

**“Changing the World One Song at a Time”:
Interrogating constructions of community in
*Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto***

presented by
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What constitutes the ‘community’ of a community choir? The ‘community’ aspect of community choirs often normatively evokes warm and positive assumptions: community singing breaks down barriers, celebrates diversity, raises alternative voices. These assumptions suggest that while community choirs may be constituted by their actual community-oriented work, they are also constituted by a *notion* of community, a community *imaginary*. And this *notion* of community underpins the community choir’s identity. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2001, 1) argues that “[t]he word 'community'...feels good: whatever the word 'community' may mean, it is good 'to have a community', 'to be in a community'. ...Company or society can be bad; but not the *community*. Community, we feel, is always a good thing.” Bauman goes on to argue that the word ‘community’ points to an ideal, a utopia: it is something that has been lost or something that is possible in the future but not something we have right now. He juxtaposes this ideal community with the harsh reality of insecurity and isolation of modernity, but he also juxtaposes ideal community with our experiences of actual community, which never meets the utopic vision.

I’m deeply pre-occupied with the assumptions undergirding the normative uses of ‘community’ in music. The research I’m presenting to you today offers a starting point in my pre-occupation. I interrogate the construction of community within one Toronto community

choir, examining the tensions between the idealized community and the realized community. I focus on *Common Thread Community Chorus of Toronto*. *Common Thread*'s sense of community is predicated on the idea that singing celebrates and unites differences. *Common Thread* was created on the belief that singing contributes to positive social change, or, as you can see here on their web site, "changing the world one song at a time." The chorus was established in the Year 2000 as a 70-voice SATB adult community choir. It's a typical community choir in many respects: the singers are volunteer with a paid conductor; they rehearse regularly; and they work towards performances. What's unusual about *Common Thread*'s musical community is that they have an intentional focus on *building* community. AND, they pursue *building* that community through two other goals of social justice and cultural diversity. So for me, *Common Thread* offered an excellent starting point in examining constructions of community in community choirs: they deliberately build community through conscious efforts at cultural inclusion. Yet, while *Common Thread* intentionally creates community, they never really state what they mean by community—the word 'community' is naturalized as wholly positive.

My central questions in pursuing this research are: How does *Common Thread Community Chorus* constitute its community as both culturally inclusive and socially just? What tensions are experienced in this constitution? How might these tensions shift our thinking of inclusive musical communities? I set to exploring these questions using data I collected from two sources: first, a descriptive survey I conducted with chorus members in the spring last year. The survey explored members' ethnocultural backgrounds and their perceptions of musical and social experiences.

Second, a review of published documents and performances produced by the Chorus in 2010, including their handbook for new members, their web site¹ and youtube channel, as well as concert performances and programs.

For this presentation, I'm going to use *Common Thread's* three goals to structure my analysis of the choir's community. First we'll look at the choir's explicit goal of community and its enactment of community, which points to a fundamental tension the choir faces between its conceptualization and its realization of community. From that discussion, I'll highlight two related tensions experienced in *Common Thread's* other two goals of (1) social justice and (2) cultural diversity. The final part of my presentation will theorize these tensions primarily using the political theory of identity\differences. Let's dive into the first of *Common Thread's* goals: building community.

Their community-oriented goal is "to develop a sense of community within the chorus and between the chorus and the broader community" (*Common Thread Handbook* 2010, 1). You can see they emphasize two sets of relationships to constitute the choir's community: the chorus focuses on relationships within the chorus itself, and between itself and external community. Internally, the choir constructs its community as welcoming and inclusive. And they do this primarily through a focus on building a culturally diverse membership. Their commitment to building a diverse membership moves well beyond lip-service. In fact, *Common Thread* understands cultural inclusion quite broadly, asserting that "members must be sensitive to human differences and to individual needs to make our community a safe and respectful place for all of us" (*Common Thread Handbook* 2010, 16). The ensemble goes to extraordinary lengths to welcome every singer, along with their unique musical, social, and cultural experiences. Several structures have been put in place to remove barriers to participation and address inequities

