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R&B SONG LYRICS AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL: TOWARD A PEDAGOGY FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MULTICULTURAL STUDENTS

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R&B SONG LYRICS AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL: TOWARD A PEDAGOGY
FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MULTICULTURAL STUDENTS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Shelly Farrior-Jackson

December 2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis posits that treating lyrics (particularly R&B lyrics) as texts in a literature analysis or first-year composition class is one-way teachers can integrate the works of marginalized writers into their lesson plans. That is, I assert that as higher education continues to take action toward academic equity and inclusion, current and future teachers must do so as well. I explain how examining and analyzing the different textual features of song lyrics can be used to illustrate different approaches to writing. This transformative pedagogical practice would foster a more inclusive and diverse classroom experience for minority students. When teachers consistently integrate the works of marginalized writers into their lessons, the lessons become relevant and the classroom environment will become a more welcoming learning environment for today's multicultural students. Finally, I aver that recognizing how songwriters communicate their ideas to their audiences will motivate students to reflect on their writing processes and encourage them to consider new ways to approach how they communicate in their own writing. When teachers consistently integrate the works of marginalized writers into their lessons, the lessons become relevant and the classroom environment will become a more welcoming learning environment for today's multicultural students.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Shirley L. Fariior, my first teacher. From homeschooling to sending the six of us to Christian school while, pursuing your own higher education, you inspired my pursuit of my bachelor's and now my master's degree. To my children: Brenee, Randall, Ryan, and Rahmoun, being your mother makes me realize how important it is to push against barriers that *attempt* to interfere with our goals in life. Saniah Breann, you're the best granddaughter; ever. "I love you times infinity." To my sisters: Sherry, Sharmayne, Synthia, Sylvia, and Shirley – having you as sisters helps me stay strong in the face of adversity and you keep me focused. Thank you for the good times. Sylvia, I love and miss you. Finally, to Breona Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and all who lost their lives as a result of racist ideologies. I will continue to do my part to see that "... with liberty and justice for all" comes to fruition in society and in academia. Our lives matter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: JOURNAL ARTICLE	
R&B Song Lyrics As A Pedagogical Tool: Toward A Pedagogy For Twenty-First Century Multicultural Students.....	1
SECTION ONE: What's Songs Got To Do With It?	4
SECTION TWO: Critical Race Theory's Role In R&B Lyrics	12
CHAPTER TWO: CONFERENCE PAPER ABSTRACT	
Conclusion	24
Academic Equity In Literature And First-Year Composition	26
CHAPTER THREE: CONFERENCE PAPER	
For Diversity And Inclusion Transform Pedagogies	28
Critical Race Theory In R&B Lyrics	33
WORKS CITED	36

CHAPTER ONE: JOURNAL ARTICLE

R&B SONG LYRICS AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL: TOWARD A PEDAGOGY FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MULTICULTURAL STUDENTS

Diversity and inclusion are integral to academic equity and must be taken into consideration by instructors as they create their lesson plans at the start of each new session. In “The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education,” Payne Hiraldo asserts that:

CRT can play an important role when higher education institutions work toward becoming more diverse and inclusive... in a predominantly White institution (PWI) simply working toward increasing the amount of students of color enrolled is an insufficient goal if institutional change is a priority. (54).

One institutional change that could work to support those students of color is for professors to include texts written by diverse writers that are culturally relevant to these students. That is, one of the primary ways to bridge the gap between conversations regarding diversity and inclusion and bringing them to fruition is through the transformation of pedagogies across the curriculum. Talmadge C. Guy explains that, “Unless adult educators develop educational strategies that respond directly to the sociocultural environment in which marginalized adult learners find themselves, it is unlikely that significant progress will be made toward addressing the problems of inequality and social injustice in marginalized communities (94).”

Although the canon's place in English studies is undeniable, a rigid dependence on its text does not allow for diversity and inclusion in course lesson planning. Plans to consistently reform lessons and approaches to teaching today's multicultural students must be included in conversations regarding diversity and inclusion. One way to facilitate this transformation is through updating [and upgrading] the texts that are read and analyzed in literature and composition classrooms. Analyzing song lyrics that are composed by marginalized songwriters will support this process.

When instructors assign readings like song lyrics that are written by diverse writers, those instructors are taking steps towards diversifying their lessons and meeting the needs of the multicultural students who occupy their classrooms. As Pettijohn and Sacco write in their piece "The Language of Lyrics: An Analysis of Popular Billboard Songs Across Conditions of Social and Economic Threat," "Lyrics are an important form of communication, serving a variety of purposes as documented in the psychology of language literature" (298). The purposes for integrating song lyrics into literature and composition lessons is that they *are* "an important form of communication," thus can serve as alternative texts, to those found in the traditional literary canon and offer instructors a plethora of ideas for creating innovative assignments as they transform their lesson plans and pedagogies.

