

Music Theory's White Racial Frame

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed,
but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (James Baldwin)*

[PDFs for slides and bibliography at
philipewell.com → research → presentations]

Philip Ewell

pewell@hunter.cuny.edu

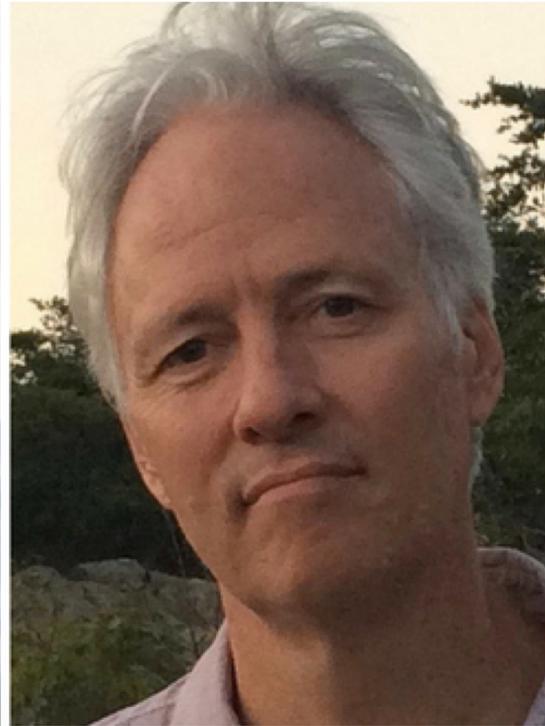
www.philipewell.com



Scene on Radio, Episode 31: “Turning the Lens,” (Seeing White, Part 1), February 15, 2017, John Biewen, host and producer, Chenjerai Kumanyika, regular guest



Chenjerai Kumanyika



John Biewen



Society for Music Theory's "Annual Report on Membership Demographics" for 2018:

- 84.2% of membership is white.
- 90.4% of fulltime employees are white.
- 93.9% of associate and full professors are white.

In 1995 SMT formed the Diversity Committee to "increase the ethnic diversity of the membership of the society" (Hall, 7).

In 1996, then-SMT-president Joseph Straus set the goal to "diversify our membership," noting that, of current members, "fewer than 2% are African American or Hispanic" (Straus, 2).

In 2018 that number had increased to only 2.9%.

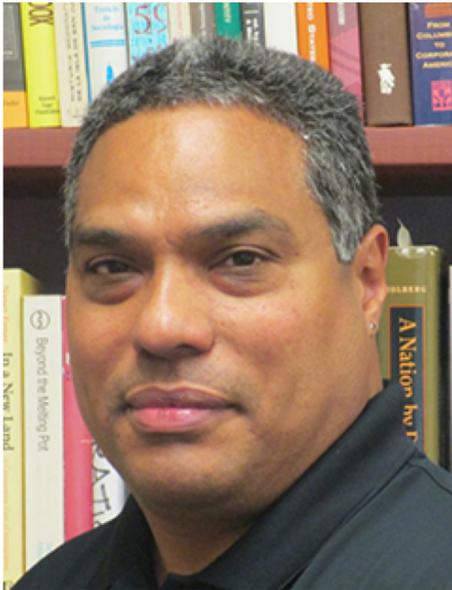
From *The White Racial Frame*: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing:



Joe Feagin

- The White Racial Frame “was generated to rationalize and insure white privilege and dominance over Americans of color” (Feagin, x).
- White Racial Frame, defined: “An overarching white worldview that encompasses a *broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as **racialized inclinations to discriminate***” (3; italics original; my **bold type**).
- Feagin: “One function of the white frame is to justify the great array of privileges and assets held by white Americans as the group at the top of the racial hierarchy” (146).

From *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*:



Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

- **Racial Structure:** “When race emerged...racialized social systems, or white supremacy for short, became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach. I therefore conceive a society’s racial structure as ***the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege....*** Therein lies the secret of racial structures and racial inequality the world over. **They exist because they benefit members of the dominant race”** (Bonilla-Silva, 8–9; italics original; my **bold type**).
- **Colorblind Racism:** “The elements that comprise [colorblind racism] are the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices; the **avoidance of racial terminology** and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience ‘reverse racism’...; the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality” (18; my **bold type**).

