Music and inclusion in Mennonite worship and peace-justice work

An interview with Sarah Nahar

Editorial note: On August 4, 2021, I (Jonathan Dueck) conducted an interview with Sarah Nahar, which has been edited for length and clarity.

Jon: Think of a story from your experience of Mennonite worship—a time when you felt included in the music or the music felt like home. What's the story that you think of? And why do you think the music worked the way it did?

Sarah: Well, I grew up in a predominantly white Mennonite congregation, and so I learned to sing many of the songs from the various hymnals. I didn't know all the songs of the blue hymnal, but as it was being introduced, people would have hymn sings, and so I went to one of those. A lot of people were asking for different songs to be sung, and something told me to choose the African American spiritual "Steal Away." And I think that when that was happening, I was also learning about slavery and the importance of songs and messages that helped our people escape brutality. Initially, when I chose it—I was only in third grade or something—I remember most of the songs were really peppy, and I didn't know what "Steal Away" sounded like. And so I remember the worship leader going, *Oh!* And I first felt nervous, like I picked a bad song or something—like it caught them off guard. They then explained a little bit what the song was and what it meant. And so, all of the gathered body sang it, and it was really calm, and I had never heard it before.

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It wasn't until college that I learned that the historically Black Fisk University choir at the end of their first tour began to sing "Steal Away," and the way that they sang it, and the heart with which they sang it, was actually the most memorable thing that their choir had done. I realized that even in third grade, even though "Steal Away" was way different than

all the other songs that were being chosen, there was some kind of ancestral connection to that song, and I wanted to learn it and to understand what it meant. I stay connected with that song in many other arenas of life—with the question of fugitivity and being able to find a safe space for refuge and rest, and the way in which the song functions as a spiritual, and the spiritual life of resistance.

And I want to share about another song. During that time here in Elkhart-Goshen at the Nappanee Missionary Church, the African Children's Choir came and visited, and we listened and heard them sing many songs. I remember "Siyahamba" because I knew that one, and they sang "Asithi: Amen sikyadumisa," and later I was flipping through the pages in the hymnal and I found "Asithi: Amen." One time we also sang that at Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, and to have heard the African Children's Choir sing it, and then to hear our congregation sing it also with gusto was really helpful for me in terms of tying my different life experiences, my Black world and my white world, kind of, together. So having those songs appear, even though they were few and far between, connected me to bodies outside of just the Mennonite Church.

Jon: I love that story! If I'm not mistaken, we met at Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship while you attended the historically Black Spelman College, right?

Sarah: Yes, and it was while I was at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and prominent Black musician and civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon was a visiting professor there. We did a project—my first and only ethnomusicology project—where we traced the lines of various spirituals, and we walked around Atlanta. To do this project, we would sing the spirituals, or study where their words showed up, or how the music was moving in the world. She also taught us about how the people who marched in protest in Augusta, Alabama, and Georgia, the places she was active, "stood in her sound"—she and the Freedom Singers (one of the precursors to Sweet Honey in the Rock) would stand behind the frontline of protestors and accompany them as they did nonviolent direct action. Activists were bolstered and sustained by the sung melodies—they could also join in and feel power in their vulnerable bodies as their voices swelled with the crowd.

Studying with Reagon helped me also understand how our religious traditions are social movements as well. They're just really long ones, but they have existential claims that—like all social movements—are seeking to

shift what is happening on this earthly plane, by way of shifting worldview. And it helped me appreciate the importance of sound and sonic power and resonance and sonic healing within all of those communities.

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I remember when Sweet Honey in the Rock came to visit Goshen, and they did their concert, and it was amazing. And Mary Oyer led us in *singing* a thank-you to them, rather than just applauding. We all stood and sang 606, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." It was really powerful, and Sweet Honey was also very moved at that type of exchange. It's one example of how I've seen our choral music used in a powerful way. At seminary someone mentioned that John Howard Yoder said once that we don't do theology in our songs. Everyone that I knew at seminary said that Yoder was wrong on this. I agree with them because I can feel us doing theology in our songs. I can feel what's happening in my body and theology similarly; it happens in the body.

Jon: Did you go to AMBS too, then?

Sarah: Yeah, I'm a 2011 MDiv graduate of AMBS. So I was at Spelman till 2006, and then I was a 2007 Fulbright Scholar in Argentina, and then I returned to Elkhart to be at AMBS, and I've done a lot of community organizing around Elkhart since then. Though I've lived a lot of places since then, I still have my membership at Prairie Street. I just have a lot of love for the community that raised me.

