

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

Music Faculty Publications

Faculty of Music

12-2015

Grappling with Inclusion: Ethnocultural Diversity and Socio-musical Experiences in Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto

Deanna Yerichuk

Wilfrid Laurier University, dyerichuk@wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/musi_faculty



Part of the [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yerichuk, D. (2015). "Grappling with inclusion: Ethnocultural diversity and socio-musical experiences in Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto." *International Journal of Community Music*, 8(3), 217–231, doi: 10.1386/ijcm.8.3.217_1.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Music at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Grappling with inclusion: Ethnocultural diversity and socio-musical experiences in*Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto***Deanna Yerichuk**, University of Toronto**Abstract**

This pilot research study explored ethnocultural backgrounds of choristers and their socio-musical experiences participating in *Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto*, a community choir that actively pursues cultural inclusion through policies of musical and financial accessibility, as well as choosing repertoire of diverse cultures. A survey of choristers investigated how *Common Thread* members' ethnocultural backgrounds informed their perceptions of their musical and social experiences and of the choir's cultural diversity, working from the assumption that all people have ethnocultural backgrounds. Research findings reveal complex and diverse cultures when singers reflect on their own experiences, but choristers tended to reduce cultural diversity to race and language when thinking about the choir as a whole, suggesting that perceptions may be operating from a white normative centre. The results of this pilot research raise significant questions about multicultural education and cultural inclusion efforts within community choral practices in ethnically diverse urban environments.

Keywords

choirs

cultural diversity

adult learning

inclusion

multicultural

perceptions

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has called Toronto the most ethnically diverse city in the world. In 2006, fully half of Toronto's population was born outside of Canada, a figure substantially higher than New York or London, whose populations include 28 per cent foreign-born individuals. Further, 40 per cent of all immigrants that arrived in Canada between 2001 and 2006 chose Toronto as their home (OECD 2010). Yet, the cultural make-up of Toronto's community choirs tends not to reflect Toronto's ethnocultural diversity. Given Toronto's cultural pluralism, my research project began with a question that several community choirs in Toronto grapple with: why isn't the multicultural diversity of Toronto represented among their singers?

The question perhaps bears greater relevance in Canada where multiculturalism is official policy, defined by race scholar George Dei as 'a political doctrine officially promoting the cultural diversity as an intrinsic component of the social, political and moral order' (2000: 21). Drawing from Dei's definition, Deborah Bradley (2016) suggests that children's community choirs, while not beholden to Canadian policy, nonetheless understand their musical environments as spaces that enact this sense of

multiculturalism by cultivating cultural diversity within membership and repertoire. Several adult community choirs in Toronto (although importantly not all) work towards similar goals, actively striving for a membership that reflects Toronto's ethnocultural diversity, yet, much like children's choirs, struggle with what Bradley calls the *inclusion conundrum* – the tensions experienced by choirs in their largely unsuccessful efforts to increase racial and cultural diversity within their memberships.

Clearly, questions of ethnocultural diversity and inclusion in community choirs are as complex as they are sprawling. Important as it may be to consider who is not participating in community choirs, my initial question was predicated on the flawed premise that cultures exist outside of community choir members who in turn share some monolithic yet unnamed culture (Bradley 2007; Lipski 2009). Therefore, to investigate questions of cultural diversity in adult community choirs in ways that do not reify otherness in the methodology itself, I began this pilot research project with the very narrow and modest focus on those who *are* members of a community choir, and, rather than assuming that some places/people have ethnocultural backgrounds while others do not, sought to investigate the ethnocultural backgrounds and social/musical experiences of current members of one community choir that explicitly focuses on cultural diversity as part of its mandate: *Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto*.

Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto (hereafter called *Common Thread*) is one such community choir facing the inclusion conundrum, actively striving for, yet not achieving, a membership that reflects the cultural diversity of the city of Toronto. *Common Thread* was founded in 2000 as a non-auditioned mixed-voice adult choir dedicated to the goal of supporting social justice work through music. The chorus

describes itself as ‘a 70-voice SATB choir that promotes community and social justice through music’ with three goals:

1. To build a culturally diverse group that performs music in languages from around the world;
2. To develop a sense of community within the chorus and between the chorus and the broader community; and
3. To promote social justice through music. (Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto 2010: 1)

Most notably for this research, their first goal overtly focuses on building cultural diversity among their members and in their repertoire, providing an excellent test case for examining ethnocultural backgrounds and socio-musical experiences of choristers. That being said, it is difficult to isolate cultural diversity from their objectives of community and social justice, opening a dangerous temptation for me (and perhaps for them) to conflate diversity and social justice in their efforts to construct a musical community. While the chorus does not overtly define the term ‘social justice’, their references to the term in promotional and policy materials suggests that ‘social justice’ refers in part to public performances and activities that support progressive political causes, such as singing at protests, rallies and fund-raising concerts that benefit social-justice-oriented causes. However, the social justice goal simultaneously points to internal attempts to create equitable singing spaces within the chorus’s own structure, of which cultural diversity constitutes one indicator of success towards those equity strategies.

