

**The Song Remains the Same:
Utilizing Selections from James Baker
Hall's Novel *Music for a Broken Piano*
to Teach Race Formation Theory in
Introduction to Sociology Classes**
by Dan Shope

There is seldom a time when questions of what constitutes good college classroom teaching in Sociology go unexplored. It is reasoned by Sociology faculty that each year college freshmen arrive on campus eager to experience higher education. They have hopes of grasping the various lessons taught in their college courses in much the same manner as they had in their high school classes. However, within a few weeks of listening to sweeping remarks made by their Introduction to Sociology class professors, inexperienced college students begin to realize that a disjuncture exists in how topics such as racism and prejudice are theorized and discussed in their Sociology classes when compared to how high school class lessons concerning race were conducted. Regardless of their final course grade expectations, many freshly minted college freshmen become confused while searching for the intellectual touchstones concerning such lessons that made their high school experience easy or at least tolerable. Developing ways to teach entering freshmen how sociologists discuss race is the subject of this essay, which itself is part of ongoing research into the subject.

Each academic year begins with faculty discussions of ways to build an intellectual bridge that could help bring college freshmen to the banks of mainstream college academia. This process has been adumbrated by me and has been often discussed while teaching in the Sociology program at Murray State University located in Murray, Kentucky. I am always searching for ways to improve my teaching of sociological concepts, especially to entering freshmen. When I learned of an upcoming special edition of *The Journal of Kentucky Studies* dedicated to memorializing the works of noted Kentucky Poet Laureate James Baker Hall, I recalled reading one of his novels entitled *Music for a Broken Piano* (1982). I remembered how a small group of budding academics remarked on its significance concerning how race could be conceptualized and how individuals in various race categories were tied to those designations regardless of their individual accomplishments. This memory inspired me to consider how I

could tie Hall's novel to the methodology of teaching how race was/is constructed in the United States and how race construction affects how people are treated.¹

Throughout the 1990s, I listened to emerging Sociology students who attempted to relegate racism and discrimination as attitudes related to the behavior of past generations in the society at large.² These students opined that given current politicized social movements, racism and discrimination have all but disappeared. Similar arguments that declare that racism is a thing of the past are now addressed in college Sociology classrooms. Many entering college freshmen now conversely argue that racism and discriminatory practices have reared their ugly heads once more, and in many ways these social practices have become more difficult to unravel.³ However, this begs the question, "Is the racism of today radically different than in the past?" How the subject of race was treated in Hall's novel *Music for a Broken Piano*, which examines the behavior of residents living in a summer commune called Farmington, could be a great tool to compare how race was viewed in the time the novel was supposed to take place (1969), in 1982 when the novel was published, and today. During spring semester 2010, I began the task of exploring Hall's thematics on race and discrimination to see if they were consistent with Michael Omi and Howard Winant's Race Formation theory.⁴ The results were quite compelling.

Hall's novel is set in the summer of 1969, which for many Americans is known as the end of the "summer of love" which culminated with the completion of a three-day concert billed as the Woodstock Festival held in Sullivan County, New York. Woodstock, regarded as a watershed cultural event, represented a time of questioning for a generation wishing for equality. Placed in this era, Hall's novel allows the reader to connect with a time when many in the United States protested the legitimacy of the Vietnam War, which also generated an increased desire, especially among America's youth, for equality.

Hall's novel represents the quest for social and racial equality that took root during the national upheaval that was earlier activated by the Civil Rights Movement and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, both central figures in the drive for such equality.⁵ Hall created the setting of the novel, Farmington, as a utopian retreat for social refugees who were weary of the boorish nature of everyday life in the late 1960s, a decade which was saturated with racism and social repression. Hall's notion was that many readers might relish the idea of retreating to their own whimsical Farmington to attempt their own racial and social self-analysis.

However, as the story unfolds nothing could be further from the truth. Hall develops characters who play important roles that set up how race formation would perhaps work in 1969. The characters were named Nathan, Farmington's director; his wife Meriwether; Toni McHugh and Warren Medders, two of the few Farmington residents who had been sought out by Nathan as paid employees for the summer at Farmington; and of course, Makar who is the only African-American in the community. These characters are quickly sorted out in a sort of psychological inventory presented early in Hall's novel. Each has a different past that will eventually cause racial tensions.

Makar, the only African-American at Farmington, was given the task of teaching Farmington residents about art, life, and ultimately racial inequality emanating from a process of race formation, a process which was initially socially imbedded into each individual's social self, which later permeated as a sort of default mechanism for handling questions of race in tense social situations. His favorite and often repeated line in the novel was, "It loves to happen." Farmington residents were continually confused by this declaration. Makar was exploring the social construction that each

Farmington resident brought with him or her. When confronted with confusing social data or pressured to think quickly, a Farmington resident's seemingly instantaneous response in many cases was to rely on the training of his or her social self, and reify the racially stratified social arrangements that were already present outside of Farmington's protective walls. Makar taught the lesson of social construction to Nathan when he was explaining his flight schedule after returning from an interview for a college teaching position at the University of Chicago in their Black Studies Program. The conversation between the two was about clearing up confusion over whether Makar would fly with American Airlines or Trans World Airlines (TWA). Makar finished the conversation paraphrasing what he thought was Nathan's comment, "What you're saying is a man in his TIME don't confuse actuality with reality?" (Hall, 76). In this passage, Hall demonstrates that even though separate races did not exist, most people thought they did and treated what they thought were different people accordingly. This was their reality even though in actuality it wasn't true.