Jon: You know, music has power, and when you're leading music, you have power. And it can be good and bad, but you have to think about it. It's not inert. But it's a hugely negotiated power space. I remember studying worship in Edmonton and watching what happened when people would set tempos wrong. Imagine the congregation like a pool of water that's kind of moving in a wave, but you can see that here, and here, and here out in the congregation are the really strong singers. And around them, if you set the wrong tempo, you'll see a little ripple of tempo move out from them, and it will change. And up there you'll have to change what *your* tempo is. That's a long way of saying one of the things I like about your two stories is that you have a lot of agency, and calling "Steal

Away" and then having people try to figure it out. Then the other one seems like a kind of gift happens in the area, but then *you* make the connection between these things. I like the *you* acting in these stories. I like the meanings that you're making.

Sarah: Yeah, I think I spoke very directly to Black cultural music traditions in the context of white Mennonite spaces that I grew up negotiating in the church. People were talking often about how to diversify and how to sing the songs of other people so that our theological imaginations expand. This was way before the conversations around cultural appropriation; it was an effort to expose people to the fact that others sing in a beautiful and powerful way—not just us—and that one way we can appreciate that is to learn the sounds of others.

Jon: So, on the other end of this, can you think of a time when you felt alienated or uprooted or excluded by music in Mennonite worship, and what do you think was happening there in the music?

Sarah: Ironically, this story comes from Mennonite World Conference, the Global Youth Summit in 2009 in Paraguay. We were desiring to sing a lot of the songs from around the world, and we invited each country delegation to bring a song. The US and North American congregations chose songs to share that were in languages other than English, in an attempt to showcase their multicultural acumen. Most of the delegations from the Global South chose songs that were American or Canadian in origin to demonstrate their relevance and modernity. The impacts of globalization were clear. Not that they have to sing indigenous music—they certainly don't—but what does that represent about the gathered body and the aspirations that we have around who we want to be in the world? In the end, the only type of singing that we all knew was "contemporary." And the Mennonites from the Global North were upset because they didn't like the contemporary music and the theology it espoused. What we saw was one result of how missionization happened, and how at one point it was connected to Americanization. Having not grown up on contemporary worship music, I wasn't sure

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what to do. Am I supposed to join them in song, or mostly just listen to them sing up front because they're the best singers? So I felt sad. I didn't feel excluded, but I felt unrooted. And I felt really bad about the impact of US imperialism. It was also a different experience than I had in 2003, when we had a song exchange.

Jon: Because you think it showed a kind of truth? You've described the frame of the event, and clearly it's framed so people were trying to connect with one another, they're trying to sing something they think of as a symbol of how the other part sings. They're saying we're all connected. But you think that what happens when Mennonites from many other places are singing what they think of to connect with the US Mennonites, they're singing a truth about the United States and a truth about US missions and how it has impacted them?

Sarah: Yeah. It was real! It was a real experience of, *Wow, this is also how music can be used*. The flip side of this is another story that I wanted to tell that kind of illustrates how music in my work in peace and justice building shows the possibilities of using music in that kind of work and what kinds of power I observe for music in these contexts. My church was a little nervous that I wasn't going to a Mennonite college when I chose to go to Spelman in 2002, and when I went to Spelman I realized just how Mennonite I was. I can't get it out of me: the way I eat, the way I read the text of the Bible with an emphasis on peace, reconciliation, and justice, and also the fact that I couldn't really dance, but you know, I got to practice that a lot at Spelman.

Jon: Yeah!

Sarah: Thank goodness, thank goodness, because to have had lost the body through our religious practices is a massive, massive loss, and I'm glad that people are trying to bring it back in many, many ways. I got back home and said, *Hey church, I'm still Mennonite!* And they're so happy, they're like, *Great, would you be our representative for Mennonite World Conference?* That was in 2003, and so that is how I had chance to go to Zimbabwe, and I got to meet Mennonites: some who danced, some who didn't; some who had a robust theology of peace and justice, some who didn't; some who lived simply, some who didn't. So I realized that being Mennonite meant a whole lot of things in different contexts, but holding at the center of their faith a trinitarian understanding of God, holding

at the center of their life community, and holding at the center of their work reconciliation (to quote Palmer Becker's *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?*). And that was also a really great time to be on the African continent, as well because Spelman is an all-Black women's school, and so I had a wonderful time learning and feeling and understanding my way to what it means to be a person of the African diaspora with deep connections to the continent but also the experience of being gone from the continent for so long.