¹ <http://www.commonthreadchorus.ca/>

related to class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or other differences. Some examples include subsidies for low-income participants, GLBT-inclusion statements, child care offered onsite. They only rehearse and perform in fully accessible locations and the choir also follows a multi-faith calendar to avoid significant cultural holidays. Further, the choir has a committee that provides a formal mechanism to develop and support their social and musical inclusion efforts. Clearly, the members of *Common Thread* demonstrate a strong commitment to creating an inclusive choral space to encourage a culturally diverse membership.

At the same time, *Common Thread* constructs its community as a part of a larger community. The chorus constitutes their collective identity as a community embedded in local and global social-justice efforts and they do this by building partnerships with, as one singer put it, other “like-minded organizations” (*survey respondent*). Two examples of this include the benefit concerts the choir holds that raise funds for local and international groups. Second, the choir brings external community into its musical space by inviting musical guests to work with the choir and perform with the choir. These guests often come from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The intentional community relationships that the choir develops both externally and internally suggest that the choir aims to construct its community as an inclusive and progressive music community. A community that unites across differences. Take a look at this clip of the choir singing what they call their “adopted theme song”: the song is called *Common Thread*, and it was written by American activist singer-songwriter Pat Humphries. The lyrics encourage unity, an equality for all through rising together with many coloured fabrics made from a “common thread.”²

² Note that the video clip can be viewed on Youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOU0w17PRco>

Common Thread's community imaginary is clear through this song. They named themselves after this song! Their performance of this song suggests we can come together through our differences, work towards social change, and do it through music. This *notion* of community is predicated on warm feelings of belonging and inclusion that can reach across all boundaries and borders, both geographic and social.

Yet, through all of the chorus's efforts towards a culturally diverse membership that is sensitive to human differences, their members have a strikingly similar demographic make-up to every community choir surveyed over the last two decades who have not taken on this explicit mandate. *Common Thread* comprises predominantly older, female, White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant singers, who tend to be better educated than the average population.³ *Common Thread's* community imaginary is infused with ideals of diversity and inclusion, pursued through music. Yet, for all of its efforts towards social justice and cultural diversity, *Common Thread* demographically looks the same as all the other community choirs studied over the last 20 years in Canada and the US.

Before I go further, I should point out that the choir sees this lack of cultural diversity within its membership. In fact, the choir is quite hard on itself in this respect: only 14% of choir members felt that the choir serves all cultures equally well. Many also noted their own positions of privilege from White, Western-European Protestant backgrounds, and several critiqued the membership, with comments such as "it's a pretty White, Anglo-ish group" (*survey respondent*). Few members, however, offered an analysis for why the choir does not, or cannot serve many cultures more fully. One member mused "I don't think we have the cultural diversity we would

³ Compiled through demographic data collected through the 2010 member survey of ethnocultural backgrounds and perceptions of social and musical inclusion in the chorus (Yerichuk 2010).

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*).

Clearly, the choir experiences significant tensions between the ideals of a socially just and culturally inclusive community and its actual enactments. These tensions point to a paradox: the choir aims to be inclusive, yet must construct boundaries to create its community, boundaries that largely go unnoticed by the very community imaginary they uphold. *Common Thread's* pursuit of cultural inclusion and social justice creates a community imaginary that idealizes crossing boundaries, and even transgressing boundaries to create space for all cultures to come together. Yet paradoxically, the community choir sets boundaries to create its community which simultaneously includes and excludes, no matter how inclusive and diverse the choir strives to be.