The chorus has two main strategies for becoming culturally inclusive: musical strategies and social strategies. First, cultural diversity is addressed through music. The chorus mandates that at least 50 per cent of their repertoire is sung in languages other than English, and that the repertoire is to be drawn from many world cultures. In addition, *Common Thread* endeavours to connect their repertoire to musical and cultural communities outside of the chorus. For example, non-English texts are taught by choristers or guests fluent in that language. The chorus also works with musical artists of diverse cultural and musical traditions to teach, perform with, and/or to write pieces of music for the chorus. The second strategy employed by *Common Thread* focuses on the singers themselves, instituting policies aimed at removing barriers to participation in the chorus, such as: subsidies for low-income participants, an inclusion statement on sexual orientation, provision of childcare, and rehearsing and performing in fully accessible locations. The chorus also follows a multi-faith calendar to ensure rehearsals and performances avoid significant cultural holidays. Further, the chorus has a well-developed committee structure, which provides a formal mechanism to support their social and musical inclusion efforts. Through all of these strategies, the choir does not claim to have *achieved* diversity or social justice, but rather works towards cultural diversity, social justice and community building as *goals* through explicit efforts.

While in policy the chorus defines cultural diversity quite broadly to include economic status, sexual diversity and ability, chorus members often focus on cultural diversity in terms of the Canadian ideal of multiculturalism. From this frame, chorus members focus on international music traditions, visible differences, and linguistic differences as the primary markers of cultural diversity, suggesting that *ethnocultural*

diversity is the key indicator by which chorus members determine the success of their efforts towards cultural diversity.

Research on community choirs suggests that the demographic portrait of *Common Thread* is consistent with that of choirs across North America, despite their efforts: predominantly female, over 35 years old, well-educated and white (Bell 2004 in United States; Rensink-Hoff 2009 in Canada). Here again, the assumptions embedded in the collective desire of singers to achieve cultural diversity deserve to be unpacked (what kinds of culture? How much diversity? In what ways? To what ends?); nonetheless, it is worthwhile to tackle these questions by taking seriously the chorus's struggles with the inclusion conundrum as a way of investigating cultural diversity and inclusion within community choirs. Scholarship studying the social contexts of community choirs has focused on the combined social and musical benefits of participating in community choirs, such as Langston and Barrett (2008) who investigated the social capital accumulated by choristers participating in an Australian choir, and Willingham (2001) who uses narrative enquiry to explore singers' experiences of participating in a Canadian choir. Several researchers investigate motivations for participation in a choir, such as Faivre Ransom (2001) and Seago (1993), and there has been substantial research on adult community choruses that examines choristers' ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, but with the exception of Rensink-Hoff (2009), independently of socio-musical experiences (Aliapoulios 1969; Holmquist 1995; Spell 1989; Tipps 1992; Vincent 1997).

These research contributions collectively point to the importance of community choirs as simultaneously social and musical. However, questions of diversity and inclusion in community choirs are becoming more urgent to address given increasing

cultural pluralism in urban centres (Bell 2008) and increased efforts of community choirs to include this pluralism in memberships. Jennifer Haywood (2005, 2006) raises issues of inclusion regarding students with special needs, and notably for my research project, Deborah Bradley (2006, 2007, 2009, 2015) has laid significant scholarly ground in questions of cultural inclusion through her critical race analysis of children's community choirs and theorization of multicultural human subjectivity. My pilot research project attempts to bridge Bradley's work with the previous scholarship on social/musical experiences and backgrounds of choristers by examining the cultural backgrounds of choristers in relation to their singing experiences and perceptions of cultural diversity.

Concepts and methods

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore how chorus members think about cultures (their own and others) in relation to their musical and social experiences. Four sub-questions addressed the main purpose:

- How do chorus members articulate their own ethnocultural backgrounds?
- What kinds of ethnocultural backgrounds are present among choristers?
- How do members understand the effects of their ethnocultural backgrounds in their current choral experiences?
- How do chorus members perceive the chorus's goal of cultural diversity?

