

Validating our students' identities: Making Music Curricula that Matters

Categorize me, I defy every label. - Q.U.E.E.N, Janelle Monáe (2013)

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Introduction

What began as a simple exercise in identity blossomed into the creation of an album project. Co-designed and -authored by undergraduate music education majors in a secondary music education methods class, the project aimed to raise a filter to popular culture and its effect on identity. Immersed in readings on community, abolitionist pedagogy, and cultural responsibility by bell hooks (2003), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014), Bettina Love (2019), McKoy and Lind (2022), each author sought to put their unique spin on curricula that would connect to the lived worlds of the students they teach.

Conceptual framework

The concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, often misinterpreted and, in some cases, misused, has become a buzzword within our teaching/learning communities; and, as we know, even a well-intended Department of Education initiative (I refer to New York City here) cannot ensure that it will play out in culturally responsive and meaningful ways in classrooms. Culturally responsive pedagogy *is* informed by trends, but is not meant to be 'trendy'; this is to say that your classroom may, and should, be informed by the current socio-political climate, but it should be a careful examination that critically engages with the environment, rather than seeking to be 'on trend'. Ladson-Billings echoes this in saying that 'many practitioners, and those who claim to translate research to practice, seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture' (Ladson-Billings, pg. 77); rather than having meaningful discussions that

challenge the status quo, we govern our classrooms with limited and superficial notions of culture, making it convenient to assign representation as a solely physical manifestation. Does simply inserting a spiritual into one's curriculum during Black History month count as culturally responsible practice? Is displaying pictures with people of diverse backgrounds enough to empower our students? Or does it reduce them to another item on our checklist, easily crossed off?

In response to this, through the lens of culturally sustaining pedagogy, student authors guided the instructional process in our class. They together selected the concept of identity as theme for their album project and drafted the following set of precepts, inspired by Susan Sontag's *Notes on "Camp"* (1964):

- We are inherently musical beings; both the music we create and the music we consume are central to our cultures and identities.
- Different forms of music making and consumption can exist in the same space; one may have more relevance given a certain context, but it does not make it superior to other forms.
- Inspiration comes from both within and around. Creation is the outward manifestation of such consumption. In tracing the roots of an artwork, we can learn about the artist.
- Identity, much like music, is shaped by a wide variety of circumstances, including the melding of cultures. The journey we take on that road very much plays a role in the final product.
- Being is becoming — musicians are always growing and changing by discovering new music and new artists.

We employ Ladson-Billings concept of remix as an acronym to highlight these precepts and spotlight themes of the creative strategies designed by the five student authors. It is important to note that while the topics explored resonate with the identities and musical preferences of the authors; the heart of the project is not the repertory selected, but the investigative process and concepts that inform the process.

R — Reinvention (*The Electric Lady*, Janelle Monáe, 2013)

In 2008, Saidiya Hartman coined the term *critical fabulation*, the reimagining, retelling, and reclaiming against the ‘Archive’, the established narrative. She writes that ‘loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive.’

In Sam’s creative strategy, *The world of Janelle Monáe: An in-depth exploration of ‘The electric lady*, he provides the following description of Monáe’s alter ego, Cindi Mayweather, told through fragments of music, lyrics, and visuals:

Cindi Mayweather is an android who has committed the sin of falling in love with a human. On the run, Mayweather discovers that she is destined to become the savior, the Electric Lady, who will liberate the androids and reconcile the two races. Mayweather returned to Earth to liberate Metropolitans from the Great Divide, an oppressive oligarchy that used time travel to “suppress freedom and love”.

