I just got finished writing a chapter on composer Julia Perry’s 1960 piece *Homunculus C.F.*, a serial minimalist work, for a collection called—as for now—*Expanding the Canon: Black Composers in the Music Theory Classroom*, edited by Melissa Hoag. Perry (1924–1979) was a Black, possibly queer, American composer whose works were influenced by Black American genres, Western European forms and harmonic languages, and serialism as taught by Luigi Dallapiccola. In the essay, I write about Perry’s use of pitch-class sets and pivot dyads and timbre and taleas and durational parameters.¹ I felt very comfortable analyzing a woman composer’s use of serial and minimalist techniques; it’s something I’ve done before and a lot. And I was happy to have my work informed by the research of other women, including Mildred Denby Green, Gretchen Horlacher, Helen Walker-Hill, and Meg Wilhoite.² But as I was writing my essay, I struggled with several other issues, all of them regarding race:

1. How appropriate is it for me, a White scholar, to be writing about Julia Perry, a Black composer?
2. How do I negotiate the influences and aspects of race and racism present in my approaches to Perry’s life and work?
3. What does it mean to be expanding the canon through racial inclusion?

Kendra Preston Leonard is a musicologist and music theorist whose work focuses on women and music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and music and screen history. She is the founder of the Julia Perry Working Group and the founder and Executive Director of the Silent Film Sound and Music Archive. Leonard is the author of numerous scholarly books and articles, including those on composer Louise Talma and music for silent film.
I have grappled with this first question of researching, analyzing, and writing about Perry for several years now. I became aware of her when I was writing my first book, about the Conservatoire Américain in Fontainebleau, France, where she was a student in 1952. The appalling (and well-documented) racism of the faculty and staff there meant that there were very few Black students; Perry attended for just one summer and, despite institutional prejudice, won the school’s top composition prize for her sonata for viola and piano, a work that is now apparently lost. (In fact, nearly half of Perry’s known works are lost.) I found Mildred Denby Green’s dissertation from 1975, which includes a chapter on Perry, and Helen Walker-Hill’s chapter on her in *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music,* but little else aside from brief mentions, usually in racially segregated sections of books. (Books on women in music, as a broad topic, have some really nasty ghettoizing practices.) In 2016 I was an American Music Research Center Fellow at the AMRC at the University of Colorado Boulder. There, I found photocopies of Walker-Hill’s collection of scores by Black women; the originals are housed at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago. I scanned them all and was excited to work with them.

I also wanted to make these scans and other resources—like program or liner notes, reviews, and articles—on Perry available online for anyone who wanted them for research purposes; not everyone can go to Colorado or Illinois to work with them. I didn’t want to put the scans up on my own website because that centered me, made me some kind of proprietor for the music, which would have been completely inappropriate, a perfect example of White feminist allyship gone bad. (I do realize that, in writing this essay, I am centering myself again in writing about my process of de-centering myself when it comes to Perry scholarship.) It is important to me that I am behaving ethically and following anti-racist practices in handling this material. I am very conscious of the small number of Black scholars in music studies, and I am committed to supporting Black scholars in any way I can. In helping provide research material and in writing about Perry, I do not want to be patronizing or step on anyone’s toes. I do not want to usurp the place of Black scholars who want to work on Perry, and I don’t want to be a White woman who claims in any way to speak for Black women, a problem endemic in White feminism. I also don’t want to be essentialist, suggesting that only Black scholars should work on Black music and musicians; and as much as I would love for Perry’s materials to have Black stewardship, I don’t think that asking my Black colleagues to take on unpaid labor of these materials is right either. My best option seemed to be making a freely accessible group on Humanities Commons, which comes with the capability to upload files that can be easily viewed and downloaded by scholars, as well as a discussion board and other tools, and called it the Julia Perry Working Group. As the Group moderator, though, I am still
centered, and find myself uneasy about this. I’ve been asked to talk about Perry on panels comprised solely of White scholars talking about Black composers, something I find problematic. But I’ve also helped researchers and performers find scores for study and performance, helping get Perry’s music out into the wider world, and that is a good thing. So, how appropriate is it for me, a White scholar, to be writing about Julia Perry, a Black composer? In rejecting essentialism, I embrace a universalism with a heightened sense of awareness. I think it’s okay for me to write about Perry as long as I am careful in doing so: respectful; attentive to the problematic nature of our non-shared identities; and always, always open to other wisdom and criticism. Perry’s life and works are important, and until there is more racial parity in music scholarship—less than one percent of music theory scholars identify as Black—I think White scholars doing work on her and on other Black composers are helping repair the exclusionary practices of our intellectual forebears. The more I think about this, the more I realize that doing reparative work by focusing on Black and BIPOC composers fits in well with the philosophy that guides me in general: tikkun olam, or repair of the world. I work to leave the world better than when I entered it. This leads to my second question: How do I negotiate the influences and aspects of race and racism present in my approaches to Perry’s life and work?