By challenging the status quo of academia, in literature analysis and composition, in particular, is to place writings from the traditional literary canon

on the proverbial shelf and teach from a new set of literary texts. According to Guy, "...to challenge the authority and power of the dominant culture is central to culturally relevant adult education" (94). Guy explains that "Unless adult educators develop educational strategies that respond directly to the sociocultural environment in which marginalized adult learners find themselves, it is unlikely that significant progress will be made toward addressing the problems of inequality and social injustice in marginalized communities (94)." The educational strategies that Guy references support the claim of this essay, which is that teachers play a pivotal role in whether or not diversity and inclusion are fully realized in academia.

A truly diverse and inclusive learning environment will occur when instructors alter their teaching styles to include the works of marginalized writers in their lesson plans. Marion Fay asserts that an "effective response" to diversity in a literature class is an "interdisciplinary approach ... more specifically, combining literature ... and music in teaching" (372). This essay discusses how the integration of song lyrics, in particular R&B lyrics, has an interdisciplinary approach since its narratives can be studied and read critically in a composition class and analyzed in literature. This "interdisciplinary approach" to teaching provides students culturally relevant lessons and serves as a gateway to diversity and inclusion. Finally, it demonstrates how R&B song lyrics can be treated as texts to be viewed through a critical race theory lens.

What's Songs Got To Do With It?

For First-Year Composition instructors who wonder why they should routinely incorporate lessons that involve listening to and reading song lyrics they should refer to Robert McParland's In "A Sound Education: Popular Music in the College Composition Classroom." McParland asserts that once songs are introduced in a composition class the discussions about the lyrics will change how students listen to and evaluate the lyrics of songs they listen to outside of class. McParland explains, "...for these discussions of songs to truly change the way students evaluate writing and compose their own pieces, the discussions must always relate back to the students' own writing" (2009). He further explains that students and songwriters share some common traits as writers since both provide their audience with facts, take into consideration their word choices, "and create an intentional tone in their writing" (2009). Observing how some of their favorite songwriters approach these techniques and always returning the discussion back to students' writing is what makes songs legitimate texts in a composition class.

The argument can be made that most students listen to songs from various genres; therefore, using the discourse of song lyrics in the classroom is one way teachers can alternate their teaching styles to make their lessons diverse and inclusive. This approach to teaching will also illustrate to students the various discursive moves that songwriters make in their writing. Many

songwriters have a tendency to center their lyrics around socially relevant themes like racism, gender identity, war, and protest; the exploration of the rhetorical techniques the writers use can inspire how students approach their own writing. In “We Know What Works in Teaching Composition” Doug Hesse posits that, some of the best approaches to teaching writing are established when assignments are “carefully” sequenced, “instruction and practice in all aspects of writing” is given to students, and attention is given “to the form and conventions of specific genres” (Hesse 2). Critically reading, thinking about, and discussing song lyrics will allow for the necessary attention that needs to be given to the unique genre of songwriting. Hesse further asserts that when instructors “teach key concepts about writing” they are equipping students with knowledge they need to “consolidate and transfer skills from one writing occasion to the next” (2). An ability to successfully transfer acquired writing skills is necessary across the curriculum; therefore, using something familiar to students (song lyrics) to teach these concepts would prove to be beneficial.

When creating their learning outcomes English instructors must take into consideration the program objectives, but they should also consider whether or not those objectives allow for diversity in lesson planning. If they do not, then I encourage instructors to take into consideration how song lyrics can help them structure their learning outcomes and allow for diversification in their lesson plans.

As instructors make moves to diversify their lessons, one primary change that needs to take place is the consistent inclusion of the works of marginalized writers, which will often involve stepping away from traditional composition and literary texts and engaging with alternative ones. Many past and present songwriters are members of one or more marginalized group, especially R&B songwriters. By expanding their lesson plans to include the texts of marginalized individuals, like songwriters, teachers are making strides towards diversity and inclusion in their classroom. Recognizing and accepting the fact that diversity and inclusion are much deeper than what can be seen by the naked eye are integral to truly changing academia. For students who belong to marginalized groups “diversity” and “inclusion” are more than buzz words. To them these words suggest that regular changes are being made to the status quo and academic equity is no longer simply a conversation, it is a reality.

In order for students to experience academic equity, by means of diverse and inclusive lessons, teachers must be willing to alter their pedagogies to provide students with a culturally relevant education. Is there anything equitable about consistently teaching students who predominantly belong to marginalized groups, the works of dominant canon of White writers? The answer should be a resounding, “No.” When teachers alter their pedagogies and introduce their students to the works of songwriters, scholars, and authors who belong to marginalized groups, the lesson has a propensity to be more relatable with a greater chance of comprehension. This is where the integration of R&B lyrics

becomes a useful tool in a composition and literature classroom. McParland explains that it is important for students to have “real world models as they develop their academic ... writing” (120). When instructors use song lyrics in a composition classroom the songwriters and their work serve as those “models.” As students analyze the moves a songwriter makes, they will consider how to appeal to their own audiences through the choices they make in their writing.

