# Teaching about Race and Racism with Springsteen Songs

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At first thought, it might seem odd to teach about race and racism in the United States with the music of Bruce Springsteen. One of the more famous long-time musicians in this country and around the world, Springsteen is likely not often associated with these topics, perhaps foremost because he is White. Yet race and racism are important topics in and across his music. Further, many of his musical influences—like James Brown and Curtis Mayfield—were Black, as was his most influential musical collaborator, Clarence Clemons, his longstanding friend and band-mate known as "the Big Man."

For decades, Springsteen has written and sung about race and racism, particularly America struggling with racism. Yes, he writes about cars and love and the Jersey Shore, too, but race and racism are, importantly, also there in the mix. He has often uttered a line in interviews that his music charts the gap between the American dream and everyday living in America (e.g., Pelley, 2007). In doing this he takes up the question, what does it mean to be an American? This work includes—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—race and racism. Shortly after the death of Clemons in 2011, Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh noted that "Springsteen set out to write about the heart of the country, and race was central to what he found there" (2011, paragraph 7).

With Springsteen's voice as one of the more prominent American cultural voices over the past several decades, it is relevant to most all social issues, but this doesn't mean it's the lone voice to consider about race and racism. Indeed, the voices of people of color must be central to social studies teaching about race and racism. The curriculum cannot be directed solely by White voices, especially those attached to great fame and wealth.

Yet, famous, wealthy, White voices are not useless. Racial justice cannot come about without progress in all corners of society, including—maybe even particularly—White America. Toward this end, White voices calling for racial justice need to be heard and considered (and undoubtedly not just those of famous, wealthy, White men). Springsteen's voice reaches the ears of many, particularly in White America, in ways that most other voices do not. It can be an important model for White students to learn to speak out against racism, and it can be an important example for students of color of how some well-known White people do speak out in favor of racial justice.

## Teaching about Race and Racism—with Music

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about learning to "ruthlessly interrogate" (2015, p. 29) his social world. Such critical investigation is central to powerful social studies teaching and learning. The United States was founded on—and today, in 2019, remains structured by—racism. The evidence is strewn across the country's history (e.g., Kendi, 2016; Lepore, 2018), including 400 years ago, when the first ship with Africans landed at the Jamestown colonial settlement. The evidence is also strewn across contemporary America, in the form of staggering gaps in wealth, education, incarceration, housing, and other areas between White and non-White (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Rothstein, 2017). Social studies teachers have the precious responsibility of shining a light on this evidence and wrestling with questions of why and how.

Because teaching about race and racism is not easy, music is a great avenue for inquiring into and discussing these topics. Songs introduce stories, characters, and ideas that make us feel and think, consider and investigate. For example, for many teachers addressing the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the mid-Twentieth Century, spirituals and protest songs—freedom songs—sung primarily by the participants themselves are foundational resources in their lessons. Songs like "Oh Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome" are examples of the larger theme that music has a long and important history (and present) in the United States of calling for and activating wheels of social change.

## Race and Racism in Springsteen's Life and Songs[i]

Born in 1949, Springsteen grew up in Freehold, New Jersey. Issues of race and racism were not foreign to him. In "My Hometown" (1984) he writes and sings,

> In '65 tension was running high at my high school
> There was a lot of fights between the black and white
> There was nothing you could do
> Two cars at a light on a Saturday night in the back seat there was a gun
> Words were passed in a shotgun blast
> Troubled times had come to my hometown

Freehold, like many others, was a struggling American town and racial tension was one of its struggles. Like his hometown, Springsteen personally struggled. In "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" (1975) he writes and sings,

> Tear drops on the city
> Bad Scooter searching for his groove
> Seem like the whole world walking pretty
> And you can't find the room to move

Scooter is Springsteen, a working-class White male trying to find his way as a young musician ("stranded in the jungle," he sings in the next stanza), not buying into the rhetoric of his father, schooling, or the mainstream establishment calling for him to cut his hair and get a traditional job. His prospects seemingly change when he partners up with an older, massive, saxophone-blowing Black male—Clarence Clemons, the Big Man. As "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" turns triumphant, Springsteen exclaims,

> When the change was made uptown
> And the Big Man joined the band
> From the coastline to the city
> All the little pretties raise their hands
> I'm gonna sit back right easy and laugh
> When Scooter and the Big Man bust this city in half

To be sure, the E Street Band, Springsteen's band, was not simply Scooter and the Big Man but it revolved around and was built upon their dynamism. The cover of Springsteen's breakout album, *Born to Run*, in which a bemused Springsteen with his guitar leans on Clemons as he plays his sax, is telling. Year later, reflecting on the relationship between Clemons and Springsteen in a society marked by racism, the biographer Marsh wrote,