Ethnocultural background provided an entry point for many participants to consider their own relationships to their cultural heritage, whether perceived as active or historical. Statistics Canada uses the term *ethnocultural background* as part of its census (2006) to encompass a complex set of factors and experiences such as ethnic origin, religion, immigration status, personal histories, ethnic identity and language, among other factors.

It is a broad term that includes but is not restricted to ethnicity, nationality and race, which was useful not only for exploring assumptions about cultural identity, but also for teasing out the ranges of cultural experiences and perspectives of members' musical and social experiences. By having members consider their own cultural constructions, I also hope that this research fundamentally challenges the faulty assumption that some people have culture and others do not. Finally, the terms *ethnocultural* and *ethnocultural background* delimit the research to considerations of ethnicity, race and nationality as the specific form of culture located as it is within a complex set of socio-economic relations. While ethnocultural concerns cannot be separated from lived experiences of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, among other subjectivities, analytically the delimitation was necessary to focus on the particular concern of the chorus as the locus of this research project.

The terms *inclusion* and *diversity* are also important to define, as the concepts are related, but not the same. The operational definition of the term *inclusion* in this article is based on Burnard et al. (2008), whose complex comparisons of inclusive pedagogies are grounded in the theory that inclusion means providing opportunities to participate, to be recognized, and to be respected, drawing from Nancy Fraser's (1997) notion of 'recognition' as a remedy to injustice caused by 'social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication' (Burnard et al. 2008: 112). Diversity, on the other hand, refers to the differences among the participants as indicators of pluralism. In this way, I draw partially from Standley's research on music educators' tolerance for student diversity, which frames diversity as cultural pluralism among students, not just in terms of racial and ethnic differences, but also ability, gender, class and religion (2000: 27).

However, for my study in which participation was voluntary, diversity operates discursively in ways that bear relevance on this study's findings. I therefore also draw on the research of sociologists Bell and Hartmann (2007) that found the general population universalizes 'diversity' as a broadly idealized notion that celebrates differences among people, yet with further probing tended to reduce diversity to racial differences. Bell and Hartmann conclude that the discourse of diversity is predicated on a white normative perspective, which they define as 'the dominance of white world-views [that] sees the culture, experiences, and indeed *lives*, of people of color only as they relate to or interact with the white world' (2007: 907, original emphasis). Understanding diversity as a white normative construct is central to the interpretation of the results.

Community choir is another important concept with assumptions that shape this research project. While I believe that the concept and definition of 'community choir' warrants further investigation, for the purposes of this initial study, Rensink-Hoff's six criteria became the starting point to define a community choir:

1. The choir is comprised of volunteer singers from the choir's local community and all members are over the age of 18.
2. The choir is either non-auditioned, or requires only a voice assessment or placement test for membership.
3. The choir performs a variety of repertoire (i.e., is not limited to large-scale works or a single style/genre).
4. The choir meets on a weekly basis for at least eight months of the year.
5. The choir sustains a regular concert season schedule.

6. The choir employs a paid, professional conductor. (2009: 49–50)

In addition to these six criteria, this pilot project required a community choir that has recognized cultural inclusion as important to its mandate. *Common Thread*, in addition to meeting the six criteria of a community choir, also strives for social, cultural and musical inclusion, believing that ‘singing is a cultural birthright of all people, something that anyone, regardless of skill level or experience, can participate in and enjoy’ (Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto 2010: 6). There are two substantial problems with the above criteria: first, they tend to assume (as does *Common Thread*, from the above quotation) that the community choir, as defined above, is the central structure by which adults sing together, when in reality, ‘community choirs’ offer only one particular form of group singing, an observation that I take up in the discussion later in this article.

Second, these criteria are at best debatable in understanding what constitutes a community choir, a topic that is regrettably out of the scope of this particular project. Acknowledging these limitations, the study employed the criteria largely as a kind of expediency that endeavoured to simplify one aspect of the research (constructions of community) in favour of opening up the complexities of the main focus (cultural diversity).

One final note on terminology: *Common Thread* labels itself as a chorus rather than a choir, which is an intentional choice to designate their singing practices as secular, although they tend to use ‘choir’ and ‘chorus’ interchangeably in their materials.

However, recent research has tended to use the word *choir*, even while framing community choirs as predominantly non-religious or as amateur or non-professional

singing groups, suggesting that the term ‘community choir’ is the most appropriate for this study. In this article, *Common Thread* is referred to as a chorus, but the broad category is referred to as community choirs.