Consistent with Winant and Omi's Race Formation, the characters in *Music for a Broken Piano* have their own history of race formation that was socially constructed. Makar took on each resident and challenged his or her place in a racially stratified world. Hall demonstrates the technique of depending on a social default mechanism when he wrote of Farmington residents first meeting Makar. They are puzzled by Makar's arcane manners during conversations that often yield frightful consequences. Makar is often insolent, insisting that those around him listen deeply to what he has to say, and he interprets a world of words that for those listeners is difficult to disentangle and reassemble into accessible meanings. He shares with his pupils how race formation works at both conscious and unconscious levels and the possible damage that could be caused by incorrect interpretations.⁶

Nathan's findings concerning the idyllic social experiment called Farmington are that we are social beings affected by our socialization at both the individual and societal levels. We cannot hide from that which emanates from our social selves. While we cannot change the entire world, we can change ourselves. Perhaps this is Makar's greatest lesson and most difficult to learn? The lessons of society, whether good or bad, do in fact, "love to happen," a phrase used several times by Makar.

Each character faces his or her personal social demons as time and place catapults each character into what could be considered a re-enactment of race performance. As one might predict if applying Omi and Winant's Race Formation theory to a reading of Hall's novel, the characters created by Hall ultimately contribute to the restoration of the social drama that occurs in much the same way as the society from which they sought refuge.

Ultimately, losing one's historical race baggage as suggested in Hall's novel would prove difficult if not impossible for most people. 1969 was a time, especially for the young, where sitting at the feet of another would prove difficult, especially the feet of a black man. To do this, one would have to let go of his or her own history. One would have to truly desire to develop the ability to sing the song, and not just know the words. Hall's novel *Music for a Broken Piano* questions how far race relations in the United States had progressed from 1969 to 1982. The same question remains today. How far has racial equality actually progressed? One could argue that little in the way of substantial gains have been made in the last 41 years. Perhaps the last presidential election is evidence of some progress. However, the sociological lists that Makar mentioned in *Music for a Broken Piano* continue today. Makar wished to no longer be on those lists of disenfranchised American citizens. To avoid disenfranchisement, Makar and everyone else would have to leave behind the history of

race formation, a tall order for a culture that has yet to learn not just the words, but the song of equality.

Using selected readings from Hall's *Music for a Broken Piano* will connect students to the relationships between historic and current ideas concerning how racial difference was and is perceived. They will become engaged in an ongoing discussion of how many in the American mainstream perceive racial differences and how that perception over the years has changed, yet in many ways has remained the same. Moreover, these students will gain a greater understanding that the term "race" is not a concrete category, but is subject to change in an increasingly politicized social world. Ultimately, my hopes are that by using selected readings from James Baker Hall's novel *Music for a Broken Piano* many incoming Introduction to Sociology students at Murray State University will recognize that in terms of race over the past 41 years, many of the words have changed, but the song remains the same.

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End Notes

1. I wish to note that Hall's novel *Music for a Broken Piano* is quite complicated and a number of other social problems are addressed including sexism, sexual violence, and gender discrimination, as well as issues related to class formation. This novel could also be used to address issues concerning these matters. Therefore, I am not suggesting that Hall's novel only be used to only teach matters concerning race formation.

2. Many students declared that racism in the United States was dead or at least dying and within a few years would be taught as a historical blight that occurred in America in much the same way that the rise of Adolph Hitler was an historical anomaly in German history. It is important to remember that most of the classrooms were filled with students who identified themselves as progressive whites who defined racism and discrimination as a distasteful, antiquated social practice that was only visited by folks as old as their grandparents. Interestingly, the few African-Americans present in those classes often disagreed.

3. One could argue that many citizens in the United States are questioning the difference between objective news reporting and opinion manipulation posing as factual news. The result is a segment of the United States populace that believes less and less what appears in many mainstream news media outlets.

4. In terms of understanding the complexities of race, Winant argued that early sociological theories were problematic though many early theorists were sympathetic towards groups negatively affected by racist ideologies of the day. However, according to Winant, early theorists in small ways contributed to misperceptions concerning racial difference, rather than

remediating faulty perceptions. The misperceptions of racial difference and the inequalities generated by such perceptions remained in place until the publication of "Race Formation," which proposes that race is socially constructed. It changes from time to time as social forces influence the essence of racial categories and the changes that are sometimes necessary to fit an ever-changing social fabric.

5. It should be noted that Robert Kennedy was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California only nine weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee. Robert Kennedy's brother, President John F. Kennedy was fatally wounded nearly five years earlier in Dallas, Texas while riding in the backseat of a convertible limousine.

6. Karen Sternheimer commenting on Omi and Winant's race formation stated that in each of us is a version of racial classification, "...Thus we are inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes 'common sense'—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world..." (Sternheimer, Karen. "Racial Formation." *Everyday Sociology Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 215).