larger social patterns of structural racism. What else would a decolonization process require?

Cox: There are a couple of particular points. One point is the people who run it, the administrative people, the editorial committee or whatever the ICMA organization calls that, diversify all of that, the very structure of the organization. The next part to me is the by-laws and all of that stuff so basically the values and meanings behind the organization. Another part is, how is peer review practiced and by whom? If peer reviews are not practiced by a diverse set of people, then you'll basically just reproduce all the problems. So there are these multiple levels of accountability to me, and this is why I started with the organization, even the very core values, because even that, it is a form of

accountability when you do something against the organization. You come in as a new vice president or president, you have to make sure that you continue what the organization needs. This means if we want to change what the organization needs/wants then we have to change its core values. If that doesn't happen through practice, as in the historical practice, then it has to happen through a set of new laws—change the laws.

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