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(Special Section Introduction) Hymns Beyond the Congregation: Constructions of Identity and Legacies of Meaning

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Hymns Beyond the Congregation

Constructions of Identity and Legacies of Meaning

Erin Johnson-Williams and Philip Burnett

Hymns are arguably as much reflections of the cultures and the societies that created them as they are expressions of religion. When feature films portray “Nearer, My God, to Thee” being sung while the ship *Titanic* went down, or when “Abide with Me” was programmed as a highly emotive, quasi-spiritual moment in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games, mythologies about hymn singing in secular environments are constructed, and take on lives of their own.¹ What these moments suggest is that people have long had meaningful encounters with hymns in environments beyond the church. This is perhaps no surprise, given that the hymn often operates as a way to forge group cohesion and facilitate expressions of shared identity. Yet the majority of academic scholarship on hymns has traditionally located hymn singing *within* church contexts, thereby downplaying the power of hymnody in the media, both historically and today, as a tradition that also exists *outside* of the church.² The customary linking of hymnology to church contexts therefore raises important questions about the broader impact of hymns when they are sung “beyond” the structures of the Christian congregation.³

Following on from a study day that we organized in October 2021 on the topic of “Hymns and Race,” we offer here two special issues of the *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* on the theme of “Hymns Beyond the Congregation.” While we have taken the more specific topic of hymns and race within church environments to an edited

volume that is now going to be part of the Routledge Congregational Music Studies Series,⁴ we curated these twin special issues (the present issue, and a second set of three articles forthcoming in the journal’s next volume), with the idea of focusing intently on the political, societal, and post/colonial legacies of hymns when they are sung *outside of, beyond, or in dialogue with* traditional worship settings. Bridging the disciplinary fields of hymnology, education, political history, music in culture, and music and social justice, our articles expand the notion of hymns as existing strictly “within” congregational settings, by considering how they have historically functioned (and continue to operate) in environments usually classified as existing “beyond” the church. In such porous contexts, the hymn arguably provides a very rich genre for exploring processes of wider social identity formation: as an active, participatory tradition with deep historical roots, hymns have long been sung at the crossroads of sacred and secular settings, and often constitute resonant, participatory meeting points for marginalized communities.

We therefore suggest that in a wide variety of reflexive sonic spaces—the protest march, the mission field, or the settler colonial singing school—hymns have resounded outside of the church for centuries, and that singing “beyond” the church is therefore an important part of the history of hymnody. Across such “secular” contexts, the hymn has long intersected with wider societal notions of race, community, and post/colonial identity. Such legacies

are, undeniably, transgenerational: while the Victorian missionary hymn certainly reached its height during the late nineteenth century, it is clear that its legacies persist today in a variety of forms. For example, Enoch Mankayi Sontonga's "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika," written in the style of a Victorian hymn in 1897, later became the anthem for the struggle against Apartheid, and is now used in the national anthems of several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

As such, we see these twin special issues as a way to bring nineteenth-century legacies of empire, protest, and racial identity into dialogue with more contemporary manifestations of hymn singing, paving the way for the hymn to be recognized as a powerful sonic force, both within and beyond worship environments. Divided into the two subthemes of "Hymns Beyond the Congregation: Constructions of Identity" and "Hymns Beyond the Congregation: Legacies of Meaning," our authors (based in institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom) comprise both early-career and senior scholars and come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds in American history, South African colonial history, political history, the history of mission education, and historical musicology. Together, these two special issues will pave the way for facilitating new dialogues between historians, musicologists, and congregational studies scholars, inviting fresh perspectives on how hymns have long constituted a powerful genre for community building that often resists and reframes the hierarchies within which most hymns have hitherto been studied. We also hope that this work encourages the traditional binaries between secular and sacred contexts for hymn singing to

be broken down, so that the migration of hymns between church services and secular spaces can also be understood as a largely inevitable societal and cultural process.

The first special issue contains three articles that draw on interdisciplinary approaches to the theme of "Hymns Beyond the Congregation: Constructions of Identity." While all three articles are loosely rooted in the "long" nineteenth century, and drawing on various strands of British imperialism as their starting point, they employ contrasting approaches to hymn singing outside of the church as a form of protest, education, and national spectacle respectively. In his article on hymns and protest songs in England and the British Empire between 1819 and 1919, Oskar Cox Jensen examines how hymns across generations of singing communities have played a role in envoicing the politics of protest in England, long before their integration into the "established Church." Exploring how nineteenth-century radical movements embraced the hymn as, in many ways, the ideal form of political protest, Jensen considers how several nineteenth-century writers shaped debates about congregational singing, with implications for how hymns are still understood as a form of communal political expression. Moving from the setting of Britain's imperial metropole to colonial South Africa, Philip Burnett then examines the word "race," the connotations it had in Victorian Britain, and how these meanings were translated by missionaries into isiXhosa. To move beyond the mission congregation, Burnett uses close readings of translated hymns to consider how the idea of "race" both reflected and challenged race relations on South African mission stations, and the wider colonial societies in which missions

