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Fortunately, I am not alone nor the first in making the case for hip-hop as a legitimate area of study. The existing foundation allows me to take the case further than simply arguing that hip-hop matters- which it does! While, of course, that mantra reverberates throughout my work, I specifically examine satirical and pedagogical applications of hip-hop in this public-facing thesis. I analyze Kendrick Lamar's satirical methodology, while making interdisciplinary connections, enlightening students of both literature and education alike. I also explore how the creation and analysis of hip-hop in secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms promotes engagement, positive interactions, and critical thinking.

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A FRESH WAY FORWARD: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HIP-HOP IN LITERARY STUDIES

By

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A public-facing thesis submitted to the Department of English

and the University of Wyoming

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MASTER OF ARTS

in

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DEDICATION PAGE

A Dedicatory Rap

This journey started with a question, posed long ago

By my main man, Michel Focault.

He asked, “What is an author? Who decides

Who’s up to par and who qualifies?”

This question hit me hard,

Got me paralyzed.

Got me thinkin’ bout the infamous dead white guys.

Sure their texts are great, and their legacies secure,

But what about others whose words have allure?

Who will preserve them and help them to endure?

There’s more questions than answers, that’s for sure.

That’s where I found myself, a knockin’ on the door,

presenting linguistic masters like never before.

For this project, it was Kendrick, but the list goes on and on.

They stand as modern-day laureates, and the movement’s growing strong.

I’ll shed some light on this literary rap game, yeah you can call me dawn.

So that’s what I set out to do,

To demonstrate the genius and the weakness too.

To engage my eager students, get ‘em sayin’ woo!

And now I stand tall, ready to share with you.

By no means am I master yet, it’s not quite all figured out,

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But I’ve got some insight, and

the path I’m walking is an important route.

So, let’s get to it, let me tell you what I’m about.

This work is dedicated to the undeniable energy of hip-hop. To the rappers whose stories lit my fire, I thank you. To all those who find inspiration and hope in hip-hop, I implore you to keep the spark alive.

I dedicate this work also to my beautiful wife, I thank you for your undying support, your listening ear, and your belief that I can do great things. Without you, this would not have been possible.

To my parents, I thank you for the example you have set and the support you gave me to continue my education.

To my students, I thank you for inspiring me to engage in teaching that matters.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Fresh Way Forward:
The Performative Power of Kendrick Lamar's Satire

Looking for Legitimacy:

"Step on his neck as hard as your bullet proof vest
He don't mind, he know we'll never respect
The good kid, m.A.A.d. city."

In this paper, I make an argument for the institutional legitimacy of Kendrick Lamar's hip-hop songs in studies of literature, not as supplemental to more 'canonical' texts, but as standalone works of literature. I propose Kendrick Lamar as an ideal case study for hip-hop at large since his poetry both appropriates and revises traditional elements of literary satire. Lamar creates a unique brand of satirical weaponry, one that channels an experience often left out of or manipulated by the institutional canon - by speaking, as the Pulitzer committee labeled it, "…(in) the vernacular of contemporary African-American life." Lamar's work reveals the power of satire to include new voices in cultural and literary conversations, but it goes beyond that. In a few key performances--at the Grammy's in 2016 and 2018--leading up to his Pulitzer, Lamar displays his prowess with satire's traditional object: targeting and calling out damaging people, ideologies, and institutions which need fixing. Lamar searingly criticizes institutional racism, the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans, and the unbelievable conditions of impoverished African American communities.

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Typically, a satirical attack such as this is accomplished by the creation of a distance between the satirist and their target. Here, however, Lamar breaks with traditional satire, making his art exceptionally potent. He creates distance between himself and his targets in order to exact critique, but he also reveals the damaging effects of this rhetorical distance by collapsing it from time to time. In so doing, he grapples with his own relationship, complicity, and identification with the problematic aspects of American culture that he satirizes. Thus, Lamar does not pose as a supposed moral superior who is calling out the flaws of others, rather he strikes a pose as a figure of earnest reflection, and therefore of even greater persuasive power. Thus, Lamar's satire proposes self-reflection as the most critical component of social change

In keeping himself and his art at the heart of his satirical onslaughts, Lamar also reveals a new method for satirists to shape audience interpretation. Lamar remains critical of his own work as well as examining the interpretations of all readers of his work to further encourage their self-reflection. Lamar asks questions of those audiences who do not approve of, identify with and encourage his satirical work and, surprisingly, he also questions those who do. He also satirizes those who misread his work or relate to it in the 'wrong' way while satirizing his own self-seriousness in wanting to 'correct' others' interpretations. These moves allow Lamar to not only promote further self-reflection (his ultimate goal), they also situate him in such a way as to be able to address a vast array of listeners, and indeed, his art welcomes a more expansive audience.