Methods

To examine ethnocultural backgrounds and socio-musical experiences among choristers, I conducted a survey of active members of *Common Thread*, which was then enhanced and verified with a material culture analysis of policy documents, performances and promotional materials produced by the chorus. This article focuses primarily on the results of the survey within the research project that took place between January and June of 2010. The survey instrument was based on the work of Vincent (1997) and Rensink-Hoff (2009) for collecting demographic data, but with modified closed and open-ended questions that probed members’ ethnocultural backgrounds and current socio-musical experiences related specifically to cultural inclusion. Closed questions focused on specific aspects of ethnocultural affiliation and experience, such as country of birth and first language spoken. Open-ended survey questions asked chorus members to describe their ethnocultural backgrounds and how they felt their backgrounds shaped their experiences singing in the chorus, as well as their perceptions of the chorus’s cultural inclusion efforts.

The survey was piloted with a small group of choristers of another community choir ($n=6$), and minor modifications on wording and question order were made based on feedback from pilot participants. Data collection took place in May 2010, in which I introduced the research project and the survey in person at a rehearsal of *Common Thread* and distributed paper copies of the survey that could be filled out in person, along with a

link for members to fill out the survey online at their convenience. The chorus administrator also sent an e-mail to members, with all information attached. Two follow-up e-mail reminders were sent to choristers, as well as an in-person reminder by the chorus administrator to encourage survey participation, with the survey deadline extended one week to capture additional responses. The chorus administrator collected completed paper-based surveys, which were manually added into the online data collection tool by the researcher. A total of 61 choristers received the survey, and 43 completed, a response rate of 70 per cent. A wave analysis found no significant differences from first to last survey respondents, suggesting no response bias. Quantitative data were analysed using cross-tabulations and frequency tables. Qualitative data largely followed a conventional inductive content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Kondracki and Wellman 2002) and were reviewed with the chorus's board of directors to validate the 'trustworthiness' of themes. Responses that diverged from common themes were also noted and analysed, following the axiom of Fink that "depth and uniqueness" rather than breadth and representation should be a qualitative survey motto' (2003: 68).

This research project is best characterized as an exploratory piece of research, which had an aim to open up questions of inclusion and multicultural music-making in community choirs, grounded first and foremost in the participants' own experiences and perceptions in the relatively narrow slice of ethnocultural diversity. While a survey is limited in its ability to detail experiences and tensions within any context, a survey also offered an effective entry point into these complex issues by enabling participation from *all* members, effectively sketching out the terrain of issues raised by the members of this

chorus. In addition, the survey provided useful data to *Common Thread*'s board of directors in their strategic planning.

Findings

Snapshot of ethnocultural demographics

By the two key ethnocultural dimensions of visible minorities and linguistic diversity as identified by the chorus, the responses indicated very little ethnocultural diversity. The chorus did not have a high representation of self-identified visible minorities: 87% of respondents indicated they did not consider themselves part of a visible minority. In addition, the vast majority of respondents (93%) indicated that English was their first language. However, the ethnocultural composition of chorus members grew increasingly complex and diverse when their ethnocultural backgrounds were examined along with other dimensions. Only 72% of respondents were born in Canada, followed by the United States (18%). About 10% of respondents were born outside of North America (see Figure 1). Further, half of Canadian-born respondents (52.5%) indicated that their parents were born outside of Canada, indicating at least familial connections to migration and immigration, if not first-hand experience. Finally, nearly a third of respondents (31.7%) considered themselves part of a faith-based group, even though *Common Thread* is explicitly secular in repertoire and practices.

Figure 1: Participants' countries of birth and their parents countries of birth; $n=43$ including four non-responses.

Constructions of ethnocultural backgrounds and identities among choristers

Chorus members were asked to describe their ethnocultural backgrounds in an open question format to explore how members of *Common Thread* understand and define their ethnocultural backgrounds based on their own experiences. The overall complexity and multiplicity of the responses indicate that multiple ethnocultural dimensions are lived and experienced simultaneously.

The ethnocultural backgrounds showed diversity in experience and in interpretation of the term. For example, 'Jewish' was at times named as a culture, a family, a religious practice, ancestry, and/or geographic location. The most common ethnocultural background was western European (38 per cent, see Figure 2). Nearly one-third of respondents identified their ethnocultural background as Jewish in part or entirely. Many participants identified themselves as 'Canadian', but did so in three specific ways: (1) as Canadian with ethnic ancestry, such as Italo-Canadian; or 'Canadian with Ukrainian roots'; (2) by identifying a region of Canada, such as 'eastern Canada' or naming a specific Canadian province; and (3) simply as 'Canadian', without additional qualifiers.

Only 8 per cent of chorus members identified race as either the whole or a part of their ethnocultural background, with most identifying as white or Caucasian. In addition, approximately 13 per cent of respondents identified themselves as white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ('WASP'), pointing to the intersections of race, nationality and religion.