Students are then invited to create a chart of famous people and their alter egos and pose the questions, *What is different between the two? Are they independent of each other, and if so, is one stronger than the other? What happens when they collide?* Students next come up with an artifact of a ‘lost’ portfolio of a musician, still unknown to society. The components of the lost portfolio include

- A main character (who can be loosely based on themselves)
- Where this ‘artifact’ was found; for example, was it buried, lost at sea, etc.?
- A playlist with ten songs that are crucial to better understanding the character, and
- A musical ‘passport’, including one song that the character ‘grew out of’ and one that the character might be interested in the future

The lesson concludes by viewing an interview with Janelle Monáe, who describes the story behind the song *Sincerely Jane* from the album *Metropolis*. As she states,

So *Sincerely Jane* was written for, wow, in a very present state in year 2007, and it was a letter from my mother, and she was basically warning me of all the things that were going on in Kansas, and it was just her plea to tell me to stay where I was and run to the future because my present was not a safe place to be.

Students respond to the prompts: *How do the past and present shape Monáe's future identity?*

What similarities between Mayweather and Monáe can you infer after watching this interview?

How is your identity shaped by your past and how can imagined futures shape your identity?

Curricula designed with this type of reimagining offers students an opportunity to reckon with systems of oppression, both ones they are aware of and ones they are not. As educators, one established and one emerging, we cannot help but wonder; is it not better to expand our preconceived notions of musicking to one that places students as the direct heroes in the established narrative, or archive, of themselves? — to answer this is not a form of erasure, but one of reclaiming.

E — Empowerment (*Artpop*, Lady Gaga, 2013)

In *We want to more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*, author Bettina Love asserts, *When you compromise your voice, you compromise your dignity. No dignity, no power* (2020, p. 44). As music educators, it can be easy to pat ourselves on the back, as it is not uncommon to hear that the music classroom is a safe space. While that speaks to our care for our students, our classroom should not be limited by four walls; our curricula should give students tools to feel confident both inside and outside the music classroom. A focus on empowerment in our curriculum gives students the ability to discuss, create, and envision a version of themselves that isn't limited by what they believe themselves to be.

Chelsea chose Lady Gaga's 2013 album *Artpop* to explore themes of bravery and identity through album art and songwriting. She introduces the provocative meat dress made of raw beef worn by the artist to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. In an interview with journalist Anderson Cooper, Lady Gaga shared,

The moral and ethical and political implication of that outfit was far beyond what most people think... The reality of it is I was there with four soldiers that had been discharged under the pretense of 'Don't ask, don't tell'. What I was really trying to say was dead meat is dead meat, and anyone that's willing to take their life and die for their country, is the same. You're not gay and dead, straight and dead. You are dead.

After viewing the video of the title track, students write down words the prompt 'fashion' elicits through free association. Students identify a word from the activity they feel represents them and create 'a look' for themselves that best expresses this aspect of themselves. Chelsea's activity can be adapted both digitally, through the use of editing apps such Goodnotes and Procreate, or physically, with newspaper and magazine cutouts. Chelsea instructs students 'to create a full artwork with your image of yourself as the centerpiece' for their album art.

In the songwriting activity that follows, students draw from selected themes from the initial activity (or create new ones reflecting a personal attribute they would like to show pride for). She encourages students to step away from compositional conventions — to make their song 'weird'. She writes, *The quality/characteristics/reception of art does not determine the depth or value of the identity that it represents. However, if it is a brave representation of self, it will be all it needs to be!* To conclude, Chelsea shares what she hopes will prevail from the project: A student's acceptance of bold statements of identity; pride for oneself; bravery in ways one represents and carries oneself; freedom from social expectations and limitations; and BRAVERY!

M — Musical Identity (*Eight memories in Watercolor*, Tan Dun, 1979)

Daniel Levitin, author of *This is your brain on music: The science of a human obsession* (2006), writes,

Our ability to make sense of music depends on experience, and on neural structures that can learn and modify themselves with each new song we hear, and with each new listening to an old song. Our brains learn a kind of musical grammar that is specific to the music of our culture, just as we learn to speak the language of our culture.

The music we present in our classroom can be, and is, a physical manifestation and rewiring of our student's perception of music; what are we telling our students when we say their music is not found in our classroom? Students *must* have their musical choices and identities validated — this, more than any musical proficiency, will inspire them.

Derek's curricular project begins by inviting students to share a story, an experience they had with a piece of music of their choice. He writes, "[Music] helps us channel those feelings, easing our sorrows or making our joy grow." He poses the question, "Why do you think [the] music had such an impact on you?" He invites students to define music. "Is it just words and tunes?"