This paradox can be seen in tensions related to *Common Thread's* community within its other two goals of social justice and cultural diversity. Turning to social justice, *Common Thread* articulates their goal of social justice as simply "to promote social justice through music" (*Common Thread Handbook* 2010, 1). The choir frequently sings at protests and rallies, and as I've mentioned, they also hold fundraising concerts to support the work of other organizations. Chorus members by and large celebrate the choir's collective political identity. In fact, nearly 90% of chorus members support the social justice focus. For many of them, the choir's political leanings offer a sense of belonging. Take a look at this story offered by one member:

...our last retreat conflicted with [a political protest.] ... I struggled but decided to attend the retreat. During the retreat, there was discussion of the fact that many of us had struggled with this decision. I felt less alone & marginal. (*survey respondent*)

This member's story suggests that the choir's commitment to social justice is a value held by many of the individuals within the choir and that the choir offers a space of belonging for these members.

Now that being said, 12% of the chorus did not find the focus of social justice an important reason for their participation. Further, responses from several members suggest that the focus on social justice actually negatively affects their social and musical experiences. One member remarked, "some of the music and attitudes in the group actually lower my enthusiasm about music" (*survey respondent*). Another member learned "something I don't like much: how to accommodate music and culture to political ideals" (*survey respondent*). These differences suggest that the ideals of community through social justice do not guarantee choristers dedicated to social justice goals, nor does a social justice focus necessarily include non-political (or perhaps 'differently political') members, but may in fact simply alienate them. While the choir aims to celebrate difference, its dedication to social justice sets a boundary for participation in the community.

Let's return to the three goals the choir has established: we looked at community, and social justice. Let's turn to the third and final goal of cultural diversity. The choir articulates their goal of cultural diversity: "to build a culturally diverse group that performs music in languages from around the world" (*Common Thread Handbook* 2010, 1). Notice that cultural diversity is emphasized in two ways: through building a culturally diverse group of singers, and through performing culturally diverse repertoire. You'll recall that I spoke earlier about the choir's struggles in achieving cultural diversity among its members. It would seem that the choir's mandate of multicultural repertoire at least should be straight-forward and achievable goal. The chorus mandates that at least 50% of its repertoire is performed in languages other than English.

This musical diversity certainly helps them represent cultural diversity in their performances. What you're looking at here are the posters from their two most recent concerts as two examples of the kinds of music they've focused on.⁴ And they do achieve their goal in repertoire. However, members raised issues that point to the boundaries set by the kinds of repertoire chosen.

Common Thread constructs its musical community as secular. *Common Thread*'s music is "rooted in secular folk music traditions" (*Common Thread* 2010, 11), which means that the chorus does not learn or perform any religious repertoire. This secular focus is partly informed by concerns for social equity, in which Christian music is recognized to have a historical legacy with colonization. However, by establishing a religiously neutral singing space, the choir may paradoxically exclude diverse cultures. One choir member clearly linked gospel music to ethnocultural exclusion, AND 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)

In order to be socially just, the choir designates the choral space as secular, yet by defining their choral community as secular, the choir may in fact exclude cultures, and cultures that are potentially racialized, that might not distinguish between folk music and sacred music.

The chorus's pursuit of their three goals of (1) community; (2) social justice; and (3) cultural diversity creates a community imaginary that idealizes diverse communities across geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Yet the choir organizers are the ones that set the terms for participation, which set up new, and often unacknowledged, boundaries. We saw the tension between the ideal community – an ideal in which everyone is included and many cultures

⁴ Images for the 2010-2011 year or similar examples can be viewed at <http://www.commonthreadchorus.ca/our-events> (accessed June 6, 2011).

are celebrated as we all unite together through song. We see the tension between that ideal and the real community, which actually doesn't have *everyone* come together. We saw another tension in which members experience feelings of exclusion and alienation related to the choir's goals (such as social justice) and we saw a third tension in drawing an inside/outside through its efforts to be inclusive, which we saw in the choir's secular focus in repertoire.

I'd like to spend the remainder of my time theorizing these tensions and paradoxes that the chorus experiences, not because the tensions are unique to *Common Thread*, but because the chorus strives towards social justice and community quite consciously. Their efforts offer particular insights into how community might be constructed in community choirs more generally, and therefore offer a starting point for critical reflection in how 'community' is thought about and enacted within community music environments.