Undeniably, Lamar's Pulitzer Prize win in 2018 for his album *DAMN.* marked a defining moment for the genre of hip-hop and its audience potential. Before this moment, it may have seemed inconceivable that an album created by a hip-hop artist, a rapper, could be

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seriously considered for an institutional prize that often tips its cap to classical or jazz compositions. Perhaps the jury was responding to contemporary cultural demands for the recognition of more diverse voices- for example, the social media storm of #OscarsSoWhite. Yet, according to juror David Hadju, Lamar's win is more than just the welcoming of a "token" of diversity to avoid controversy: "…'this sphere of work' — rap music — 'has value on its own terms and not just as a resource for use in a field that is more broadly recognized by the institutional establishment as serious or legitimate,' he said" (*New York Times* April 2018*).*

Many institutions (the Pulitzer committee and Harvard University's Hip-Hop Archive & Research Institute to name a few) recognize the genre's institutional legitimacy and its potential, thanks in part to Lamar's contributions and craft. This momentum is a fountainhead for new conversations (amongst new audiences) regarding hip-hop. This new dialogue should focus not only on legitimizing hip-hop --too often the sole focus of the conversation-- but also on dissecting its possibilities *and* its pitfalls. Indeed, I believe that Lamar's work explicitly asks us to consider rap as a whole (the good, the bad and those pesky in-betweens), in order that we might better understand the art form, the communities it reflects, and its potential as a tool for social change. To best honor Lamar's efforts and to best contend with historic institutional assumptions about the negative potential of this art form, I propose that the debate about hip-hop turn towards an examination of Lamar's work as satirically capable-that is work that is both performative in its demands for social change, and reflective in its capacity for self-critique as well as for the critique of the genre of hip-hop at large.

This work- both Lamar's art and the analysis thereof- is indeed "legitimate and serious," and this paper contributes not only to the existing discussion of satire, but also opens

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the door for other conversations to take place: conversations about race, identity, and American institutions. At this juncture, I will outline a methodology to ground the paper's forthcoming analysis of Lamar's satirical successes, shortcomings, and strategies, as well as his relation to various audiences.

The Set-Up:

"*Would you say my intelligence now is great relief?*
And it's safe to say that our next generation maybe can sleep
With dreams of being a lawyer or doctor
Instead of boy with a chopper that hold the cul de sac hostage."

Although it evolves from a different satirical tradition than Lamar, Stephen Bogel's *Theory of Satiric Rhetoric* illuminates the intricacies of Lamar's performances. Bogel establishes that satirists do not attack something outside and pre-existing themselves; rather, he says, "Satirists identify in the world something or someone that is both unattractive and dangerously like them, or like the culture or subculture that they identify with or speak for, or sympathetic even as it is repellent—something then that is *not alien enough*" (41). Bogel contends, however, that this similarity between the satirist and their target can dampen the effectiveness of the satire. Thus, he claims that the satirist rhetorically produces a difference and distance between themselves and the target. As Bogel states, "Satire then is a rhetorical means to the production of difference in the face of a potentially compromising similarity, not the articulation of differences already securely in place" (42). Lamar's performances hinge on and play with this operation of satirical rhetoric. Unlike most other satirists, though, he often collapses this difference. This is because he wants to forward the concept of difference

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as a fabricated construct. By instructing his audience to see divisions as artificial- by developing distance only to telescope it- he is able to even more effectively critique constructions of race and racial prejudice. By demonstrating the fragility of racial binaries rather than obscuring that fragility, his work becomes exceptionally satirically effective.

Reading Lamar's performances in this way, as very much wrapped up in the practices of identification, difference, and relationship between self and other is productive, but it only partly explains his presence in our cultural landscape. To better understand Lamar's satirical impact, an academic reading a la Bogel does not suffice. Robert Phiddian would remind us that, "Satire as it is experienced by engaged audiences, by contrast (to a more scholarly approach), simplifies. It is impatient" (52). Thus, while slow-paced scholarly and analysis may indeed serve to enlighten to an extent, it misses the initial impetus for satire: its impact on an audience which quickly digests its content.