Working on Perry seems a logical next step in this thread of my scholarship, moving from the Conservatoire Américan to Louise Talma—a White, queer, American composer who also studied and later taught at the Conservatoire about whom I’ve written extensively—to Perry. But I have to approach this work carefully. I am White, and, having been trained in conservatories and universities that taught fairly conservative—no, let’s just say it—White (male, heteronormative, ableist) supremacist—research methods, I know that any scholarly work I did on Perry would be tainted by biases (what Philip Ewell calls the White racial frame)4 instilled by that training, no matter how hard I work to recognize and purge them. I need to keep abreast of approaches in other disciplines, just as I did when working on Talma, in order to find appropriate historical and social lenses through which to understand Perry’s music. Perry exists not in that small, marginal space of Black women composers found in books and textbooks, but as part of a much larger discourse about music analysis and mid-century American composition. This discourse includes using conventional compositional tools but also subverts them and denies them, requiring scholars and performers to understand frames outside of their lived experience. To help combat the White supremacy inherent in scholarly musical analytical methods, I draw from both anti-racist music scholarship and the work of Matthew Salesses and Felicia Rose Chavez.5

Salesses and Chavez aren’t music scholars; they teach writing from an anti-racist perspective. I also teach writing, and I’ve realized that many
of their approaches and philosophies can be applied to music studies as well. Both emphasize the concept that “craft is a series of expectations,” that “craft is an abstract concept.” When we analyze music, we’re exploring the composer’s craft in making it, but craft has to be redefined for each creator and for person seeking to evaluate a work. Mainstream analysis assumes a shared vocabulary among creators and scholars, a vocabulary and set of concepts that are weaponized when music doesn’t correlate with or imitate the craft of the almost always White “masters” of the music that fills our concert halls. Craft, Salesses writes, “is support for a certain worldview.” In studying American “classical” music, the worldview taught to us and that we are expected to use in our own work is that of White, often European-born men who created themselves as primary sources for analytical techniques or, in later generations, are dedicated to preserving those techniques.

In analyzing Perry’s music, then, I consider how she had to break from expectations and ideas of accepted craft and why, and how to analyze her music using the vocabulary of music analysis in ways that also allow for her individual expression. I wanted to figure out how to view her music through Audre Lorde’s claim, “There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean.” Perry’s composition both follows and rejects Lorde’s ideas. Perry uses the master’s tools, those already existing forms and gestures and structures, to communicate with people who, because of White supremacy in American music, already understand what can be built with those tools. At the same time, she creates narrative in non-Aristotelian ways, and her craft reflects, resists, and reshapes the culture in which she is composing. In viewing her from my White perspective, I might be believing in a historical construct that is not her true identity, and I have to be aware of how race as a historical construct informs how I study her music.

Finally, what does it mean to be expanding the canon through racial inclusion? The concept of the canon is problematic, but I understand why Hoag uses it in the title of the collection. It serves as shorthand for a lot of different things: the (limited range of) music repeatedly played by orchestras; the (limited range of) music people teach in conservatories and schools of music; the (limited) body of pieces from which many performers choose their repertoire. Oh, sure, there’s the occasional token non-White composer on a program, a nod to “diversity.” Music scholars have spent many years now trying to broaden the canon, to diversify the canon, to make the canon more inclusive. Perhaps trying to make the canon bigger isn’t the answer. Perhaps we need to do away with the canon and the idea of canon. Composer and scholar Annika Socolofsky recently tweeted about having had her works included in the “contemporary canon.” “Feels really weird,” she wrote, “my issue with The Canon isn’t that I want more people included in said canon, it
is that I want any notion of a canon to be destroyed completely.”7 Her attitude is mirrored in Chavez’s model for anti-racist writing workshops as well. Chavez writes, “The traditional model [for teaching writing] affirms the authority of white literary ‘masters’ through a strict study of canonical texts, imparting an implicit rubric for the ‘right’ way to write.” Socolofsky is in agreement. “The Canon,” she writes, “is simply a tool for gatekeeping. It defines ‘quality’ based on its own white supremacist patriarchal Eurocentric ideals, and excludes those who do not make that kind of art.” Chavez and Socolofsky both call for an anti-racist method of focusing outward on artists for whom the canon is irrelevant. Chavez asks her students to “[survey] a living archive of ... material by a range of writers including people of color, differently abled writers, and people who are LGBTQIA2+.” Socolofsky writes, “In lieu of a canon, let’s seek to be constantly growing and expanding our experience with wide array of artists, aesthetics, backgrounds, and messages. This is how we learn. This is how we grow.” I agree. Although my essay on Perry will appear in a work titled Expanding the Canon, I don’t want to expand the canon—a collection of music curated through the power of White supremacy. I too want to unmake the canon, trade the “an” of “expanding” for the “lo” of “exploding.” I want the living archive that Chavez promotes, the growing and expanding experiences Socolofsky details. As a scholar, I have the opportunity and responsibility to help change the way music is taught and learned about, and those of us who are White and writing about underrepresented musicians who are Black or BIPOC or non-male or disabled or queer can help chip away at the canon until it crumbles away and becomes viewed as a mistake of the past, but only if we undertake substantial work. It is work that needs doing.

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