Although R&B songs are primarily written by African Americans, the narratives embedded in the lyrics are relatable to listeners who are marginalized and those who are not. When instructors alter how they teach new concepts by looking at a song through a particular lens, such as critical race theory, that approach to teaching has a propensity to engage students on two meaningful levels. First, it engages the student with the songwriter’s writing style, then it shows the unique rhetorical positioning she/he makes to illustrate the primary theme of the song. In “The Hardest Part Was Writing the Songs, But the Easiest Part Was the Motivation”: Music-Centered Pedagogy in the College Composition Classroom,” Anissa Sorokin explains that in her composition classroom, although she follows the university’s student learning objectives, she also adds her own learning goals inasmuch as songs in composition are concerned. I would argue that the six learning objectives that are specific to her course can be used in any composition class and they are as follows:

-
1. Use personally meaningful music as a means to enter into traditional writing assignments.

2. Understand how music can be used as a rhetorical device and be able to use music as an argument or as a supplement to an argument.
 3. Better understand the process of creating and composing music.
 4. Better understand the process of creating and composing written text.
 5. Explore connections and divergences in different modes of composition, particularly music and writing.
 6. Investigate a cause and use music to create a multimodal text designed to address that cause in some way (76).
-

Using R&B lyrics to demonstrate numbers 2 through 6 will prepare students for #1, choosing a song that is “personally meaningful” to them and will serve as an introduction to “traditional writing assignments.” Treating R&B lyrics as culturally relevant texts the number of lessons a teacher can introduce to students is expanded exponentially. By listening to, critically reading, and analyzing song lyrics that are familiar (and some that will be unfamiliar) the teacher and students benefit from this alternative approach to teaching analysis. According to Smith, Smith, and Bobbitt, “The potent writing required of songwriters makes the genre effective in writing class... For students learning to center their ideas, songs are

the clearest models for focused writing” (121). I will assert that in addition to students “learning to center their ideas” they will also recognize the word choices songwriters use to get the attention of their audience and to convey the theme of their songs and this recognition will inspire them to think critically about their own word choices. Through analysis of R&B song lyrics, I argue that students from varying backgrounds will discover some level of relevancy to the lyrics and make connections to them and discover new ways to express their unique voices through their own writing.

As students think critically about what genre of music they prefer and whose rhetorical moves they admire, the argument can be made that, through this practice and process, students’ writing skills will improve. The method of critically reading lyrics will acquaint students with the various ways singers present their messages in songs. In “Why can’t we be friends? Using music to teach social justice” scholars Denise L. Levy and Daniel C. Byrd posit that, “... instructors can challenge students to critically read and analyze lyrics both within a historical context and as applied to current social problems” (65). This century has experienced its share of societal problems, many of which have been confronted in song lyrics, and through close readings students will recognize how songwriters address their audiences as they communicate their thoughts on various societal issues.

By discussing and analyzing R&B lyrics from different eras students will recognize the various rhetorical moves songwriters and singers have made and

continue to make as they argue for equality and social justice. This approach to teaching analysis in a composition class is an inventive way for instructors to alter their teaching styles in order to provide their students with lessons that are relevant to their lives. Levy and Byrd quote Seattle Post-Intelligencer Editorial Board's assertion that "Whether it's songs of war or peace, music fuses the emotion and logic in a way that moves humans" (2003 para. 7). The combination of "emotion and logic" can arguably help students determine their position on the overarching theme of a song. Knowing where they stand on a given topic will also guide students as they write essays and research papers. In *Discourse Analysis: Putting Our Worlds into Words*, the writers explain that "Stance taking is one of the very outcomes of putting the world into words" (Strauss and Feiz 103). When instructors assign argumentative essays there are typically two approaches to such an assignment. One approach is to ask students to choose a subject that is of interest to them and the other is to assign each students a topic to argue. Whatever approach is used the outcome is the same, each student's stance must be evident in their writing, which Strauss and Feiz describe as "putting the world into words".

Helping students recognize how songwriters express their stances in the song lyrics they write, can inspire students to use innovative ways to communicate their views in writing. Strauss and Feiz further explain that "As we examine discourse through the lenses of reference . . . , we begin to understand the speaker's or writer's attitudes with respect to the people, things, and ideas

that they are speaking or writing about” (103). Thinking critically about a writer’s word choices and how particular words function within a song lyric and the ideas that are emphasized by words demonstrates different approaches to making a point evident to an audience. Like poetry, song lyrics often reference an era or societal matter and the word choices depict the songwriter’s “attitude or feelings with respect to the issues that they are speaking about” (Strauss and Feiz 103).

Taking Sorokin’s “course specific” objectives into consideration as they create their lesson plans and student learning outcomes, teachers can successfully integrate song lyrics into their composition lessons. Song lyrics can be used to help students recognize a song’s theme and different concepts embedded in the narrative, so students can construct an essay that demonstrates and summarizes their understanding of the concept and defend the arguments presented in their essays. Recognizing the rhetorical moves that songwriters use to reveal social issues will introduce students to a variety of ways to express themselves in their writing. Sorokin asserts that “Integrating music—a topic students already cared about—into the curriculum helped alleviate some of my students’ anxiety about writing” (75). This teaching method, getting students comfortable with writing, can ultimately help students become confident writers and improve their writing, overall. When students feel apprehensive toward an assignment those feelings can be reflected in their work, therefore, putting them at ease can help them approach the writing with confidence, which can lead to a cohesive and well-written essay.