Students then listen to a recording of Tan Dun's *Eight memories in Watercolor* for piano (1979) and describe their impressions of the piece. Derek invites them to compare how it may be similar or different to the music they listen to. He explains that Tan Dun was expressing feelings of homesickness, a feeling familiar to most of us:

Homesickness is something most of us have to go through, whether it be because of relocation, going to boarding school or university, or even moving out from home, although we experience it in varying degrees! It was because of this feeling of missing home, coupled with his loyalty to his heritage, that Chinese composer Tan Dun wrote his first work.

All facets of their identity must be respected. Their identity as a listener (what music are they listening to on a daily basis?), as a performer (do they have a say in the music they perform? Is it something that brings them joy?), and as a creator (do they feel like their musical voice is

being heard?) interact with each other. While there may be more opportunities for one over the other, each of these facets cannot substitute for one another; in doing that, you delegate what role you view them as, which often is performer over creator or listener.

I — Interdisciplinary (*Renaissance*, Beyoncé, 2022)

For his album and creative strategy, Jai chose the studio album *Renaissance*, where he playfully invites students into the ballroom culture setting where race, gender, sex, and sexuality intersect. In her article, *A silvery, shimmering summer of Beyoncé*, New York Times journalist Jenna Wortham writes, ‘Renaissance as an album is a blueprint for how to cultivate pleasure and hold onto it at all costs; [...] a chance to practice the vision for the world we hope to live in, and simultaneously release grief for the one that we do live in.’ The recent tour, which has grossed more than \$461 million to date in revenue, has been described by Jai, an undergraduate music education major and fan, as ‘mesmerizing...one for the books, bringing ballroom culture to mainstream media and being a safe space for not only the queer community but for Black and transgender people.’

Like a rib cage, when we write about interdisciplinary implementation, we want to expand in every direction. Most forays can be sorted into two categories: art and literacy.

Interdisciplinary Practices in Art:

We advocate against the separation of arts, a practice that is common amongst the US public school system. Students are often presented with a choice of *either* – either music or art, music or dance, even band vs. orchestra vs. choir — sifting out any opportunities for interdisciplinary art projects.

When designing curricula for music, we want to look for ways to interact with other art forms. This can be done through visual art, writing song lyrics/poetry, digital collages, etc;

students should be encouraged to analyze interactions between art and music — how does one inform the other? Why is it important to recognize that relationship? Suggest collaborations between art departments; ask students to come up with choreography, visual aides, photography — the possibilities are limitless. Jair suggests in his lesson *Uncle Johnny made my dress* that students sketch an album of their own, including album art and a curated playlist, drawn from their personal musical and nonmusical inspirations, and the community(ies) they wish to affirm and uplift.

Interdisciplinary Practices in Literacy: We also support looking for ways to incorporate other forms of literacy into the classroom; education is a multifaceted beast that needs to be fed from all directions. Pragmatically, by adding a focus on history, writing, science, etc, you show other educators the importance of music.

In Jair's lesson *Unique...but wait I heard this somewhere*, he begins the investigative process with the announcement: *Welcome to Club Renaissance: Act 1, where the music is unique but pays homage to house music by the use of sampling*. Students together, then individually, aurally analyze the sampling of tracks along with their expressive intent and role within the album.

Finally, Jair also shows how music, arts, and literacy all meet together in the lesson, *10,10 Across the board: Voguing or noguing*, students debate whether Beyoncé's choreography is a true representation and expression of voguing - the highly stylized ballroom dance form created by the Black and Latino LGBTQ community - or its counterfeit known as noguing. His prompt follows:

Activity: Where's Beyoncé? I will sue that girl...Oh no, Beyoncé is being called to the floor (court) where she's being accused of Noguing (invading ballroom culture). [W]rite and perform a skit to prove if Beyoncé is invading ballroom culture or uplifting the community through her album.