> Bruce and Clarence could not pull down the tower in which America is shackled, no two humans could do that, but they inflicted their share of damage…They were these two guys who imagined that if they *acted* free, then other people would understand better that it was possible to *be* free. (2011, paragraph 15)

**"Gonna be a judgment that's a fact"**

Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf area in late August of 2005. The aftermath of the hurricane was environmentally and socially disastrous. Not only was New Orleans flooded, social relations within the city were characterized by utter disregard of the city's poorest people, particularly people of color. Nine months after Katrina hit, Springsteen and his accompanying group of musicians known as the Seeger Sessions Band played the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Reviewing the performance for the *Times-Picayune*, music writer Keith Spera wrote,

"No other artist could have spoken to, and for, the city of New Orleans at this most important of Jazzfests more purposefully, more passionately and more effectively than Bruce Springsteen and the Seeger Sessions Band" (Spera, 2012).

One song Springsteen sang was "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live," an adaptation of Blind Alfred Reed's Great Depression-era song of the same name. After singing Reed's opening stanza about a doctor and his "humbug pill," Springsteen departed from Reed's story in order to tell a story about New Orleans post-Katrina:

> "Me and my old school pals had some mighty high times down here
> And what happened to you poor black folks, well it just ain't fair"
> He took a look around, gave a little pep talk, said "I'm with you" then he took a little walk
> Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live
>
> There's bodies floatin' on Canal and the levees gone to Hell
> Martha, get me my sixteen gauge and some dry shells
> Them who's got out of town and them who ain't got left to drown
> Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live
>
> Got family scattered from Texas all the way to Baltimore
> Yeah and I ain't got no home in this

world no more
Gonna be a judgment that's a fact, a
righteous train rollin' down this track
Tell me how can a poor man stand such
times and live

The second stanza focuses on the response by then-President George Bush. The president metaphorically takes a walk, signifying the way in which the people most struggling in New Orleans, many of whom were poor and Black, were left behind by all levels of government.

In the third stanza, the folks who "got (money)" fled the town. Those who "ain't got (money)" were left to drown. As I read this stanza, the simple Black-White binary is troubled. The speaker, as I imagine, is a small business owner, or even simply a homeowner, of any race who is looking to protect his business or home, and family. All who "ain't got," of all races, were left behind. Importantly, though, those who "ain't got" were overwhelmingly Black.

The fourth stanza faces the reality of the exodus from New Orleans from the point of view of someone who was able to flee. The reality of families and communities scattered to the winds is plainly acknowledged. Springsteen sings "I ain't got no home in this world no more," echoing Woody Guthrie's lament ("I ain't got no home, I'm just a ramblin' round") during the Dust Bowl and westward migration that John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* characterizes. But there is also a hope expressed in the idea of a "righteous train": a judgment is coming. It may not be present yet but it's coming.

**"It ain't no secret"**

In February of 1999, a 23-year old Guinean immigrant named Amadou Diallo was shot 19 times by four police officers while he stood in the entryway of his apartment building in the Bronx in New York City. Diallo was unarmed. The officers shot 41 times. Diallo died.

At the time, Springsteen and the E Street Band were in the midst of a reunion tour. In the wake of Diallo's shooting, Springsteen wrote a song titled "American Skin." The subtitle is "41 Shots." He writes/sings:

Lena gets her son ready for school
She says "on these streets, Charles
You've got to understand the rules
If an officer stops you
Promise you'll always be polite,
that you'll never ever run away
Promise Mama you'll keep your hands in
sight"

The chorus repeats:

Is it a gun, is it a knife
Is it a wallet, this is your life
It ain't no secret
It ain't no secret
No secret my friend
You can get killed just for living
In your American skin

Springsteen first played "American Skin" in Atlanta, during the reunion tour. It was big news, particularly in the New York press as the tour concluded with a 10-night stand at Madison Square Garden in New York City (Barnes, 2000). Springsteen played "American Skin" each night at the Garden despite protests from the New York City Police Department and the

Police Benevolent Association. A recording of the song from one of these performances, which is serious and haunting, was included on a DVD released after the tour. The repetition of "41 Shots" by Springsteen and other members of the band—seemingly 41 times, even if not really—serves as the song's heartbeat.