Critical Race Theory's Role In R&B Lyrics

Understanding the origins and the importance of critical race theory (CRT) and how integral CRT is to education will help instructors recognize how to integrate it into their lessons. One approach to teaching CRT in a literature analysis class is to view song lyrics from a CRT perspective. Chris Demaske explains that the creation of critical race theory is a direct result of stalled and in some instances “reversed” actions that were generated by the civil rights movement. In the 1970s and early 1980s when legal scholar Derrick Bell and other scholars in the field, lawyers and activists realized what was happening they joined together to address the issue of a decline in and reversal of the progress that the Civil Rights Movement made. In an effort to shine a light on and push against ideologies that were threatening the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement, legal scholars Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado constructed critical race theory (CRT) (First Amendment Encyclopedia). Like Bell and others who took action, composition and other English instructors must band together to ensure that any progress that has been made towards diversity and inclusion in their departments does not come to a standstill, or worse, experience a reversal in progress.

Critical race theory (CRT) scholars posit that in spite of the tireless efforts that were made and continue to be made by civil rights activists, racism continues to exist and is ingrained in American culture; therefore, efforts to

abolish it (in all its forms) must be ongoing. Purdue University's Online Writing Lab explains that:

Prominent CRT scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams share an interest in recognizing racism as a quotidian component of American life ... In doing so, they attempt to confront the beliefs and practices that enable racism to persist while also challenging these practices in order to seek liberation from systemic racism (owl.purdue.edu).

Instructors who are willing and prepared to address academic “beliefs and practices that enable racism to persist” must also be willing to tackle this issue every day that they teach, since Crenshaw, Matsuda, and Williams assert that racism is a “quotidian component of American life.” Those instructors must regularly take steps to ensure they are engaging in ongoing conversations and taking action towards abolishing academic racism within their departments and in their classrooms. Putting an end to the oppressive nature of academic racism is vital to the success of instructors, their students, and higher education overall.

Payne Hiraldo argues that “... the various tenets of CRT can be used to uncover the ingrained societal disparities that support a system of privilege and oppression” (Payne 54). The counter-storytelling tenet of critical race theory *counters* how members of dominant society tell the stories of marginalized individuals. When marginalized people tell their own stories, they speak from

experience and not from research. According to Payne, counter-stories are useful for “analyzing higher education’s climate ...” and it gives “faculty, staff, and students of color a voice to tell their narratives involving marginalized experiences” (54). Today, some higher education scholars, examine various texts through a CRT lens alongside their students in an effort to recognize and analyze how different scholars and writers describe their experiences with racism and its presence in society.

For decades, R&B songwriters have embedded the counter-storytelling tenet of CRT into their lyrics to “uncover the ingrained societal disparities” that marginalized people have historically encountered on a routine basis. From songwriters such as Abel Meeropol, Nina Simone, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder to Janelle Monae singers have expressed their views, through storytelling, combined with various metaphors and literary devices to push against social injustice. Through songs like, “Strange Fruit” (1939) “Mississippi Goddamn” (1964), “Inner City Blues” (1971), “Cash in Your Face” (1980) and “Q.U.E.E.N.” (2013) singers and songwriters have challenged discrimination, examined privilege, and rejected violence since R&Bs beginning.

Though there are multiple texts that can be used for the purpose of teaching the counter-storytelling tenet of critical race theory, any teacher would be hard pressed to find an example of other people’s story more descriptive than the 1930s song “Strange Fruit.” Matthew Willis explains in his article “The Unlikely Origins of Strange Fruit” that although there were other songs whose

lyrics protested against the atrocity of lynching African Americans during the Jim Crow and segregation era, Billie Holiday and her unique singing voice made the song “Strange Fruit” one of the first nation-wide cultural protest against this depraved tradition of terror. This somber tune by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish teacher and activist and a member of a Communist Party, was written “... at a time when the party was one of the few white-dominated organizations campaigning for civil rights” (Willis 1). It is important to note Meeropol’s contribution to the civil rights movement since it demonstrates how individuals who were from various ethnicities and backgrounds used their voices to speak out against the violation of other people’s civil rights.

It can also be useful for today’s multicultural and marginalized students to know the historical background of songs that accompanied the Civil Rights movement; which was primarily a movement built on the premise of a call to action for change, since the historical events that led to the writing of these protest songs can inspire their argumentative essay writing and calls for change. Through class discussions and analysis of the songwriter’s word choices, students will recognize the imagery, metaphors, and the discursive moves Meeropol makes to describe the climate of that era as he tells other people’s stories. Identifying the distinctive ways Meeropol describes, “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze” may initially give the audience the impression that the “black bodies” are swinging on tire or wooden swings, but as they continue to listen the lyrics describe an entirely different setting. The song as a whole is an example of

counter-storytelling of other people's stories. The first stanza sets the tone by describing the setting:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees (Lyric
find).