Figure 2: Ethnocultural backgrounds of respondents; $n=43$, including four non-responses. Percentages calculated out of the 39 responses received and do not add up to 100 per cent as respondents could provide multiple answers.

How ethnocultural backgrounds shape current singing experiences

When asked how members saw their ethnocultural backgrounds shaping their experience singing in *Common Thread*, about one third (32 per cent) of the respondents either could not articulate a connection, did not understand the question, or felt there was no influence. The other two-thirds of respondents did articulate connections between their personal backgrounds to the experience of the chorus overall. Responses were as complex and varied as members' ethnocultural backgrounds. Many respondents related their ethnocultural backgrounds to the repertoire being learned. In some cases, their backgrounds made particular languages or musical styles more familiar, as demonstrated by a member who wrote 'we're doing lots of eastern European music this year which has familiar tones for me' (survey respondent). Another member connected ethnocultural background and social values in describing his or her current singing experiences, commenting, 'I think it makes me feel quite comfortable singing our English songs, as they (generally) come from my ethnocultural background, as well as reflect the social values in which I was raised' (survey respondent).

In other cases, backgrounds made particular languages or musical styles more challenging. Several respondents felt that their personal backgrounds helped them to value *Common Thread's* mandate of inclusion and diversity, or 'the important of inclusiveness of all peoples and their cultures' (survey respondent). Other categories of

responses included: the importance of cultural inclusion (15% of respondents); linking personal upbringing to participation (10% of respondents); an awareness of personal privilege (7.5% of respondents); and a perception of a lack of diversity in the choir's membership (7.5% of respondents).

Members' perceptions of chorus goals

The research study also sought members' perceptions and experiences of the chorus's formal inclusion efforts. Chorus members rated how they've learned diverse cultural perspectives in two ways: (1) socially, through getting to know fellow chorus members and (2) through the music. The vast majority of members strongly or moderately agreed that they have learned diverse perspectives socially and musically, although they rated learning through music (73 per cent) slightly higher than through social opportunities (69 per cent).

Respondents were less positive when asked to rate whether *Common Thread* served all cultures equally well. Only 14 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that the chorus serves all cultures equally well, and 38 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that *Common Thread* serves all cultures equally well. Additional comments provided by respondents suggested they felt that the chorus does not exhibit cultural diversity in its membership, focusing primarily on visual diversity: 'It's a pretty white, anglo-ish group' (survey respondent).

Discussion

The research question focused on how choristers think about their own cultures and other cultures in relation to their social and musical experiences in the chorus as an entry point in considering the inclusion conundrum facing *Common Thread*, a choir that

has not seen increased ethnocultural diversity despite its overt efforts towards cultural inclusion. Certainly, the findings of this research corroborated the observations of chorus members that very few people within *Common Thread* consider themselves visible minorities, and fewer still speak languages other than English. While it seems an inevitable conclusion to assert that the various tools *Common Thread* has used to increase ethnocultural participation have not worked, what is perhaps more important to consider here are the constructions of cultural diversity at play, and the assumptions embedded therein that may shed some light on the question of why. The findings suggest that chorus members construct cultural diversity differently depending on whether they are reflecting on their own cultural locatedness or thinking through the overall diversity of the choir.

The choristers' constructions of their own ethnocultural backgrounds were complex and nuanced, indicating kinds of cultural diversity along multiple axes, such as religious affiliation, nationality, parental immigration and ethnic ancestry. Many answers were both specific and complex, with multiple dimensions of ethnocultural experiences and identities mixed together. For example, several respondents explicitly identified themselves Jewish, but as a culture and not as a religion, and some named a specific form of Judaism, such as Ashkenaz. Further, while the majority of respondents were born in Canada, many respondents indicated a particular region or city within Canada as a part of their cultural locatedness, suggesting that national commonality does not necessarily mean ethnocultural homogeneity among chorus members.

In thinking through their own ethnocultural backgrounds, members demonstrated some awareness of power relations and their own positions of privilege, particularly in relation to race. Many respondents identified themselves as white or WASP, with a few

offering some analysis for how this affected their participation in the chorus, pointing to issues of power and privilege. One respondent demonstrated this succinctly:

I was raised in a Canadian home by my Mom, also born in Canada. My grandparents (one side) were born in England, so some of our cultural activities may have been influenced by this. I am a white anglo-saxon protestant (still a church goer) who is aware of the 'privileged' position this is seen as and feel responsible to NOT assume superiority! (survey respondent, original emphasis)

The prevalence of self-identification of whiteness as an ethnocultural background indicates a certain awareness of how whiteness privileges the lives of some choristers, challenging the invisibility of whiteness discussed by Bell and Hartmann (2007). Perhaps the chorus attracts members already attuned to issues of power and privilege in its overt mandate of social justice, or perhaps the chorus helps develop this awareness. Regardless, this self-awareness combined with the overall complexity and multiplicity of the ethnocultural backgrounds indicate that when chorus members think through *their own* cultures, they live and perceive multiple ethnocultural dimensions simultaneously.

