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Tracing Cultural Migration through Music:

An Inquiry Approach to Enhancing Global Understanding

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For decades, reports from prestigious task forces and learned societies have lamented the geographic ignorance of American students (Thornton, 2007). Yet, despite continuing warnings that global awareness will be pivotal to economic success and international cooperation in the coming years, the public schools of the United States remain stubbornly insular. Even graduates of prestigious American universities will often arrive in Europe for the first time, expecting to see “Florence”, “Cologne”, or “Munich” on train station schedules.

Very quickly, these naïve travelers come to realize that the citizens of *Firenze*, *Köln* and *München* know their cities by other names. Yet, even after young Americans come to understand that Germans call their nation *Deutschland* and Greeks refer to their land as *Elláda* (Ελλάδα), their knowledge of the world beyond the United States tends to remain haphazard, often exhibiting glaring gaps. Of course, North Americans cannot be expected to know Europe as well as local travelers who grew up knowing that the Swiss refer to their country by four different

names: *die Schweiz* (German), *la Suisse* (French), *Svizzera* (Italian), and *Svizra* (Romanch).

Still, young Americans exhibit a striking lack of familiarity with basic geography, even when there is no language barrier and they live in fairly close proximity to the locations in question. Confronted with a blank world map, about 11 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds living in the United States cannot locate the U.S.; 29 percent cannot point out the Pacific Ocean; 58 percent cannot locate Japan; 65 percent cannot find France (Roper, 2006). One cannot help but wonder how, as they grow older, these young Americans will manage to maintain business and cultural relationships with nations that, like Russia (Россия) or Egypt (مصر), use a different alphabet or, like China (中國) or Japan (日本), utilize a non-alphabetic writing system.

Adopting an Inquiry Approach to Social Studies

An argument might be made that most young Americans will never travel to Russia or China. However, in an increasingly interconnected world, one does not need to travel abroad to be affected by world events or the global economy. Fortunately, a meaningful introduction to global geography and cultures requires neither world travel nor extensive linguistic skills. This article demonstrates how, by adopting a discovery approach to world geography, enhanced global awareness can be encouraged to develop naturally. Learning becomes an adventure. As part of this process, students gain a deeper understanding of how the people who identify with a particular culture tend to see the world and understand their own place within it.

In poll after poll, high school students rank history as their least favorite (i.e., least

interesting) subject (Levitsky, 2006). Taking a student-centered, inquiry-based approach to social education gets beyond the boredom inherent in merely reading successive textbook chapters and answering the questions at the end. Varied voices are incorporated into the curriculum. When student-generated questions guide the investigation, social studies knowledge can be constructed through student research. Students are encouraged to form their own interpretations of evidence and submit them for review (Scheurman, 1998). Through class discussions of their findings, students learn to view issues from different angles and to identify multiple perspectives. Without the need for rote memorization, they also absorb a broad range of factual knowledge.

Music as a Tool for Cultural Exploration

Mapping the Beat is an innovative curriculum that uses inquiry learning to teach geography. A multiple-state project funded by National Geographic, *Mapping the Beat* builds on students' interest in popular music to initiate a process of discovery. Through studying music history and ethnomusicology, young people gain a sense of connection to the global cultural traditions upon which American popular music has drawn. Students investigate both the material (tangible/visible) and nonmaterial (oral/experiential) elements of human culture by looking at how these cultural elements are manifested within specific musical traditions.

In the process, students discover that much of what now seems uniquely “American” about popular music in the United States is actually a product of the merging of European and African musical traditions. The *Mapping the Beat* curriculum helps students in fifth and eighth

grade discover the human geography of the United States through looking at the story behind specific genres of popular music. By tracing the spread of musical forms (the rhythms of the African Diaspora, Celtic tunes brought to the Appalachians by Scots-Irish immigrants, the Latin beat driving the fingers of German accordion players in Texas) students explore the diverse ways American culture is linked to a wider world.

