

Open Letter on Antiracist Actions Within SMT

**Anyone may sign this document via the Google Forms link at the end of the letter text. In the first 10 days after publishing, this letter received more than 900 signatures. We are still accepting signatures, but since the rate of signing has lowered significantly we'll only update the letter once per week. Thank you for your support!**

At the Plenary Session of the Society for Music Theory's 2019 meeting, Philip Ewell, Yayoi Uno Everett, Ellie Hisama, and Joseph Straus powerfully demonstrated how systemic racism, sexism, and ableism animate musical discourse. They spoke not only with candor and wisdom, but also with exceptional courage. The *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, in Volume 12, has just published a number of vitriolic responses to a single aspect of one presentation—under the pretense of scholarly debate, no less—and the ensuing scandal has diverted our field's focus from the structural critiques made in the plenary. The journal's violation of academic standards of peer review, its singling out of Prof. Ewell while denying him a chance to respond, and [the language of many of its essays](#) constitute anti-Black racism. These actions provide further evidence of the structural force of white supremacy in our discipline. While this episode is the most recent, and perhaps the most illustrative, the treatment Prof. Ewell received from the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* is only the latest instance of systemic racism that marginalized Society members have faced for many years.

We applaud the [recent statement](#) of the Executive Board of the Society for Music Theory. To aid the Executive Board in their aim to “determine further actions,” we the undersigned advocate for the following:

1. A public statement from the President, authorized by the Executive Board and in accordance with the Policy on Public Statements, that SMT acknowledges the following three points: (a) that American music theory is historically rooted in white supremacy, the racist idea that whites are superior to nonwhites, (b) that these white supremacist roots have resulted in racist policies that have benefitted whites and whiteness while disadvantaging nonwhites and nonwhiteness, and (c) that these racist policies have resulted in injustices suffered by BIPOC at all stages of their careers. Further, we call upon the President, with the authorization of the Executive Board, to apologize to all BIPOC who have suffered such injustices, without equivocation.
2. A demonstration of support by the Society for the graduate students of the University of North Texas Department of Music History, Theory, and Ethnomusicology in their [call for accountability](#). We recommend that this support take the form of a letter to UNT Press demanding a full and truthful account of recent editorial processes at the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*. This account should include information pertaining to which

authors submitted works through the call for responses and which were invited to participate individually, a description of the peer review process, details of which members of the editorial board, advisory board, and journal staff viewed submissions before publication, and an explanation of how certain authors were able to separate their roles as academic advisors to the editorial staff from their roles as authors.

3. The establishment of an Ombudsperson position or committee that advocates on behalf of those disadvantaged by imbalances of power in cases of conflict and misconduct related to journal editing, publications, conferences, governance, and teaching, since SMT has a role to play in promoting its policies for all members in all professional situations.
4. A statement that calls upon Society members to resign from the editorial board of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, as the journal's recent comportment is incompatible with the SMT Policy on Ethics.
5. An amendment to the SMT Policy on Harassment, as it pertains to publication, to apply to members' behavior in all their scholarly endeavors, not only in SMT publications, discussion groups, and interest group interactions.
6. A censure of the advisory board of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, pursuant to relevant portions of the SMT Mission Statement, Policy on Ethics, and Policy on Harassment, as the Society's policies have no meaning if violations do not invite censure. In particular, the Policy on Harassment states that "cases of proven offenses" will result in "revocation of membership and honors."
7. That all members of the society, as individuals, confront the ways we ourselves have sustained systems of racism and sexism through our own scholarship and pedagogy. The adoption of the above points is not a substitute for this self-reflection. That self-reflection will be aided by recent studies and works on antiracism, such as those [Harvard has compiled](#) and those in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). Members affiliated with an institution of higher learning can likely contact staff members dedicated to antiracist training and pedagogy. [Project Spectrum's keynote address at the 2020 MTSNYS conference](#) also outlines important steps that individual theorists can take toward enacting change in our field.

It is only through acknowledgment and sustained, careful reflection that we can truly begin to address these issues as an academic community. As a starting point, each music theorist must ask themselves: What books and articles do I read? What scholars do I cite in my own research? What music do I analyze in my research and in my classes? What readings do I assign in my classes? What interest groups am I involved with? What committees do I serve on and what is the racial and gender makeup of those committees? What students do I mentor? In short, we all need to ask ourselves: What have I done as an individual to perpetuate existing white supremacist systems of power and inequity in our field? Probing these questions in our work individually is essential to our collective reckoning.

This document was collaboratively authored by eight music theorists who identify as white: Edward Klorman, Stephen Lett, Rachel Lumsden, Mitch Ohriner, Cora S. Palfy, Nathan Pell, Chris Segall, and Daniel Shanahan. As is too often the case, white racial activism relies on uncredited labor by BIPOC. This document has benefitted from criticism, editing, and authorship by Philip Ewell, Anna Gawboy, Jennifer Iverson, Vivian Luong, and Toru Momii. Its failings rest with the initial authors.

We also believe that there is broad support within the music theory community and beyond for the views expressed in this letter. If you would like to show your solidarity, please add your name by filling out the form found at the following link.

**Complete the form here and your name will be added alphabetically on the next daily update.**

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Rosa Abrahams, Ursinus College  
Ruaidh Absaroka, University of Salzburg  
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