As students comprehend the role that looking at song lyrics through a critical race theory plays in a FYC class, they will identify that this stanza is how the writer tells other people's stories by describing bodies as "strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." Rhetorical scholars such as Ersula Ore argue that lynchings (now manifested as police killings of Black men and women) are expressions of anti-Black racism and is central to U.S. American citizenship. The strange fruit represent the hanging "strange" Black bodies (always jarring to Black people but normalized in U.S. White America) and the violence enacted against these "non-human bodies." Students might recognize the powerfulness in the second line where Holiday refers to "Blood on the leaves and blood at the root." In this line, she suggests Black blood, a metaphor for Black death, has nourished the tree. Black blood (death) is at the root of the tree—and maybe even American society. This is a protest song that accesses the deepest reservoirs of Black pain and suffering and renders a story about what it might

mean to suffer as a Black person in America. This song centers a Black people's response to the suffering and violence she has witnessed in America.

Although the lyrics are not a typical call-to-action piece, they do call attention to occurrences in the South that were ultimately one of several incidents that led to the formation of the Civil Rights Movement and ultimately the creation of concepts like critical race theory. Merriweather Hunn, Guy, and Manglitz explain that "... other people's stories hold the power to move and when they are retold, they take on a 'larger than life' quality. What begins as a particular, individual experience gains validation through the act of re-telling" (245). Meeropol's bold approach to "re-telling" other people's stories depicts them in a 'larger than life' way that captures the attention of his audience and the nation.

According to Sorokin, asking students to pay attention to the "almost constant presence of music in their lives, ... helps them consider the rhetorical purposes music serves" (31). As stated above, the "rhetorical purposes" for "Strange Fruit" was to call attention to the atrocity of lynching in the south; therefore, the song accomplished what Meeropol set out to achieve. One can argue that the majority of songs written by R&B songwriters also have a rhetorical purpose. CRT counter-stories are embedded into the lyrics of many songs written by the late Nina Simone. Like Meeropol, Simone was also a civil rights activist who used her songwriting skills to speak out against racism and the murder of people of color and those who fought for their rights. In "Mississippi Goddamn," unlike Meeropol, who uses imagery and metaphors to tell other

people's story, Simone [appears to] intentionally avoid speaking figuratively and instead openly expresses her anger as she communicates the stories of other people. She begins the song with:

Alabama's gotten me so upset

Tennessee made me lose my rest

And everybody knows about Mississippi, Goddam.

Her rhetorical moves point at major incidents of violence that occurred throughout the South in the 1960s. In 1965 many African Americans were savagely beaten in Selma, Alabama, during a march for their suffrage.

In Birmingham, Alabama a bus carrying freedom riders was bombed, and at the 16th Street Baptist Church, also in Birmingham, four little girls were murdered, and 22 people were injured when a bomb exploded. In Mississippi, three civil rights workers went missing and the car they were in was found burned. Finally, in 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

One can argue that the historical details were intentionally left out making these stories of other people "larger than life" in such a way that captures the attention of the audience in an almost mysterious way. As students closely read and discuss how Simone describes the events that reflect the nation's systemic racism and racial violence that are embedded in the narratives of this song are uncovered. As students analyze this piece one question, they can ponder why Simone intentionally excludes imagery and metaphors in the lyrics and opts for a

direct approach to telling these stories. Finally, another question for discussion can be, “Why does the songwriter end this song by speaking directly to the oppressor? As she explains:

You don't have to live next to me
Just give me my equality
Everybody knows about Mississippi
Everybody knows about Alabama
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam (Lyric
Find).

Simone seems, throughout the song, to speak to U.S. writ large. She speaks to the conditions of Black people and the ways Black citizens in the U.S. belong neither here (in the U.S.) or there (Africa). The song addresses the audience directly in an attempt to demonstrate the force of her call in the song, but also to enact the African American rhetorical tradition’s *call response*. “You don’t have to live next to me” implicates all White listeners. It speaks to their complicity in the atrocities she previously outlines in the song, their desire for her music but not her.

As students continue to analyze different songs, they will begin to recognize the similarities in themes and concepts like CRT counter-stories as different songwriters embed them into their lyrics. In a song analysis class, by listening to *and* reading lyrics throughout the course, students will begin to

recognize how frequently critical race theory's counter-storytelling tenet is deployed in R&B lyrics.

In addition to CRT counter-stories, English instructors and students who listen to and read R&B song lyrics will begin to recognize African American experiences and their varied quests for freedom as recurring themes that surface when viewed through a critical race theory lens. Identifying the variety of rhetorical moves songwriters make coupled with the historical or societal issues that inspired their writing, students will consider innovative ways and creative word choices to express their own experiences. Even though many R&B songwriters have written lyrics to describe their stories or other people's stories of discrimination, each writer does so in her/his unique way and an awareness of the various ways to express oneself will potentially awaken a desire in students to copy the style of the songwriters they admire. As they continue to listen to and analyze song lyrics, the assertion can be made that students will recognize how songwriters describe their experiences with oppression and their desires for a better way of life and that recognition will inspire students to find creative ways to describe their own and other people's experiences in their writing.