Understanding hip-hop's relationship to its audiences is critical in the context of an America that simultaneously sees itself as post-racial and emboldens the forces of white supremacy. Lamar's art reflects a lived experience that is often underrepresented in American culture: that of poor, urban, African American communities. Lamar discusses this subject in his reflective track, "Sing For Me/I'm Dyin' of Thirst" where he asserts his rap as a space for affirmation, attention, and advocacy. He raps, "I count lives all on these songs/Look at the weak and cry, pray one day you'll be strong/Fighting for your rights, even when you're wrong." According to Lamar, putting these stories in the spotlight, "counting lives," functions to improve the lives of individuals and ideally to improve the institutions that create such precarious subject positions. The question raised by this technique is: for whom are the stories catalogued? In other words, to whom does Lamar's fight for the rights of the

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disenfranchised speak? Is it aimed at those who see their lives reflected therein, or is it demanding the attention of those with power and privilege who often overlook these lives? To answer this question, I will present an acknowledgment of the function of audience in satire to further ground the analyses of Lamar's performances in 2016 and 2018.

Audience Amalgamations:

I practiced runnin' from fear, guess I had some good luck
At 27 years old, my biggest fear was bein' judged
How they look at me reflect on myself, my family, my city
What they say 'bout me reveal
If my reputation would miss me
What they see from me
Would trickle down generations in time
What they hear from me
Would make 'em highlight my simplest lines
I'm talkin' fear, fear of losin' creativity
I'm talkin' fear, fear of missin' out on you and me
I'm talkin' fear, fear of losin' loyalty from pride
'cause my DNA won't let me involve in the light of God
I'm talkin' fear, fear that my humbleness is gone
I'm talkin' fear, fear that love ain't livin' here no more
I'm talkin' fear, fear that it's wickedness or weakness
Fear, whatever it is, both is distinctive
Fear, what happens on Earth stays on Earth
And I can't take these feelings
With me so hopefully they disperse
Within fourteen tracks, carried out over wax
Searchin' for resolutions until somebody get back
Fear, what happens on earth stays on earth
And I can't take these feelings with me
So hopefully they disperse
Within fourteen tracks, carried out over wax
Wonderin' if I'm livin' through fear or livin' through rap

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Satire is a genre that harnesses its power to transform its readers, a genre aimed at disrupting and changing things. Yet, as Robert Phiddian warns us, examining hip-hop as an evolution of satire takes us to new ground because hip-hop is "satire from anti-authoritarian sources that cannot be easily assimilated with Augustan assumptions about the proper decorums of cultural critique" (47). The heart of traditional satire in academic studies is the 18th century satirists, who often wrote from positions of power and privilege to others of similar prestige. Yet, hip-hop predominantly broadcasts itself to anti-authoritarian as opposed to institutional audiences; the songs and their performances often speak about and to a demographic of American citizens wary (to say the least) of authoritarian institutions. In other words, hip-hop doesn't always reach the audiences that most need to hear its messages about systemic racism and structural inequality. Lamar's work, as an exception to this rule, has indeed caught the attention of institutional authorities. For this reason, Lamar must engage a variety of audiences in social critique from a variety of different angles.

Lamar and hip-hop at large remain mired in a new version of the long-existing audience problem of African American art. While many authors have tackled what James Weldon Johnson termed, "the Negro problem,"[1] Langston Hughes has a relevant and particularly powerful way of explaining this phenomenon. Hughes asserts that the "problem" results in part from pressures on African American artists to please both black and white audiences, and he dissects this duality of audience demands on African American art.

[1] James Weldon Johnson defines a cultural problem known as the "Negro problem" in America in his essay "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist." According to Johnson, a defining question rings throughout American history, and this question summarizes the "Negro problem." He says, "The question has run all the way from whether or not the Negro was a human being… to whether or not the Negro shall be accorded full and unlimited American citizenship" (209). This question, regarding the status of black Americans, begins to shed light on the problematic history of race relations in America, and it reveals the privilege/power dynamic at play.