Community imaginary is intimately linked to communal identity. As we heard yesterday, Christopher Small (1987; 1998; 2001) argues that the point of musicking is to say in effect "this is who we are," and who we are is in relationship. And those relationships are not so much those that actually exist than what we desire to exist. Look again at *Common Thread*'s performance of the song "Common Thread": "*in a many coloured garden, we are growing side by side. We will rise altogether, we will rise...*" (Humphries 1992). The song envisions a collective future in the here and now. By envisioning a community imaginary, the song also says this is who we are and who we want to be: we are different, we can respect these differences and all grow together; we can find strength and justice in unity. It's a powerful vision. And it's not that we shouldn't have these powerful visions, this community imaginary. The danger is when the imaginary is normalized so that we cannot see the boundaries created to constitute that very vision.

So I use the concept of “identity-difference” to interrogate the tensions between imagined and real constructions of community within *Common Thread*. In particular, I turn to political theorist William Connolly (1995; 2001). It might seem strange to use a political theorist on a community choir, but Connolly’s focus on micropolitics in tandem with *Common Thread*’s political understanding of their musical community makes his theory a particularly robust tool for analysis in this example to theorize constructions of community. Connolly (1995) characterizes the micropolitics as the everyday experiences with social relations that operate below the threshold of larger legislative and political acts, and he understands the micropolitical to be in a constitutive relationship with the macropolitical, which would be the larger and more formal legislative and political structures (Campbell 2008). By focusing on micropolitics, Connolly emphasizes how the global is simultaneously local and the local necessarily global. *Common Thread*’s focus on local and global social justice, along with its focus on multicultural repertoires and internal community, call attention to this simultaneous local and global. In short, *Common Thread* is an example of micropolitics.

Connolly brings the terms ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ together in the concept “identity\difference” but he doesn’t let these terms reconcile – he uses a backslash to point to a constant and ongoing struggle, what he calls the political paradox of identity. Identity is necessary, he argues; we can’t do away with it. And identity is always and only constituted in and through difference. Connolly characterizes identity\difference as a paradoxical relationship, much in line with the paradox of community that I’ve put forward here. Connolly argues that:

You need identity to act and to be ethical, but there is a drive to diminish difference to complete itself inside the pursuit of identity. There is thus a paradoxical element in the politics of identity....It operates as pressure to make space for the fullness of self-identity for one constituency by marginalizing, demeaning, or excluding the differences on which it depends to specify itself” (Connolly 2001, xv).

My first thought was: *but Common Thread doesn't demean difference...they celebrate difference.*

Yes, they do celebrate differences but only in some ways. The differences between secular and sacred offers one example of how the choir marginalizes certain differences in efforts to create a neutral and universally accessible space: they normalize secular music as socially just music. Similarly, *Common Thread* celebrates non-Western European music traditions, but celebrates these traditions in a fairly Western European choral form. All of the repertoire from diverse cultures is translated into SATB arrangements. The singers learn to produce a unity in tone, which is a demand specific to the Western European choral form. At best, these performance expectations ignore the myriad of ways that adults sing together throughout the world. At worst, the normative choral framework tacitly upholds Western European music production as the technique by which everyone should come together or be included, reifying the superiority of the very culture the choir is trying to subvert.

Another important argument in Connolly's theory is that difference is never reconciled; difference never goes away. In fact, as soon as difference appears to be reconciled, then we've simply rendered difference invisible and fixed. We have ultimately fixed difference into Otherness. The following is an extensive quote from Connolly to clarify his conception of difference and Otherness:

An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies: to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things. When these pressures prevail, the maintenance of one identity (or field of identities) involves the conversion of some differences into otherness... Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty. (Connolly 2001, 64)

His analysis suggests that in the *Common Thread* example, the choir's normative uses of community and inclusion obscure the differences that constitute that community. This in turn fixes those very differences to secure the certainty of the choir's identity. That being said, the choir doesn't necessarily fix difference into Otherness as Connolly describes here, but it is a risk. The choir is inclusive; it welcomes and celebrates differences, yes, but the choir also sets the terms for participation in the choir. As adaptive as they strive to be in their policies and practices, "others" must agree to the terms that the choir sets for its community in order to participate.