operated. Viewing hymns as a way to mediate racialized understandings of not only the Christian religion but also colonial experience, Burnett reminds us that the act of hymn translation had wide ramifications for the project of empire because translations often radically transformed not only understandings of religious concepts, but also the ways in which people viewed (and were made to view) themselves in the complex world of colonial Christianity. Returning to the context of imperial Britain (with a brief coda in present-day India), Erin Johnson-Williams then considers how, from the use of “Abide with Me” in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games to the 2020 discussions of the England Rugby Football Union around banning the singing of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests, the use of hymn singing as an expression of nostalgic national identity in Britain pervades public spaces. From the rise of singing hymns at mass sporting events in the late nineteenth century, to the ongoing notion of hymns as a form of national spectacle in post-Brexit Britain, Johnson-Williams suggests that the decade of the 2020s provides a critical moment to consider hymn singing at British sporting events as a mode of “nationalist mass congregating,” where the singing of hymns takes on overlapping associations of past and present in the increasingly commercialized secular environments of professional sport. Constructions of identity, through tens of thousands of fans singing Victorian hymns together today, are thus continually renegotiated in relation to nineteenth-century singing movements.

In the next issue of the *YJMR*, we will continue the dialogue with a second set of articles, which will consider how hymnic

legacies evolve over time. Entitled “Hymns Beyond the Congregation: Legacies of Meaning,” this second special issue explores how hymns are a product of European modernity, whether through the media of cinema, the printed book, or as an expression of Black transgenerational trauma. Starting off with the vivid imagery of singing a Sunday school hymn as a way to learn how to be in the “army” of the Lord, Jonathan Hicks explores the idea of “Christian Soldiers” as represented in early twentieth-century cinema, such as the 1939 film *Stanley and Livingstone*, as a way to consider the performative politics of music, movement, and empire. Moving from the British-controlled territories of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania) to the context of settler colonial North America, Jesse P. Karlsberg, Kaylina Madison Crawley, and Sara Snyder Hopkins then examine how singing communities have been created through generations of sacred vernacular southern songbooks that contain hymns. Drawing on the research of the *Sounding Spirit* project, with which the coauthors are all affiliated, they investigate how racialized migrations of hymns in the southern states of the USA have always been in dialogue with notions of race and communal identity. Their case study of shape-note traditions and the *Cherokee Singing Book* (1846) demonstrates the many historical and contemporary functions of hymns beyond denominational or liturgical confines, and the relationship of these functions to books’ contents, bibliographic form, and racial, geographic, and religious contexts. Finally, Emmett G. Price powerfully concludes the special issue by going beyond the media of book and film to explore how hymns in wider American society can be a form of

nomenclature and negotiation, especially in the wake of the murder of George Perry Floyd in May 2020. Suggesting that hymns can be a means of negotiating Black trauma, Price explores how the redemptive nature of hymns has been used in nonredemptive, and even oppressive, ways. Paving the way for future scholars to locate the study of race within their research on hymns, Price shows that hymns sung in congregations can also become a form of community expression and a means of negotiating communal transgenerational trauma outside the church.

All six articles facilitate dialogues about the (ongoing) power of hymns beyond the congregation. These forms of hymnic power can be read not only as a manifestation of the racialized imperial culture within which many hymns were written and distributed during the long

nineteenth century, but also as a means of exploring and renegotiating such histories in decolonial ways today. Across all articles there is a common focus on how the hymn works across time and space to form (and perform) communal identity, in relation to the hierarchical structures that created cultures of hymn singing in the first place. We hope that this collection of articles initiates a broader conversation about how hymnody can (re)constitute historically racialized notions of “the communal” through the lived presence of hymns in secular spaces and mass media. While hymn singing in secular spaces has deep historical roots that are, undoubtedly, tied up with histories of racism and colonial injustice, it is important to remember the multiple forms in which these legacies still resonate and re-sound today, whenever (and wherever) hymns are sung.

NOTES

1 On the vast cinematic mythology about “Nearer, My God, to Thee” on the *Titanic*, see Richard Howells, *The Myth of the Titanic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 120–35. On “Abide with Me” in British sporting events, see the article by Erin Johnson-Williams in this special issue.

2 For example, much congregational music studies scholarship examines the hymn within church settings rather than secular contexts. See, for example, Becca Whitla, *Liberation, (De)Coloniality, and Liturgical Practices: Flipping the Song Bird* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Monique M. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jonathan Dueck, *Congregational Music, Conflict and Community* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017); Mark Porter, *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018); C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2003); the essays in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Mall, Jeffers Engelhardt, and Monique M. Ingalls (London: Routledge, 2021); *Making Congregational Music Local in Christian Communities Worldwide*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Murial Swijghuisen Reigersberg, and Zoe C.

Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2018); and *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016). On hymns in secular contexts there is less literature, but notable exceptions include Kiri Miller, *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) and Andrew Mall, “Beer & Hymns’ and Community: Religious Identity and Participatory Sing-Alongs,” *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 6/2 (2020): 33–52.

3 On decolonizing the academic field of hymnology, see Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “Towards a New Hymnology: Decolonizing Church Music Studies,” *The Hymn* 71/3 (2020): 24–32. Notably, outside of hymnology, one of the more prominent contexts within which hymns have been studied outside of strictly “congregational” settings is when the lens of post/colonialism in music is the academic starting point. For example, see the discussion of hymns as a musical agent of colonization in Kofi Agawu, “Tonality as a Colonizing Force in Africa,” in *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, ed. Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 334–55.

4 Erin Johnson-Williams and Philip Burnett, eds., *Hymns and Constructions of Race: Mobility, Agency, De/Coloniality* (forthcoming from Routledge).