During that time at the Global Youth Summit we did exchange songs, and we learned a tune from Indonesia: "Hari ini, harinya Tuhan" (This is the day, this is the day, that the Lord has made"). I wrote it down in my notebook. I kept it. I practiced it. It was really meaningful because "This is the day" is my grandmother's favorite verse, and it's a song that my parents, particularly my mom, would wake us up to each day when we were children. And so to know it in Indonesian was really meaningful to me. And I also got to learn another song from Ghana, "Da na se, da na se, da wo nyame na se." And when I was in Ghana, people would ask, *Do you speak any Twi?* And I'd say, *No, but I know this song*, and I'd see them brighten up, the smile on people's faces. And the same with people I would meet from Indonesia. So these itty bitty song lines allowed me to say, *I don't know your language but, I respect it, and I respect your music or song.*

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In 2015 I was on a Christian Peacemaker Teams (now Community Peacemaker Teams) delegation to learn what was happening in West Papua, and West Papua was dealing with this tremendous amount of racism from most of Indonesia, and it has not had a chance to have self determination since the vote of 1969, that was either become independent or become part of Indonesia, after the Dutch left, placing this gorgeous region in quite a limbo. In many ways, West Papuans are cousins to the Australian aboriginal indigenous peoples; they don't eat rice, they live in the highlands, so they feel really significantly different and have been oppressed by the central Indonesian government. And not only that, but Indonesia is transmigrating its population to Papua, that part of the country, changing the demographics, and minoritizing indigenous Papuans as second-class citizens. We were there to learn about the human rights viola-

tions of Australian-funded and US-backed policing forces that are putting down the resistance and self determination efforts, similar to how the United States and to a lesser extent Canada participated in supressing Latin American peoples movements. There is a strong sense of religiosity all across the many islands of Indonesia. Though there are different types of religiosity and different types of ritual practice, there's a lot of respect for religious practices. This came in handy for us as spiritual activists there.

We were in a meeting with some community leaders, and we're listening to the story of a massacre of civilians by authorities in Biak. We internationals were responding, and we were also singing some songs together. And then the secret police showed up and were asking what we were doing. Scary! Our representatives went out and said, *These folks are in a prayer meeting. They can't be interrupted.* And the secret police wouldn't interrupt a prayer meeting. So the representative comes back and says, *Keep praying; keep talking. If anyone knows a song, sing–sing songs so that they can hear you and so we can delay any oppression by the secret police.* We all looked around at each other. I asked people whether they knew the song "Hari ini," and they *did*! And so, even though they do have their own indigenous languages—Bahasa Indonesian is a lingua franca—and so we sang it and sang it and sang it and sang it until the police went away.

Jon: You just waited them out?

Sarah: We waited them out, and they just left. And we interspersed the song with a few other things, but it was something that the group—which has a lot of Australian Quakers and number of other international people, but mostly Papuans there—ended up using the song to create a shield of protection and connection. So it was really powerful to have that experience—a certain song for a moment. That was a time when a song really helped in peace and justice building. It was the song I had learned at the Global Youth Summit of Mennonite World Conference.

Other times songs have helped are in the work to challenge Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Being invited to learn some singing traditions from Islam—particularly from Sufism and the *zhikr*—has been meaningful. There's a chant rhythm song singing that I experienced in the context of western Sufism that was really awesome to learn about and to participate in.

Jon: Allahu!

Sarah: Right, *Allahu!* Yes. We repeat the phase about the oneness of God as we sing in a moving circle—going around, and around, and around. Losing yourself in the sound of all together. And also *nigunim*. These wordless melodies have been really powerful in contributing to learning about Jewish songlines.

Jon: Did you sing them in inter-religious contexts?

Sarah: I definitely have sung them in inter-religious contexts, as well as in the context of celebrating *zhikr* and in the context of Jewish folks being together for *davening*—that is, being in prayer. There's also an initiative called "Let my people sing." It's a post-Zionist Jewish initiative around learning and singing songs together in the Diaspora.

Jon: In Israel/Palestine?

Sarah: This happened in the US context in which people are negotiating what is considered secular space and bringing to bear their religious convictions on that. Singing together in the context of Israel/Palestine carries a whole other charge.

Jon: I think it's really interesting to think about *zhikr* and *nigunim* together because neither is very representational, right? They're not narrative; they're both kind of sonic entrainment things. They're about experiencing time together—the bigger meaning of it is that we're doing this together.