In conclusion, my project here was to interrogate the choir's construction of community and get at the tensions that underpin the idealized and realized community. While it wasn't my project to provide solutions, I'd be remiss not to acknowledge that my analysis paints this community chorus into a corner. As soon as they celebrate difference, they reify that very difference. As soon as they define their community as inclusive in particular ways, they draw borders that simultaneously exclude and include. And yet there is no way for them to constitute their community without drawing borders. So how might they, and I as a community music practitioner who experiences these same struggles in my own work, move forward? Well, taking a page from Connolly, I would first suggest this is not about finding solutions, but about engaging in the struggle. Connolly argues that reifying difference into Otherness is a temptation in the logic of identity\difference, but not inevitability. He argues *not* to resolve or rise above the tension of differences or in this case the paradox of community. But to constantly struggle. He might advocate that the choir begin to view its three goals as contestable sites rather than fixed or normative ideals. The choir needn't necessarily give up its faith in its united vision, the power of its community imaginary. Rather, the choir could, in Connolly's words, insert a stutter in its faith:

To insert a stutter in one's faith is noble, then, in my eyes. But it is also to implicate oneself in a series of paradoxes and limitations. Such a stutter does not enable you to render everything in your faith perfectly transparent. Each existential faith comes to terms with itself in relation to a specific set of alternatives historically available to it. Much in the faith you share with others, then, will remain opaque to you and them. But it is nonetheless noble to sustain a certain torsion between the nourishment your faith provides and the periodic call to probe dimensions of its comparative contestability. (Connolly 2001, *xxiii*)

Connolly suggests that questioning our own faith allows us to more fully negotiate the tensions and paradoxes therein because when we question our own faith, we have to confront the paradoxes that shape our faith.

Second, I offer Connolly's notion of *agonistic respect* as a way of negotiating the paradox of identity\difference. Agonistic respect "allows people to honor different final sources, to cultivate reciprocal respect across difference, and to negotiate larger assemblages" (Connolly 2001, *xv*). Engaging tensions and paradoxes in a respectful manner offers a way to probe the dimensions of contestability of the choir's community. In many ways, evidence suggests that the choir already grapples with some of the tensions they encounter, and perhaps more bravely, invite tensions and differences into their practice, demonstrating moments of agonistic respect. For example, the repertoire the choir chooses can be contested: their handbook offers that members can raise objections to repertoire, even after repertoire is chosen. We can even look at the earlier example of the choir member who struggled with the choice between attending the choral retreat or attending the protest—this member's story indicates that a debate and dialogue arose in the rehearsal that day among many choir members. Further, members have critiqued the Western European choral model and in response, the conductor has rehearsed the ensemble in clumps and circles of singers.

Through this presentation, I've discussed the tensions between community imaginaries and actual communities formed in one particular community choir that aims to be conscious of

the musical work in which they engage. Through *Common Thread's* construction of community as culturally diverse and socially just, the choir engages a paradox of community: it aims to build a community that crosses boundaries and removes barriers to celebrate cultural differences, yet the choir must construct boundaries to create its community. This paradox has implications for all musical initiatives that use the word "community" to define their musical work. We can never get away from drawing boundaries in creating community. Those who define the community define what binds the group together, as well as what or who is left outside. To pretend a community is fully inclusive with no boundaries is to ignore the ways in which we shape our communities in particular ways that create feelings of belonging for some but not all. The fact that *Common Thread Community Chorus* experiences and to some extent acknowledges tensions between their ideal and their actual community suggests a beginning of reflexivity described by Connolly: reflective not of their own internal emplacements, but of their implicatedness within larger social relations.

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