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Imitating the two audiences, he says, "'Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' say the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites" (2)." Lamar's work (and that of other hip-hop artists as well) similarly propels itself by reaching an audience that knows its experiences, conceits and codes- an audience with a shared grasp of the structures of institutional racism, historical oppression, and unjust dealings. Yet now, with its Pulitzer Prize and its increasing institutional recognition, it also reaches another audience- the elite of the music industry and academic writers such as myself. Thus, Lamar carefully contrives art which grapples with what W.E.B. DuBois termed the "double-aimed struggle" [2]of the black artist in America. However, I suggest that considerations of Lamar's opposing audiences must account not just for racial division, but also for varying levels of familiarity (or otherwise) with his music's content and hip-hop culture.

This audience problem becomes more complex in a mass media consumer market. As Tricia Rose observes in her seminal text *Black Noise* that, "To participate in and try to manipulate the terms of mass-mediated culture is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways--it provides communication channels within and among largely disparate groups and requires compromise that often affirms the very structures much of rap's philosophy seems determined to undermine" (37). Thus, as rap's audience potential grows, the more the sword cuts both

[2] W.E.B. DuBois details this dualistic struggle in his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*. He provides a deeper look at the "Negro problem" as he reckons with the palpable influence of 200 years of American slavery, particularly emphasizing how the cultural act of dualistically coding people as both "Negro" and "American" relegated black citizens to a secondary status and divided them against themselves. As DuBois states, "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (3). In this way, DuBois positions the personhood of black people in America as dualistic. In DuBois' view, trying to "satisfy two unreconciled ideals" traps a black artist in a seemingly impossible predicament. These artists may lose respect or recognition unless they conform to white ideals, leading them on a path of "wooing false gods," "invoking false means of salvation" and even being "ashamed of themselves."

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ways. Kendrick Lamar's art illustrates this complicated compromise as an essential element of rap, and one to be overcome through a complex catalogue of self-centered satire.

Looking solely at "black" and "white" audiences no doubt simplifies the vast and complicated body of people who consume and experience Lamar's art not to mention the complex and varied nature of "blackness" and whiteness" as ideological constructs and as lived experiences. Yet, to stick with this oscillation between two kinds of audience members--those who understand his work on deeper levels, perhaps seeing it as an affirmation of their lived experience and those to whom Lamar is bringing these novel experiences and narratives--nudges the conversation towards a better understanding of exactly how to analyze Lamar's contributions to the canon of satire.

2016: Taking the Stage

"I'm African-American,
I'm African.
I'm black as the moon,
Heritage of a small village-
Pardon my residence,
Came from the bottom of mankind."

Lamar cleverly utilizes the first words in his 2016 Grammy Awards performance to emphasize self-reflection and to complicate the idea of a clear-cut system of othering between the satirist and his targets. Rather, Lamar immediately indicates an identification with and proximity to the some of the ugly mechanics of American society and those of satire itself. Lamar jumps in at the start of his performance with the twice-delivered line, "I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015." Beginning the performance this way directs the whole operation of the

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satirical rhetoric back towards himself as satirist. Lamar then reinforces this move by telling his audience, “Once I finish this, if you listen, I’m sure you will agree.” Lamar here suggests that by the end of the performance, any listener from either side of the audience divide- the academic, the wealthy elite in the Grammy seats, or the kids listening from his hometown of Compton- will realize what makes him a hypocrite, hinting at his purpose to shape their interpretation. Although, the performance that follows this works to create distance between himself and the target of his satire—white supremacy and white supremacist institutions—interestingly, this first move shrinks that distance. After dissecting the performance’s rhetorical production of distance, I will discuss the significance of this curious proximity, but suffice it to say that his all-important line about being the “biggest hypocrite of 2015” must be borne in mind throughout his performance.

Lamar walks onto the Grammy’s stage in chains and prison uniform, attached to four other black men. Surrounding them, as they march abjectly to the front of the stage, are cells filled with more men. Lamar thus sets up his satire by producing rhetorical difference in such a way as to be able to critique and examine the social mechanisms of racism both historically and in the present. Here, he targets the systemic racism that results in the hyper-incarceration of black men in America. The performance continues from there with a stanza of exaggerated rage that “works to establish difference” between the speaker and any community that might target him because of the color of his skin (Bogel 48). The audience members who share his experience at this point see a sight all too familiar, a black man in chains, which rightfully raises anger and sadness in the face of destructive racial stereotypes.