In 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old Black male, was murdered by George Zimmerman, a 28-year old biracial (Latino and White) male, in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, where Zimmerman was the neighborhood watch coordinator. After the shooting, Springsteen began regularly singing "American Skin" during his ongoing tour, including at shows in Florida. Two years later, just months before Eric Garner was strangled in New York City and Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri—two of the events that precipitated the Black Lives Matter movement—Springsteen released the album *High Hopes*, featuring a first-ever studio version of "American Skin."

**Ideas for Teaching with Springsteen Songs**

The songs featured above are just several of many Springsteen songs that engage race and racism. I chose these both for their personal significance to Springsteen ("Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out"; "My Hometown") and their relevance, including commentary, on important cultural and political events ("My Hometown"; "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live"; "American Skin"). These songs can be engaged in the classroom in numerous ways. Here are curricular possibilities for each one. I intentionally do not affix grade levels to these suggestions as I believe they could span across many grade levels with appropriate adaptation. As a beginning, a teacher might play audio (and possibly video) for the song and hand out a copy of the lyrics so that students can examine and annotate them.

*"Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out"*

- Focus: Personal Reflection
- Context: Our personal experiences shape how we interact with the world. They also provide the boundaries around our imagination for what might be possible. Thinking about the relationship of Bruce and Clarence, students can examine in their own lives the influences and roles of people from different backgrounds.
- Guiding Questions: What are your experiences with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds than you? Thinking about what Bruce and Clarence meant to each other, how has your life been bettered, directly or indirectly, by the actions of people from different backgrounds than you?
- Additional Considerations: Student might write narratively in response to these questions; they might also gather artifacts related to their experiences and compile them in a scrapbook or memory box

*"My Hometown"*

- Focus: Attending to the Local
- Context: So much attention in the social studies curriculum is focused on the national level, sometimes obscuring more local levels. While learning about race and racism across the United States, it's

important for students and teachers to study these topics locally.
- Guiding Questions: What are 'race relations' (or 'struggles for racial justice') like in your local community? What is the history of 'race relations' in your local community, including during the 1950s and 1960s when Springsteen was growing up in Freehold, New Jersey?
- Additional Considerations: Local libraries can be a wonderful resource for such investigations, as well as local newspaper archives; interviews with community elders can also be quite powerful

*"American Skin (41 Shots)"*

- Focus: Studying Examples of Racial Injustice
- Context: The murder of Amadou Diallo is one of many instances in U.S. history of people being killed "just for living in [their] American skin." Students might study two instances of this kind of injustice, one historical and one contemporary.
- Guiding Questions: What social context precipitated each instance? What happened in each instance? What were the ramifications of what happened? How do the instances compare and contrast?
- Additional Considerations: Having both national and local dimensions to this investigation can be quite meaningful as students come to see that injustice is not solely 'here' or 'elsewhere'

"*How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live"*

- Focus: Extending the Tradition
- Context: Many folks songs, including freedom songs sung during the Civil Rights Movement, are adapted across time and place to speak to new contexts. Just as Springsteen adapted Blind Alfred Reed's song to the context of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, students can write an adaptation of the song (or any song) for a new, present-day context.
- Guiding Questions: What is a justice issue that needs particular attention? What details of the issue are important and should be worked into the song? Who is the audience for the song and what particular words, phrases, or ideas will be meaningful to that audience?
- Additional Considerations: Students can record and/or perform their songs to bring awareness to, and spur action of, others in their schools and/or communities

Additionally, in working with each of these songs, I encourage teachers to ask students to find other songs, especially in other musical genres, which have similar themes and bring them into the inquiry.

**Conclusion**

Social studies teachers must grapple with the history and present of race and racism in the United States and across the world. This is simply non-negotiable if we are to take seriously our charge to create effective citizens, as stated by the National Council for the Social Studies (2010). In doing this, we must work with and see to it that our students hear many voices; Bruce Springteen's is one of so many potential

curricular resources. While his voice cannot stand alone in the inquiry, it can be a powerful part of it, particularly as it is firmly rooted in the places of New Jersey and New York.

Thinking about the significance of place, and what it might mean for students learning about their places, I am reminded of something that Springsteen said to me when I was able to an interview him about Woody Guthrie's song "This Land Is Your Land":

> ["This Land Is Your Land" is] enormously beautiful. It's one of the most beautiful statements of ownership of your own Americanness. The insistence of your place, that this is your place. That you have a place, not just geographically, but by birthright you are a player in history. By your belonging to this place, at this time, and making your claim of ownership of this place, at this time, marks you as a player in this moment in history. As such you are empowered, rather than disenfranchised. (Author, 2018, p. 14)

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