Music theory's white racial frame believes that:

- ...the music and music theories of white persons represent the best framework for music theory.
- ..., among these white persons, the music and music theories of whites from German-speaking lands of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries represent the pinnacle of music-theoretical thought.
- ...the institutions and structures of music theory have little or nothing to do with race or whiteness, and that to critically examine race and whiteness in music theory would be unfair or inappropriate.
- ...the language of “diversity” and the actions it effects will rectify racial disparities, and therefore racial injustices, in music theory.

Racial demographic data for musical examples for seven American music theory textbooks*

Textbook	Percentage of market share	# of musical examples	# of examples by nonwhites	# of examples by nonwhites as percentage
Aldwell/Schachter, 4 th ed. (2011)	5	465	0	0%
Benward/Saker, 9 th ed. (2015)	13	333	8	2.40%
Burstein/Straus, 1 st ed. (2016)	11	304	1	0.33%
Clendinning/Marvin, 3 rd ed. (2016)	25	504	15	2.98%
Kostka/Payne/Almén, 8 th ed. (2018)	29	370	10	2.70%
Laitz, 4 th ed. (2015)	8	550	2	0.36%
Roig-Francoli, 2 nd ed. (2010)	5	404	13	3.22%
TOTALS	96	2930	49	1.67%

*With thanks to Megan Lyons for researching, compiling, and helping to interpret the demographic data, and to Justin Hoffman, of Oxford University Press, for providing unofficial statistics on textbook market share.

Functional tonality is a key element
of music theory's racial structure

Bonilla-Silva, "racial structure," defined:
"the totality of the social relations and
practices that reinforce white privilege."

John Ewell, Graduation from Morehouse College, 1948



John Ewell

Martin Luther King

The 1948 Graduating Class of
MOREHOUSE COLLEGE
ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Schenker's Racism

[SDO = *Schenker Documents Online*]

- He speaks of “Less able or more primitive races” (2015, online “Literature” supplement, 21), “inferior races” ([1910 and 1922] 2001, vol. 1, 28), and “wild and half wild peoples” (Diary entry, September 8, 1914, SDO).
- He speaks of whiteness in relation to the “animal” Japanese, that the “white race” will need to adapt in order to “annihilate” the Japanese “animals” (Diary entry, August 20, 1914, SDO).
- Writing about the “Slavic half-breed”: “There will be no peace on earth until...the German race crushes the Slavs on the grounds of superiority” (Diary entry, July 26, 1914, SDO).

Schenker's anti-Black Racism

[SDO = *Schenker Documents Online*]

- “Even negroes proclaim that they want to govern themselves because they, too, can achieve it” (Handwritten letter, September 25, 1922, SDO).
- He disparages “negro music” and jazz ([1930] 2014, 77), as well as negro spirituals, claiming that they were, “completely falsified, dishonest expropriation of European music” (Diary entry, January 16, 1931, SDO).
- He laments that Germany must endure “the ignominy of [France’s Senegalese] black troops—the advance party of its genitalitis [i.e., genitals], of the flesh of its flesh, of the cannibal spirit of its spirit. ([1921–1923] 2004, 15–16).

Schenker's Admonitions Against Racial Mixing

[SDO = *Schenker Documents Online*]

- “‘Race’ is good, ‘inbreeding’ of race, however, is murky” (Handwritten letter, January 13, 1934, SDO).
- He expressed horror at the mixing of races in “Senegalese marriage relationships” ([1921–1923] 2004, vol. 1, 5) and “intermarrying black racial stock with...a French mother” ([1921–1923] 2004, 18).

Joe Feagin, from *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*:

“The dominant racial frame has sharply defined inferior and superior racial groups and authoritatively rationalized and structured the great and continuing racial inequalities of this [American] society. In a whitewashing process...this dominant framing has shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental numerous racial issues, including the realities of persisting racial discrimination and racial inequality” (22).

Whitewashing Schenker, I [my **bold type**]

1. Oswald Jonas **omitted several passages** of *Der freie Satz* “that have **no bearing on the musical content** of the work” (Schenker [1935] 1979, xiii).
2. Ernst Oster: “I felt it best to **omit several additional passages** of a very general, sometimes semiphilosophical nature here; these omissions are not expressly indicated” (Schenker [1935] 1979, xiii).
3. Allen Forte: “Almost **none of the material bears substantive relation to the musical concepts** that [Schenker] developed during his lifetime and, from that standpoint, **can be disregarded**” (Schenker [1935] 1979, xviii).
4. William Rothstein reduces Schenker’s offensive language to “**supposed indiscretions**” and “**peripheral ramblings**” (Rothstein, 8).
5. William Benjamin: “[Schenker’s] **apparent racism** was an emotional reflex which stood in contradiction to his personal belief system” (Benjamin, 157).
6. Nicholas Cook offers “**humor,**” [i.e., Schenker was joking] as a possible reason for Schenker’s disgusting language (Cook, 148).