Yet, when reflecting on the overall cultural diversity of the choir, the members of *Common Thread* chorus tended to reduce cultural diversity to skin colour and audible accents, exemplified in the comment that the choral group seems white and 'anglo-ish'. This perceived failure of diversity is predicated on a specific idea of cultural diversity that, in sharp contrast to personal ethnocultural backgrounds, relies on reducing diversity to bodies and voices that are neither 'white' nor 'anglo-ish'. Further, while many

members felt that *Common Thread* did not have the kind of cultural diversity that the chorus aspires to have, several responses indicated that they could not explain this. One respondent reflected, ‘I don’t think we have the cultural diversity we would like. Whether or not that is because we don’t serve all cultural backgrounds equally well, or because of other factors, I don’t know’ (survey respondent). While the choir’s reflexive practice offers some recognition of power and privilege that they work to ameliorate through their musical, social and political structures and practices, this respondent’s question of the lack of cultural diversity may point to a key issue in the inclusion conundrum: perhaps the very focus on cultural diversity *contributes* to the lack of diversity in that the (white, Anglo-Saxon) members place themselves at the centre and work at inviting ‘Others’ in, thereby reifying the very relationship they are trying to subvert. In this way, diversity is framed from a white normative perspective (Bell and Hartmann 2007) that sees non-whiteness as ‘Other’. Further, by coding race as culture, the choristers may inadvertently reinforce this white normative perspective, a broader point that Bradley (2006) makes of multiculturalism in general, which ‘allows hegemonic whiteness to remain unnamed, suppressed, and beyond discussions of race’ (Bradley 2006: 8).

In her analysis of community children’s choirs and the constitution of the multicultural human subject, Deborah Bradley states that ‘the predominantly white memberships and Eurocentric repertoire of many community children’s choirs suggests that traditional structures and practices are exclusionary, even when this may not be the intent of the choir’s organizers’ (2007: ii). To some extent, *Common Thread* intentionally seeks to redress this imbalance with a robust and complex system of multicultural/multilingual repertoires, inclusive musical practices, and sociocultural

accessibility measures, and to a certain extent choristers demonstrate some awareness of the circulation of power and privilege within their choral structure. However, the chorus may well perpetuate the kinds of exclusion named by Bradley through the very choral structures they use, in ways that largely go unrecognized by the chorus. A choir is itself a western construct (Bradley 2007; Lipski 2009), and not necessarily the only, or the best, means by which groups sing together. Despite explicit social and musical policies implemented to encourage inclusion, *Common Thread* still bases its musical structure on a western European choral model. The choir subverts more formal choral structures by periodically practicing in circles or clumps of singers, and has a policy of bringing in language coaches from the cultural milieu of each piece of non-English repertoire. Yet the actual musicking of the repertoires does not stray far from a Eurocentric practice, which constitutes and reconstitutes the choral space from a normative Eurocentric centre.

While the chorus members are perhaps partially (but only partially) aware of their collective racialized positions, they seem less aware of that the chorus governs the parameters of its singing community, and in its construction of an inclusive community, draws boundaries that exclude despite attempts to the contrary. The best example of this is *Common Thread's* stance as a non-religious chorus, 'rooted in secular folk music traditions' (Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto 2010: 11). The chorus does not learn or perform any religious repertoire, largely in an attempt to create a neutral, inclusive and perhaps mostly non-Christian space, recognizing that much repertoire within Eurocentric traditions is firmly entrenched in Christianity, which in turn is entrenched with legacies of colonialism. However, one respondent linked gospel music to ethnocultural exclusion, in particular racial exclusion, lamenting that 'gospel music has

been dumped in favour of I don't know what... if we are going to honestly be empowered, reflect our diverse communities and welcoming, what are we saying about black culture and history through this policy of aggressive neglect' (survey respondent). This response suggests that the project of inclusion is fraught with complications and contradictions: such as, in order to be socially just, the choral space is made secular in recognition of the ways in which religions have historically been bound up in colonialism. Yet for many ethnocultural groups, religion and music are bound together through practice, and by designating the chorus as secular, many cultures may in fact be excluded.