Tracing the Migration of African Musical Forms

By recreating the musical “soundtrack” of American history, the *Mapping the Beat* lessons help children to make meaningful connections with (and within) the United States history curriculum. This article focuses primarily on one example. The history of how African-American musical traditions grew and spread--from sorrow songs sung in the fields to rappers at the top of the popular music charts--is made memorable to students by its relationship to the popular culture with which they have grown up. Students’ enjoyment of rap, rock, blues, gospel and/or jazz in turn enhances their understanding of the contribution that citizens of African heritage have made to the shared culture of the United States.

Walking down streets around the world one can hear the rhythms of jazz, rap, and rock and roll. All of these quintessentially American musical forms share African roots; to trace their development is to study migrations of varied kinds. In Colonial times, long-distance travel was predominately by water. Africans arriving in the United States came first across the Atlantic, then up the rivers of the Eastern Seaboard or along the Mississippi and its tributaries. The later movement of African Americans from South to North began as a trickle with the Underground Railroad. Later this migration became a steady flow as railroads provided a ready way to escape the inflexible socioeconomic hierarchy of the segregated South and to gain access to industrial

jobs opening up in the North, especially during the first half of the 20th century.

The Great Migration from the rural South to Northern cities changed Black Americans from a primarily rural to a predominantly urban population. The scope of this mass migration is best seen in Detroit (later home to Motown) a city that, during World War II, earned the title “Arsenal of Democracy” for its contribution to the war effort. In 1910, Detroit’s African American population was just 6,000; this jumped to 120,000 by the 1929 Stock Market Crash. For upper elementary students, to whom this era may seem a part of the distant past, the story of the transformation of the blues and gospel music of the South into the soul music of the 1960s, then into rock, and eventually into rap, brings to life the human story of cultural change.

Using Maps and Music in Upper Elementary and Middle School

How does the study of musical history become an exercise in inquiry learning? This section describes inquiry units designed to enhance student understanding of Africa’s cultural legacy and that of the Africans who came to the U. S. Introductory musical presentations, hands-on activities, and a KWLH Chart (What do we *know*? What do we *want* to know? What we have *learned*? How can we learn more?) provide a springboard for classroom conversation. The KWLH chart doubles as an assessment technique, allowing teachers to trace the progress of student researchers as they move through the cycle of outlining what they know, posing questions, discussing newly acquired knowledge, envisioning how they might expand upon it.

For younger students, sharing a Swahili folktale (n.d.) can be a good introduction to traditional African styles of storytelling. They may also take a look at Kid’s Africa (n.d.), a PBS site that focuses on legends and handcrafts of Africa. An on-line introduction to the thumb piano (n.d.) can serve as a jumping off place for classroom conversations about how traditional African

music is similar to--and different from—the popular music students are familiar with. Building on this discussion, a *Mapping the Beat* lesson entitled “The Ngoni, the Banjo and the Atlantic Slave Trade” (n.d.) provides an imaginative connection to African cultural traditions by tracing the migration and transformation of the ngoni (1999), an African musical instrument.

Students begin by studying a world map to find out what parts of Africa were involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Then they see how a ngoni is built by hollowing out a piece of wood, then covering the hole with a cowhide head, much like the head of a drum. A wooden neck is added and the ngoni is strung with 4 to 8 strings, made from animal gut. However, when slaves from Africa arrived America, they had no access to traditional African instruments. So they had to invent new instruments, using the natural resources of the American South. The banjo, a descendent of the ngoni, was a product of this type of cultural adaptation. When students listen to the music of the ngoni (Bassekou Kouyate, 2008.), then of the banjo (Steve Martin, 2008), they can hear the sounds of cultural migration and transformation, then discuss how the sound created by the drum-like body of the banjo compares to that of a guitar.

Another *Mapping the Beat* unit, entitled “Unconventional Maps and the Underground Railroad,” (n.d.) enables students to investigate how coded song lyrics and maps in the form of quilts were used to guide travelers along the Underground Railroad. Of course, the Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad; it was a route to freedom set up by abolitionists and escaped slaves. Between the American Revolution and the Civil War, this route helped slaves escape to freedom in the North. A read-aloud picture book, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (Hopkinson, 1993), written by a descendent of plantation slaves, introduces the unit. The gospel song “Follow the Drinking Gourd” (2007) provides a moving example of how cryptic song lyrics could be used to help guide escaped slaves (Explanation, n.d.). Students draw maps

and design quilt squares with embedded messages to recreate some of the challenges faced by escaping slaves.