As students listen to and analyze Stevie Wonder's "Cash in Your Face" they will recognize that the counter-stories embedded in the lyrics can apply to anyone regardless of their race, age, or gender identification, etc. who has faced any form of discrimination, especially housing or employment. Even though it is unclear whether the songwriter is telling his story or other people's stories, what

is clear is that the theme is discrimination. Wonder illustrates this as he transitions between the voice of the oppressed and the voice of the oppressor throughout the song. In lines three through five of the lyrics the audience begins to recognize the subject matter as Wonder describes the scene: "...This must be a lucky day for me/Because the sign says there's a vacancy/Look I know you came a long way ..." (Musixmatch). Wonder's "show don't tell" approach is reminiscent of Meeropol's and Simone's, which can spark a discussion on why this style of writing may be common among marginalized songwriters. Like most songs, especially protest songs, the counter-stories in "Cash in Your Face" can spark several classroom discussions, such as the dual role that Wonder plays. The rhetorical moves he makes to represent both the oppressed and the oppressor illustrate the context of the unfairness and the justification that is commonly given for the unfair treatment. Attention should also be given to the way he communicates his feelings of frustration without overtly saying he is frustrated can be used to demonstrate how "show, don't tell" works in expressive writing. Overall, a close reading of this song illustrates how a writer can express dissatisfaction with a situation in a creative manner.

As students critically read, think about, and analyze past and present songs, they will recognize the various ways writers have approached exposing societal issues in their writing. One can argue that the recognition of purpose, audience, and tone in song lyrics will inspire students to find innovative ways to capture the attention of their audience in their own writing as they flesh out the

purpose for their essays, consider their intended audiences, and determine what tone they will use.

Janelle Monae's song lyrics have a tendency to move from one point to another even though there is one central theme. In her song "Q.U.E.E.N." Monae offers a nuanced approach to writing about past and present societal issues as she pushes against stereotypes and hegemonic ideologies. Like Simone, Monae does not hesitate introducing her audience to the theme. The video opens with a narrator who gives a synopsis of what can be expected from the stories embedded in the lyrics. The narrator announces in a futuristic tone:

It's hard to stop rebels that time travel. But we at the counsel pride ourselves at doing just that. Welcome to the living museum where legendary rebels from throughout history have been frozen in time ... Here you find members Wonderland and their notorious leader Janelle Monae along with her dangerous accomplice Badoula Oblongata. Together, they launched project Q.U.E.E.N. a musical weapons program in the 21st century (bing.com/videos).

What can be considered one of the most powerful statements in this monologue is, "Researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program and hunting the various freedom movements ... disguised as songs" (Monae and Fredriksson). Monae is continuing the tradition of "freedom movements ... disguised as songs" that began decades ago. One can argue that Monae expresses her freedom by

questioning the systems that were designed to keep marginalized people in their proverbial places. Some of the questions she poses are:

Am I a freak for getting down?

And tell me what's the price of fame?

Am I a sinner with my skirt on the ground?

Hey brother can you save my soul from the devil?

Hey Sister, am I good enough for your heaven?

Say will your God accept me in my black and white?

Or should I reprogram the programming and get down? (Genius Lyrics).

This songwriter illustrates a distinctive approach to counter-storytelling as she transitions from one societal issue to another. In this song, Monae aligns herself within the tradition of Harriet Tubman as she claims to be a justice crusader who desires to set Black people free. Monae explicitly critiques fitting into a uniform understanding of what it means to be human or what it means to live a life. She pressures these boundaries to suggest other ways of existing and being human in the twenty-first century. She necessarily goes back to the church as it is fundamental institution that shaped/shapes Black consciousness and behavior. She queries the programming of the Black church in America and wonders what it might mean to live outside the normative perceptions of Black femininity. Getting down refers to grooving to the beat of one's own drum, living as one desires, not as is prescribed by societal expectations. Although Monae covertly

points at issues like gender roles and gender identification, as well as religious ideologies critical thinking, reading and analysis will expose those topics for students and give them a chance to engage different people's perceptions of what it means to live a life unrestrained by society's expressions of humanity. Consistent exercises that require critical thinking and analysis of song lyrics can arguably enhance how students respond, in writing, to this unique genre.

Conclusion

The song lyrics shared in this thesis illustrate to students and teachers the various ways skilled writers have approached composing and using writing to make change over the years. From calls-to-action, to emotional and ethical appeals, the narratives that songwriters intentionally embed in songs can be effectively used for the purposes of critical thinking, reading, and analysis, which might inspire powerful and insightful academic writing. In "Eat Drink and be Merry for Tomorrow You Teach" Royster explains:

For me ... perhaps the only, and certainly
the most critical term of engagement in the
reading, teaching, and valuing of literature is that human
beings, not books, are at the center of the enterprise (4).

When English teachers consider Royster's assertion, perhaps the obligation to primarily depend on texts that are found in the traditional canon will no longer dominate their thoughts as they create their lesson plans. By applying this

premise that “human beings, not books, are the center of” literature *and* learning perhaps instructors will not hesitate to use different approaches to teaching and will be more inclined to integrate the works of marginalized writers and authors into their lessons. When instructors demonstrate that they value the works of marginalized writers their students will believe that their voices are valued too.

As demonstrated in this essay, when culturally relevant pedagogies and culturally relevant education are the foundation of lesson planning and student learning outcomes this approach to teaching will lead to diverse and inclusive learning environments. Teaching students various ways to respond to the rhetorical situations they experience daily in their lives equips them with the tools that are needed to become skilled writers, which is key to their academic and professional success.