Finally, the policies that define the boundaries of the community choir (such as secular) point to a more central question of how exactly the community of a community choir is constituted through policy and through practice, a point that gets lost among the set of criteria used within this research project. Ideas of cultural diversity and inclusion are configured and enacted through constructions of community. Perhaps the very construct of 'choir' exemplified in the criteria bounds the *Common Thread* community in particular ways that structure in certain cultural practices while structuring out others. While some research has explored the boundaries implicit in constructions of community within community music more generally (Yerichuk 2014; Bowman 2009), further research is needed to investigate how community choirs construct their communities through policies and practices, particularly in how structural elements of choral singing might contribute to the inclusion conundrum.

Some concluding thoughts

The research terrain explored in this pilot study suggests that there is no easy or unproblematic resolution to the inclusion conundrum of multicultural community choral spaces. While *Common Thread* exhibits extensive diversity along several ethnocultural dimensions and may exhibit increased diversity along other sociocultural dimensions, the simple fact remains that people of visible and lingual minorities, as well as immigrants and newcomers, are currently not represented among the choristers in *Common Thread*, certainly not in any way that reflects Toronto's ethnocultural diversity, nor in a way that the chorus collectively feels, marks successful cultural diversity. This stubborn reality underpins perceptions of cultural diversity that conflate race and culture, suggesting that the discursive construction of diversity is predicated on a white normative centre. Yet meaningfully challenging a white normative centre (more significant than acknowledging its presence) is difficult because of its combined pervasiveness and invisibility to those who benefit from it, even in conscious attempts to address this inequality. As a white researcher, I am complicit in this same system, and this project also contributed to upholding a white normative centre in ways I have only recently recognized, such as using the category of 'visible minority'. While I used it here because it is a common term in Canada's federal policy the term assumes whiteness as the norm, as pointed out by the United Nations in 2007.¹ My own categories framed members' responses in particular ways that also assumed whiteness as the norm, a point made by a survey respondent who added the category '*invisible* minority' to the paper survey.

Many thorny questions remain, particularly regarding the circulation of culture, race and religion in secular choirs. Further research, building on Bradley's (2006, 2007, 2009) work on the multicultural human subject, can tackle complex questions of how

cultural diversity is defined, enacted, and even who is defining the terms of inclusion within community choirs, community music and multicultural-oriented community education projects. Significant quantitative, qualitative and theoretical research might begin to address the question of how community choirs can achieve multicultural diversity among members, if indeed it is possible, or even necessary. Community choirs are primarily recreational spaces, with voluntary participation. If non-white, non-English-speaking people do not participate in the choirs, are they missing out? Or is the choir? Comparisons between multicultural-focused choirs and other group singing environments that draw from non-western European cultural traditions may offer insights into choral participation and assumptions upon which participation is predicated. Further, research that examines when and why members quit choirs may also offer insights into the barriers to participation that some choirs uphold, whether intended or not.

Perhaps most importantly, concepts like ‘multicultural’, ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘community’ are constituted and practiced within community music contexts in complex ways predicated on social relations such as race, class, gender, sexuality and ability, that if examined as complex wholes, may yield important insights in the field of community music as well as assist community groups such as *Common Thread* in pursuing their cultural diversity goals more fully.

References

Aliapoulios, A. A. (1969), 'A study of the adult amateur choral organization in the United States and the implication for adult education', Ph.D. thesis, Boston: Boston University School for the Arts.

Bell, Cindy (2004), 'Update on community choirs and singing in the United States', *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*, 2:1, pp. 39–52.

____ (2008), 'Toward a definition of a community choir', *International Journal of Community Music*, 1:2, pp. 229–41.

Bell, Joyce and Hartmann, Douglas (2007), 'Diversity in everyday discourse: The cultural ambiguities and consequences of "Happy Talk"', *American Sociological Review*, 72:6, pp. 895–914.

Bowman, Wayne (2009), 'The community in music', *International Journal of Community Music*, 2:3, pp. 109–28.

Bradley, Deborah (2006), 'Music education, multiculturalism, and anti-racism: "Can We Talk?"', *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 5:2, pp. 2–30.

____ (2007), 'Global song, global citizens?: Multicultural choral music education and the community youth choir, constituting the multicultural human subject', Ph.D. thesis, Toronto: University of Toronto.

____ (2009), 'Oh that magic feeling!: Multicultural human subjectivity, community, and fascism's footprints', *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 17:1, pp. 56–72.

____ (2016), 'The inclusion conundrum and community children's choirs in Canada', in Frank Abrahams and Paul Head (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*, New York and London: Oxford University Press.