A third unit, entitled “Louisiana and the French Diaspora,” (n.d.) traces the migration of the French-speaking Acadians from Nova Scotia to New Orleans. Touching on topics similar to the ngoni unit, these lessons explore the effect that migration had on music in Louisiana. An on-line account, “On the Trail of Evangeline and Her People” (1998), provides insight into both the travails of the French Acadians (the future Cajuns) who were expelled from Nova Scotia when the British took over Canada and the delights of Cajun culture. Cajun music is lively (La Louisianne Records and Swallow Records, n.d.) and many Cajun songs have French lyrics.

Another popular Louisiana musical style is known as Zydeco (2008). This is similar to Cajun music, but was developed in the Creole communities of Louisiana in the twentieth century. Creoles are related ancestrally to both (but not only) the French settlers and African slaves. Zydeco, the name of which comes from a popular song title "Les haricots sont pas sales" ("The snap beans aren't salty"), often includes the accordion (introduced by German settlers), electric guitars, a drum set, and a washboard (which is played with spoons, bottle openers, or metal thimbles). With a map students trace routes that French-, German- and African-Americans took to reach North America. Zydeco is heavily *syncopated* (back-beat) and has a fast tempo (Buckwheat Zydeco, 2009).

High School and Beyond: Music as a Pathway to Empathy

We have books for political history... But music is one of the most intimate expressions. Through music you become knowledgeable of the intimate aspects of life that aren't told in books. The people themselves tell you their

stories—it's not an interpretation. (Yurchenco, from Handwerk, 2003)

The *Mapping the Beat* lessons described so far focus on the concrete aspects of culture that are most easily accessed by upper elementary and middle school students. The same lessons can also be extended for use with older students, through encouraging more far-reaching inquiry. Waterman (1999) provides an excellent introduction to the distinctive traits of African music. Students can then see if they recognize these traits in the regional African music featured on National Geographic's world music website (n.d.). They may then look with more discerning eyes at those genres of American popular music that draw upon African musical traditions.

How might examining the music of the African Diaspora provide a steppingstone to an enhanced understanding of the African American experience? In *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (1996), Samuel A. Floyd offers an innovative approach to understanding the music of Black America. Although Floyd recognizes European influences, he also demonstrates that much of the Black music played in North America continues to share key characteristics with its African counterparts. Floyd emphasizes the centuries-old linkage between the music, myths and rituals of Africa, showing the key role they played in the evolution and enduring vitality of African-American music. He argues:

African survivals exist not merely in the sense that African-American music has the same characteristics as its African counterparts, but also that the ... interpretive strategies of African Americans are the same as those that underlie the music of the African homeland, that these tendencies and beliefs continue to exist as African cultural memory, and that they continue to inform the continuity and elaboration of African-American music (p. 5).

Floyd maintains that while African Americans may not have direct knowledge of African traditions and myths, they can intuitively recognize links to an authentic African cultural memory. His use of the term "cultural memory" is inspired by Jason Berry's usage in his article "African Cultural Memory in New Orleans Music" (1988), where the phrase is used to refer to "nonfactual and nonreferential motivations, actions, and beliefs that members of a culture seem, without direct knowledge or deliberate training, to 'know'--that feel unequivocally 'true' and 'right' when encountered, experienced, and executed" (p. 8).