Whitewashing Schenker, II [my **bold type**]

7. John Rothgeb: “We urge the reader to recognize that however much Schenker may have regarded his musical precepts as an integral part of a unified worldview, they are, in fact, **not at all logically dependent on any of his extramusical speculations**. Indeed, no broader philosophical context is necessary—or even relevant—to their understanding” (Schenker [1910 and 1922] 2001, xiv).
8. Nicholas Cook comments on Schenker’s “authoritarian impulse that is expressed in the many hierarchies which make up Schenker’s worldview (it is tempting but I think **not very helpful to draw the obvious parallel with his music theory**)” (153).

Two Schenker quotes, one on the inequality of peoples, the other on the inequality of notes

“But let the German mind also gather the courage to report: it is not true that all men are equal, since it is, rather, out of the question that the incapable ever become able; that which applies to individuals surely must apply to nations and peoples as well” (2015, online “Literature” supplement, 23n13).

“It is therefore a contradiction to maintain, for example, that all scale tones between ‘C’ and ‘c’ have real independence or, to use a current but certainly musically unsuitable expression, ‘equal rights’” ([1935] 1979, 13n3).

Two Schenker quotes, one on whites controlling blacks, the other on the fundamental structure controlling the middleground and foreground

About whites controlling blacks he says, “Even negroes proclaim that they want to govern themselves because they, too, can achieve it” (Handwritten letter, September 25, 1922, SDO). [That is, blacks must be controlled by whites.]

About the scale degrees of the fundamental structure, he says, “the scale-degrees of the fundamental structure have decisive control over the middleground and foreground” ([1935] 1979,111).

From “Confronting Philosophy’s Anti-Semitism”:



Laurie Shrage

“When the anti-Semitic views of great thinkers such as Kant, Voltaire or Hume (or Hegel, Schopenhauer, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, for that matter) are exposed, one typical response is to question whether these prejudices are integral to their important works and ideas. But this may be the wrong question. A better question is: Should those who teach their works and ideas in the 21st century share them without mentioning **the harmful stereotypes these thinkers helped to legitimize**” (Shrage 2019; my bold type).



Sara Ahmed

From *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*:

“The term ‘diversity’ is a sign of the lack of commitment to change and might even allow organizations such as universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities” (53).

To a large extent the language of diversity—which actually **reinforces** music theory’s white racial frame—exists to avoid one simple concept: whiteness.



Chandler Dean

From “How Can I Help to Promote Diversity Without Relinquishing Any of my Power?”:

“Nice to see you. I’m an ally. As an upper-middle-class Northeastern American liberal college-educated cis straight white male, I’m aware of my privilege. And I’m willing to do anything to fight for progress—especially if it involves me telling you how aware of my privilege I am. So make no mistake: I will do anything to uplift the marginalized. As long as uplifting the marginalized doesn’t involve diminishing my societal position in any fashion. That would, of course, be unfair” (Dean 2019).

#MusicTheorySoWhite?

Music Theory's White Racial Frame

Thanks to Brian Alegant, Robin Attas, Nicholas Baragwanath, Juan Battle, Patrick Boenke, Jim Bungert, Poundie Burstein, Thomas Christensen, Gabrielle Cornish, Robert Cowan, Arnie Cox, Jessie Daniels, Michèle Duguay, Suzanne Farrin, Joe Feagin, William Fourie, Ellie Hisama, Justin Hoffman, Billy Hunter, Danny Jenkins, Charity Lofthouse, Rachel Lumsden, Megan Lyons, Noriko Manabe, Betsy Marvin, Wolfgang Marx, John Mattessich, David Neumeyer, Annemarie Nicols-Grinenko, Mitch Ohriner, Jeff Perry, Lynne Rogers, Bill Rothstein, Gesine Schröder, Joe Straus, Marianne Wheeldon, Yayoi Uno-Everett, and the CUNY Mid-Career Faculty Fellowship Program

Philip Ewell

Hunter College CUNY

pewell@hunter.cuny.edu

www.philipewell.com