Burnard, P., Dillon, S., Rusinek, G. and Sæther, E. (2008), 'Inclusive pedagogies in music education: A comparative study of music teachers' perspectives from four countries', *International Journal Of Music Education*, 26:2, pp. 109–26.

Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto (2010), *Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto Handbook*, Toronto: Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto.

Dei, George J. S. (2000), *Power, Knowledge and Anti-Racism Education*, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Faivre Ransom, Judy L. (2001), 'An investigation of factors that influence adult participation in music ensembles based on various behavioral theories: A case study of the Norfolk Chorale', D.M.A. thesis, Virginia: Shenandoah University.

Fink, Arlene (2003), *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide, Third Edition*, California: Sage Publications.

Fraser, Nancy (1997), *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Post-Socialist' Condition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Haywood, Jennifer (2005), 'Including individuals with special needs in choirs: Implications for creating inclusive environments', Ph.D. dissertation, Toronto: University of Toronto.

____ (2006), 'You can't be in my choir if you can't stand up: One journey toward inclusion', *Music Education Research*, 8:3, pp. 407–16.

Holmquist, S. P. (1995), 'A study of community chorus members' school experiences', Ph.D. thesis, Eugene: University of Oregon.

Hsieh, H. and Shannon, S. (2005), 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15:9, pp. 1277–88.

Kondracki, N. L. and Wellman, N. S. (2002), 'Content analysis: Review of methods and their applications in nutrition education', *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 34:4, pp. 224–30.

Langston, Thomas W. and Barrett, Margaret S. (2008), 'Capitalizing on community music: A case study of the manifestation of social capital in a community choir', *Research Studies in Music Education*, 30:2, pp. 118–38.

Lipski, Gloria (2009), 'Multiculturalism from within: Choral relationships as enactments of cultural diversity in Common Thread', M.A. thesis, Toronto: University of Toronto.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2010), *OECD Territorial Reviews: Toronto, Canada 2009*, Paris: OECD Publishing, http://www.oecd.org/document/1/0,3343,en_2649_34413_43985281_1_1_1_1,00.html. Accessed 28 March 2011.

Rensink-Hoff, R. (2009), 'Adult community choirs: Toward a balance between leisure participation and musical achievement', London and Canada: Western University.

Seago, Ted (1993), 'Motivational factors influencing participation in selected Southern Baptist church choirs', Ed.D. thesis, Houston: University of Houston.

Spell, G. M. (1989), 'Motivational factors and selected sociodemographic characteristics of Georgia community chorus participants', Ph.D. thesis, Athens: University of Georgia.

Standley, Jayne (2000), 'Increasing prospective music educators' tolerance for student diversity', *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 19:1, pp. 27–32.

Statistics Canada (2003), 'Ethnic diversity survey: Portrait of a multicultural society', <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-593-x/89-593-x2003001-eng.pdf>. Accessed 9 June 2010.

____ (2006), 'Canada's ethnocultural mosaic: 2006 census', <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/ethnicorigin/pdf/97-562-XIE2006001.pdf>. Accessed 9 June 2010.

Tipps, J. (1992), 'Profile characteristics and musical backgrounds of community chorus participants in the southeastern United States', Ph.D. thesis, Tallahassee: Florida State University.

Vincent, P. M. (1997), 'A study of community choruses in Kentucky and implications for music educators', Ph.D. thesis, Lexington: University of Kentucky.

Willingham, Lee (2001), 'A community of voices: A qualitative study of the effects of being a member of The Bell-Arte Singers', Ph.D. dissertation, Toronto: University of Toronto.

Yerichuk, Deanna (2014), “‘Socialized Music’: Historical formations of community music through social rationales’, *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 13:1, pp. 125–53.

Contributor details

Deanna’s dovetailed passions of singing and community education underpin her academic and professional work. She earned her Ph.D. in Music Education at the University of Toronto, investigating historical social and musical inclusion efforts of community music schools in Toronto’s settlement houses, which earned her the 2012 SOCAN Foundation/CUMS Award for Writings on Canadian Music. As a professional singer, she operates a private voice studio; led the Voice and Choral Department at Dixon Hall Community Music School for five years; and has been the guest conductor of *Echo Women’s Choir*.

Contact:

Faculty of Music, University of Toronto

83 Queen’s Park

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

M5S 2C5

E-mail: d.yerichuk@utoronto.ca

Note

¹ The Canadian newspaper *National Post* ran an article on 5 July 2011 detailing the UN report and the tensions between the Canadian government and the UN on Canada's continued use of the term 'visible minorities' (see <http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/07/05/canada-ready-to-spar-with-un-over-%E2%80%98visible-minorities%E2%80%99/>, accessed 14 September 2014).