Importantly, literacy is fluid; while some forms of literacy may feel more “relevant”, oftentimes it is the forms that we dismiss quickly, such as music, that offer the best access points for students who may struggle with more traditional ideas of literacy. Finding ways to provide access points for all students is pivotal to an equitable classroom. Done skillfully, educators, regardless of the subject they teach, can provide musical touch points into their lessons; this form of fluid musicianship is much more accessible and useful than requiring students to learn an instrument, such as the recorder or ukelele.

X — Crossing Boundaries (*CrazySexyCool*, TLC, 1994)

In *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations* (2012), bell hooks writes, *The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it’s to imagine what is possible*. Bettina Love (2019), too, affirms the transcendent power of the arts. As she emphasizes, *Writing, drawing, acting, painting, composing, spittin’ rhymes and/or dancing is love, joy, and resistance personified. Art provides more to communities than just visual and sonic motifs: it is one of the key ingredients to a better world* (2019, p. 95).

Tess invites students to examine the intersection of music, identity, and social issues as expressed in the music of the innovative 90’s girl band TLC, and in particular, their album *CrazySexyCool*. Tess questions, ‘What is TLC trying to convey in the album title? Think of three adjectives to describe your own current ‘era’. What do you feel best describes you at this time in your life, or what you are currently aspiring to?’

Tess introduces their song and music video *Waterfalls*, one of the first songs and music videos to reference HIV and AIDS. The social/cultural realities of the crack and HIV epidemics during the decade of the 1990’s provide context to the song’s lyrics – *Don’t go chasin’ waterfalls, Please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you’re used to*. As TLC member Chilli

explains, ‘When you think about a waterfall it looks really beautiful...but if you follow it down, it crashes.. anything in your life that is not good for you is a waterfall...it’s anything that’s not healthy in your life’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59AUIPuJqow>).

Tess invites students to reflect upon examples of activism and protest in the music they listen to, and asks, *Do you think social and/or political commentary has a place in music?* The inquiry continues: *What do you wish would change in the world? What angers you? What inspires you? What do you wish you had more power over? What is an issue you wish more people understood?* Ideas generated become lyrical material for a culminating composition: an original verse that is rapped and/or sung and recorded over a Soundtrap beat.

We advocate for the crossing of lines that sustain systems of oppression. The inherent nature of borders is to divide; to transgress this cultural norm is to assert a future where people from different cultures, backgrounds, religions, upbringings, and identities can respectfully engage with each other. It helps to cultivate the social emotional skills of the next generation.

We do write this with caution — boundaries can exist for a reason. Culturally responsible pedagogy is not about claiming cultures that aren’t yours, but about finding ways to responsibly engage and connect with other people.

Final thoughts from a future teacher in the field: Culturally propelling pedagogy

Like the law of conservation of mass, best visualized in Newton's Cradle, successful curricula, once in motion, should stay in motion. Curricula should inspire, should cause space for more conversation, should push, should comfort, and should ask questions. The unit can end, but the quest shouldn’t be over. It is about instilling a love for learning and challenging the notion that learning is stagnant. ‘Music is not an optional relish for life but a phenomenon that lies at the foundation of society’ (Blacking, cited in Campbell, 1998, p. 5) There is nothing still about

learning, except when we fail our students. This means that for some classes, your curricula, as is, will work and for others, it won't. The opportunity to inspire a new generation, unafraid of taking on those risks and challenges, is nothing short of inspiring.

Curricular Authors:

Co-author, Sam, is an undergraduate music education major, multi-instrumentalist, composer, and poet who expresses his identity through words and music.

Chelsea, an undergraduate music education major, finds her voice and identity through music theater, and is passionate about empowering students. to be who they are in the face of a world that often tells you who to be.

Derek, a graduate composition major of Chinese descent, finds resonance in the work of composer Tan Dan, whose compositional voice crosses boundaries of Western Classical music and Eastern traditions.

Jair, is an undergraduate music education major and fan of Beyoncé.

Tess, an undergraduate music education major, expresses her identity through musical theater and an avid sense of musical play both in and outside the classroom.

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