CHAPTER TWO:
CONFERENCE PAPER ABSTRACT
ACADEMIC EQUITY IN
LITERATURE AND FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

Although education has made progress since the 1953 ruling of “Brown v. Board of Education” that states “separate but equal” is unconstitutional, academia still has a long way to go. Unless lessons across the curriculum routinely include the works of marginalized writers and scholars and provide students with content that is culturally relevant to their lives, education will forever be unequal.

This essay suggests that one way to combat inequality in education is for literature analysis and first-year composition instructors to transform their pedagogies by integrating R&B song lyrics in the classroom in order to provide their students with culturally relevant content. The assertion is that when the course content is relevant to the lives of today’s multicultural students, diversity and inclusion will come to fruition. The primary focus is to demonstrate how using culturally relevant materials like songs to introduce analysis and critical race theory prepares students for academic writing for first-year composition and beyond. Integrating songs into these classes is one approach instructors can take towards diversifying their lessons. To support the claims of this essay, marginalized songwriters and the narratives of R&B lyrics are discussed. Finally, this paper serves as a call to action for English instructors to transform their

teaching styles and lesson plans to make every effort to provide each of their students with an equitable education.

CHAPTER THREE:
CONFERENCE PAPER
FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION TRANSFORM PEDAGOGIES

In spite of the plethora of advertisements, signage, and ongoing conversations, on most campuses, regarding the acceptance of people from diverse backgrounds, the result of these conversations has marginalized students and instructors wondering when true diversity and inclusion will come to fruition, because a superficial diversity will no longer suffice. Although conversations regarding diversity and inclusion on college campuses are necessary in order for academic equity and societal growth to occur, the argument can be made that these ongoing discussions must be extended to include conversations regarding the consistent use of texts written by marginalized writers. The discussions must also include plans for consistently restructuring pedagogical approaches to teaching today's multicultural students.

Although, the literary canon's place in English studies is undeniable, a rigid dependence on its text does not allow for diversity and inclusion in course lesson planning. Whether instructors recognize it or not, their failure to consistently teach and discuss the works of marginalized scholars does not go unnoticed by their students and this teaching style tends to further add to students' feelings of alienation from their instructor and cohorts, who are often members of dominant society.

I have always believed that if we analyze songs like literature doing so will open the door to studying the works of writers who do not belong to dominant society and will provide students with lessons that are relevant to their lives. In “The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education”, Payne Hiraldo asserts that, ...

CRT can play an important role when higher education institutions work toward becoming more diverse and inclusive. For example, in a predominantly White institution (PWI) simply working toward increasing the amount of students of color enrolled is an insufficient goal if institutional change is a priority. Examining the campus climate efforts to have culturally competent and diverse staff, faculty, and administrators is a more effective way of becoming more diverse and inclusive (54).

Hiraldo’s assertion regarding the importance of a “culturally competent and diverse staff”, is completely valid, however, she does not call attention to the significance of culturally relevant texts by diverse and inclusive writers. I will suggest that one of the primary ways to bridge the gap between conversations regarding diversity and inclusion and making them a reality is through the transformation of pedagogies across the curriculum. By challenging the status quo of academia, in literature analysis and composition, in particular, is to place writings from the traditional canon on the proverbial shelf and teach from a new set of literary texts. According to Guy, “...to challenge the authority and power of

the dominant culture is central to culturally relevant adult education” (94). Guy explains that, “Unless adult educators develop educational strategies that respond directly to the sociocultural environment in which marginalized adult learners find themselves, it is unlikely that significant progress will be made toward addressing the problems of inequality and social injustice in marginalized communities (94)”.

Teachers play a pivotal role in whether or not diversity and inclusion are fully realized in academia. A truly diverse and inclusive learning environment will occur when instructors alter their teaching styles and regularly include the works of marginalized writers in their lesson plans. Teachers of literature and first year composition, for instance, must move beyond [simply] engaging in conversations and consistently take steps to align their teaching styles with the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion. This graduate essay discusses why song lyrics should be taught as literature, how the integration of R&B song lyrics is an innovative pedagogical approach to providing students with culturally relevant education (CRE) in literature and composition classes. It also demonstrates how R&B song lyrics can be treated as texts to be viewed through a critical race theory lens.

Recognizing and accepting the fact that diversity and inclusion are much deeper than what can be seen by the naked eye are integral to truly changing academia. There must also be diversity and inclusion in the lessons that are taught, which will result in an equitable learning environment.

Consistently teaching marginalized students the literature of dominant scholars does not allow for an equitable learning environment. In “Teaching in the Pop Culture Zone: Using Popular Culture in the Composition Classroom” scholars Smith, Smith, and Bobbitt reference Lucy Calkins and Peter Elbow who explain the importance of students having “real world models as they develop their academic ... writing” (120). When instructors use song lyrics in a composition class the songwriters and their work serve as the writing “models”. These scholars further assert that when students analyze a song, of their choosing, they will look “for the mood, tone, voice, and literary devices that make that song appealing to its target audience” (120). As each student recognizes the aforementioned aspects in a song and the rhetorical moves the songwriter makes, the students will consider how to appeal to their own audiences through the rhetorical choices they make in their writing.