Sarah: Emile Durkheim would call that collective effervescence. There's certainly something to that. And that kind of goes into some stories I might offer Mennonite congregations as they begin to sing from a new songbook. I really enjoyed meeting the songbook at convention. We had great guidance from the people who were so deeply involved in the immense amount of discernment around what got in, what was left out, what order things are in, what worship resources look like, and so on. And I knew that that was hard because AMBS emerita and *Hymnal: A Worship Book* editor Rebecca Slough explained a bit of the process to us with regards to the blue hymnal—what it was like to work on that committee. I loved to learn that. It gave me a lot of compassion for the people who were working on *Voices Together*. Even more so since it became available during COVID-19, a time when it was dangerous to sing with one another.

The inability to sing together showed how important song is to some people's connection and also the amount of grief and loss that there was

during that time. Communities all over the world have been dealing with a lot of disruption for a long time, and now mainstream US society has felt it in a fashion. If we let it, these realizations can really help us have increasing compassion. To realize, for example, that we can't sing if we can't *breathe*, so part of wanting everyone to be able to sing together is to support Black Lives Matter and to make sure that people still have breath in their lungs. To protect everyone not only from being choked by a police officer but also from environmental racism and from spiritual traumas that people have experienced as a result of abuses of power.

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I guess I would encourage people to teach more people how to lead singing and why it matters. This is a long roundabout way to say I enjoyed meeting *Voices Together* at convention because the people who helped put it together were able to give a little bit of explanation and information around songs and what they meant and why they chose them. Doing this is really helpful for ritual—like for the song of response, saying why that song got chosen. For example, I often use 323, "Beyond a dying sun," after I preach from the book of Revelation, and I'll ask the worship leaders to make a bridge to say, *In this song we'll speak about the type of eschatology we have, and so sing it like you mean it.*

Jon: That makes me think of your first story of "Steal Away"—where the worship leader talked about the song, where it came from, what it meant—because when you told that story, the connection that made for me is that "Steal Away" is kind of a heart song or a memory song that's tied to HBCUs as an institution, going back to Fisk. You would hear songs like this from Morehouse College choir. And I thought of "In the Rifted Rock" for some Mennonites. And you talk about fugitivity, which makes a lot of sense for "In the Rifted Rock." Like a lot of those Russian German Mennonite heart songs, they're not about prosperity. They're not about winning. They're about some little place where you can be safe from the things that are happening to you and the big world that's beyond your control. And when I lead singing in a Mennonite church now for me to not talk a little bit about why "In the Rifted Rock" is there, you know, I

like the idea of telling stories and song leading because I think that's part of how they connect us, and if you leave it unspoken it's hard to *include*.

Sarah: I think that there's a possibility as well, through that practice to say, *Here's what "Rifted Rock" meant for that generation*, you can invite people to connect with that generation. But you can also say, *Sing this and see what it means to you today in your context*, because how the Dutch-Russian Mennonite story gets told has a lot of implications for people's politics, their openness, their recognition of their complicity in power, or their sense of ongoing solidarity with the marginalized. So you can do a couple things with the song, depending on how it's led and depending on what's happening in the congregation that day.

About the Author

Sarah Nahar (neé Thompson) is a nonviolent action trainer and interspiritual theologian. Now as a PhD candidate in Syracuse, New York (Haudenosaunee Confederacy traditional land), she focuses on ecological regeneration, community cultivation, and spiritual activism. Previously, Sarah was a 2019 Rotary Peace Fellow and worked at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Atlanta, Georgia. She was a founding member of the Carnival de Resistance, a theological circus focused on environmental justice, intentional community life, and the arts. She has been the executive director of Christian Peacemaker Teams (now Community Peacemaker Teams), She attended Spelman College, majoring in comparative women's studies and international studies, minoring in Spanish. At Spelman she was the student government president and founder of the AUC Peace Coalition, a group that built on the work of Atlantan Civil Rights leaders to resist US militarism. She has an MDiv from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in her hometown of Elkhart, Indiana (traditional Potawatomi land). She is currently on the board of Buddhist Peace Fellowship and part of the Black-led and Indigenous-led coalition to return the metals captured in the form of a Columbus statue in downtown Syracuse to the earth, in order for the earth to have the chance to regenerate anew the ancient story in its/this place. She is married to Jonathan, and together they are parents of Belén.