As an example, Floyd points to the experiences behind jazz saxophonist Sidney Bechet's comment that there "was something happening all the time to my people, a thing the music had to know for sure. There had to be a memory of it behind the music" (p. 103). Speaking of his grandfather, Omar, who died a slave as a young man, Bechet observed: "Inside him he'd got the memory of all the wrong that's been done to my people. . . . When a blues is good, that kind of memory just grows up inside it" (p. 108). For Bechet, slavery was a "memory," although he did not see or experience it. The music "taught me a whole lot about Omar's trouble in a way I couldn't have known about until I'd had some trouble of my own" (p. 104). Bechet elaborates:

I met many a musicianer in many a place after I struck out from New Orleans, but it was always the same: If they was any good, it was Omar's song they were singing. It was the long song, and the good musicianers, they all heard it behind them. They all had an Omar, somebody like an Omar, somebody that was *their* Omar. It didn't need just recollecting somebody like that: it was the feeling of someone back there--hearing the song like it was

coming up from somewhere.

A musicianer could be playing it in New Orleans, or Chicago, or New York; he could be playing it in London, in Tunis, in Paris, in Germany. I heard it played in all those places and many more. But no matter where it's played, you gotta hear it starting way behind you. There's the drum beating from Congo Square and there's the song starting in a field just over the trees. The good musicianer, he's playing *with* it, and he's playing *after* it. He's finishing something (p. 202).

Mali: A History in Music (n.d.), available as a downloadable audio file on the National Geographic website, provides an in-depth historical look at the African roots of these cultural memories. Having listened to a wide array of samples of African music, students may compare the traits they discovered in this music to the characteristics of American popular music genres, such as jazz, rock, rap and the blues. Quotes such as those above could be used as prompts for quick-writes in which students argue for or against a point of view; then volunteers might share their insights with the class. The teacher may read Jason Berry's brief history of Congo Square:

There was a time, deep in the city's past, when the reach of African memory cradled a portion of what is now Louis Armstrong Park. In 1800 the area was a grassy plain set back behind the Vieux Carré, surrounded by wood and swamps. Slaves gravitated to the site for large, Sunday drum-and-dance convocations. It became known as Place Congo, and in later generations, with English supplanting French as the local language, Congo Square (1988, p. 3).

To modern tourists visiting New Orleans, the expanse of green across Rampart Street from the French Quarter (*Vieux Carré*) might seem to be of little interest. Yet knowledgeable visitors, who are able to envision Louis Armstrong Park as it once was (surrounded by woods and swamps), recognize this as one of the most poignant sites in the city—especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. For it was those former swamps (filled in and kept dry by continuously pumping out the ground water) beyond *Place Congo* that became the low-lying residential neighborhoods where large numbers of African Americans settled in the 20th century. These were the neighborhoods where real estate was affordable--due to the risk of flooding.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, reporters staying in fashionable sections of the city (neighborhoods with higher elevations above sea level) initially sent out bulletins saying that there had been only limited damage. Only later was it discovered that neighborhoods at lower elevations had suffered catastrophic flooding. Speaking more generally, the human impact of the Black experience of on-going marginalization can easily be overlooked by outsiders who use the distancing lens of sociological analysis. In contrast, the heart-felt musical out-pouring of a people forges an emotional connection, creating a deeper sense of shared humanity. Through the musical language of the blues, the human impact of marginalization is intuitively understood.

Educational Importance of the Study

What does this mean for global education? As Elliot Eisner (2004) has pointed out, the word “culture” has two meanings. In the anthropological sense, a culture is a shared way of life. In the biological sense, a culture is a medium for growing things. Both definitions are of importance for educators. Schools are clearly set up to pass on knowledge and skills associated with a shared way of life. Less apparent to the casual onlooker is the fact that schools also serve

as cultures for growing things. What schools grow (or at least aspire to grow) are minds. They do so through a designed environment that includes, but is not exhausted by, the curriculum.

Seldom do we stop to reflect on the ways in which the curriculum defines the content—ideas, values, and skills—that becomes a significant part of a child’s cognitive repertoire. In our era of high-stakes standardized testing, a single-minded focus on language arts and math has led to a significant narrowing of the K-6 curriculum. The danger is that the cognitive repertoires of children will be similarly narrowed. The *Mapping the Beat* curriculum provides an opportunity for students to explore varied cultural perspectives. Such inquiry provides a stronger, more immediate connection with world cultures and geography than the study of textbooks alone.

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