Through analysis, the author’s rhetorical moves will emerge. The emergence of these moves are integral to analyzing the discourse, which is essential to guiding students as they respond to the author’s moves in their own writing. Although, R&B songs are primarily written by African Americans the narratives embedded in the lyrics are relatable to most people; those who are marginalized and those who are not.

By treating R&B lyrics as texts the number of lessons a teacher can introduce to students is expanded exponentially. In “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” scholar Jacqueline Jordan Irvine asserts that:

A culturally relevant teaching builds on the premise that learning may differ across cultures and teacher can enhance students' success by acquiring knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and translating this knowledge into instructional practice (58).

By listening to, reading, and analyzing song lyrics that are familiar (and some that will be unfamiliar) the teacher and students benefit from this alternative approach to teaching analysis. Teachers who do not “possess a thorough knowledge of the content” will gain it while adding to their teaching tool kit and students will have opportunities to apply “lived experiences to connect new knowledge to home, community, and global settings”, the “multiple representations” can be acquired from the playlists of students, the radio, or any source where songs can be retrieved. According to Smith, Smith, and Bobbitt, “The potent writing required of songwriters makes the genre effective in writing class... For students learning to center their ideas, songs are the clearest models for focused writing” (121). As students become critical listeners and readers of song lyrics, they will recognize how songwriters make their themes apparent to their audiences, which will help students narrow their word choices in order to make their arguments clear for their readers.

Through analysis of R&B songs, I make the claim that students, from varying backgrounds, will discover some level of relevancy to the lyrics, of

Carefully chosen songs, and make connections to them and discover new ways to express their unique voices through their writing as a result of this experience.

Critical Race Theory in R&B Lyrics

Payne Hiraldo argues that "... the various tenets of CRT can be used to uncover the ingrained societal disparities that support a system of privilege and oppression" (54). Many R&B songwriters embed the counter-storytelling tenet of CRT, into their lyrics in an effort to "uncover the ingrained societal disparities" that people of color have historically encountered on a routine basis. Recognizing the rhetorical moves that songwriters use to "uncover" these "societal disparities: will introduce students to a variety of ways to express themselves in their writing. Sorokin asserts that, "Integrating music—a topic students already cared about—into the curriculum helped alleviate some of my students' anxiety about writing" (75). This teaching method, getting students comfortable with writing, can ultimately help students become confident writers and improve their writing, overall. When students feel apprehensive towards an assignment those feelings can be reflected in their work, therefore, putting them at ease can help them approach the work with confidence.

According to Lisa R. Merriweather Hunn, Talmadge C. Guy, and Elaine Manglitz, there are three types of counter-stories: personal, other people's or narratives, and composite. Although, there are several songs that can be used for the purpose of teaching the counter-storytelling tenet of critical race theory.

Any teacher would be hard pressed to find one more haunting and descriptive than the 1930s single “Strange Fruit”. Matthew Willis, explains in his article “The Unlikely Origins of Strange Fruit” that although there were other songs whose lyrics protested against the atrocity of lynching African Americans during the Jim Crow and segregation era, Billie Holiday and her unique singing voice made the song “Strange Fruit”, one of the first nation-wide cultural protest against this depraved tradition of terror”. Willis explains that, Meeropol was a Jewish teacher and activist and a member of a Communist Party, “... at a time when the party was one of the few white-dominated organizations campaigning for civil rights.”

It is important to note Meeropol’s contribution to the civil rights of African Americans because it demonstrates how individuals, who were from various backgrounds used their voices to speak out against the violation of African Americans’ civil rights. It can also be useful for today’s multicultural and marginalized students to know the historical background of songs that accompanied the Civil Rights movement; which was primarily a movement built on the premise of a call to action for change, since the historical events that led to the writing of these protest songs can inspire their argumentative or call for change essay writing.

Identifying the variety of rhetorical moves songwriters make coupled with the historical or societal issues that inspired their writing, students will consider innovative ways and creative word choices to express their own experiences. Although, many R&B songwriters have written lyrics to describe their stories or

other people's stories of discrimination, each writer does so in her/his unique way and an awareness of the various ways to express oneself will potentially awaken a desire in students to copy the style of the songwriters they admire.

The song lyrics shared in this essay illustrate to students and teachers the various ways writers have approached writing over the years. From calls-to-action, to emotional and ethical appeals, the narratives that songwriters intentionally embed in songs can be effectively used to inspire academic writing. In "Eat Drink and be Merry for Tomorrow You Teach" Royster explains:

For me ... perhaps the only, and certainly the most critical term of engagement in the reading, teaching, and valuing of literature is that human beings, not books, are at the center of the enterprise (4).

When English teachers consider Royster's assertion, perhaps the obligation to primarily depend on texts that are found in the traditional literary canon will no longer dominant their thoughts as they create their lesson plans. By turning to marginalized scholars, song writers, and authors and valuing their works in their classrooms, teachers will introduce their students to a plethora of skilled writers who can influence their students' writing styles.

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