As the beat cues the start of Lamar’s song, “The Blacker the Berry,” he states, “You hate me, don’t you? You hate my people; your plan is to terminate my culture. You know

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you're evil, and I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey." These lines draw a clear distinction between the speaker and the targeted "you." Lamar's crafty use of the pronoun without antecedent allows for multiple target identification; it targets racist individuals while also speaking to a larger structural narrative that helps to shape such individuals with the "plan to terminate" a culture. In this way, Lamar not only engages an audience that directly experiences racism due to being black like him, he also engages a wider community that studies the historical and institutional aspects of racism in America. Yet, leaving the "you" ambiguous potentially allows for identifications that move the target away from a general critique of systemic racism and racists, which Lamar aims at, to "white people" in particular. This slippage represents one of many places where Lamar's engagement with the practices of rhetorical difference has the potential to become too effective for his ultimate goal of undermining rhetoric of this kind to be achieved.

The following lines, however, work to address this misperception by broadening the reading of "you" even further. The "you" is no longer racists, nor is it white people- it clearly refers to structural racism and the cultural practices that follow from that institutionalized discrimination. He states, "You sabotaged my community, makin' a killin', you made me a killer." Crediting the target with an ability to shape and create the subjectivity of the speaker reveals the target's institutional, cultural, and historical identity. Likely, the largely black audience that hears these lines will imagine that Lamar targets not white people but "The White Man"- not a specific entity but rather the conjunction of practices and policies that allow for the subjection and subjugation of black people. An audience member who lacks an understanding of Lamar's experience and identity, on the other hand, might likely pause and reflect on if and how they belong to this "you." Ultimately, though, anyone of his audience

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members could feel complicit in the mechanisms of hatred, difference, and prejudice interpellated here.

Thus, Lamar chastises the notion of producing difference, yet his own work employs the production of difference. Lamar's effective production of rhetorical difference indeed permits the potentiality for an audience member to 'misread' his work as critiquing whiteness in general. This type of artificially constructed binary is exactly what Lamar wants to strike down, detesting oversimplified dichotomies for their ability to shape, "sabotage," and "terminate." Only by keeping in mind Lamar's self-proclaimed hypocrisy, can an observer get to the 'desired' reading of this performance. Nevertheless, the performance barrels on, producing difference and distance effectively to strike at the detrimental practices of historical and systemic racism.

The chorus echoes the impact of the historical practices which enabled the systematic subjugation of black people in America and shaped their group identity. Assassin joins Lamar to rap the chorus, saying, "They treat me like a slave, cah' (cause) me black… All them say we doomed from the start cah' we black. Remember this, every race start from the block." The voice here emphasizes how the other - white-dominated institutional systems - defines and treats subjects according to their blackness. The chorus also cleverly puns on the pronunciation of black and block, showing a complicated understanding of the origins of blackness itself. Does the idea of race start with white people encountering blackness? Does it begin at the slave block where auctions of human beings were held? Or does the line signify that all of humanity can trace its origins to Africa, the motherland of blackness?

Leaving this ambiguous intentionally allows Lamar's work to, in the words of Bogel, "…ask us to meditate on the problematic intricacies of identification and difference by which

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we define our own identities and our relation to others of whom we cannot fully approve or disapprove" (46). Bogel and Lamar both demonstrate the discomfort caused by the relationship between identification and difference. There is an inevitable connection between the two and the distance created by difference does not separate two ideas, rather that space is where those ideas meet. Thus, this slippage in the chorus, an echo of the slippery pronouns in the verse, asks audiences to contemplate their connection with the 'other side' of Lamar's audience base. However, this slippery language which confuses exactly whom/what is the topic of discussion, not only leaves the door open for self-reflection (Lamar's aim), in its "problematic intricacies" it also allows for an audience to misunderstand the performance as doubling down on the construction of artificial binaries and the rhetorical production of racial difference.

Lamar's emphasis on critiquing these productions of racial difference (and thus of racism) by historically white institutions by distancing himself as satirist from "them," his intended target, takes his audience away from the opening lines about his hypocrisy. Indeed, as Kornhaber notes in *The Atlantic*, "At the Grammys, Lamar didn't let the song's full logic develop. He only performed the first verse, the one where the narrator is in full righteous-fury mode, drawing power from his heritage to confront white America."[3] On the album, the song comes back to Lamar's hypocrisy in speaking with such exaggerated rage and therefore employing his own distancing rhetoric of difference—a rhetoric that reinforces racial divides rather than questioning them-- but his Grammy's performance waits to come full circle. The delay allows Lamar to further develop and play with the mechanics of difference in order to

[3] Spence Kornaber provides thought-provoking analyses of Lamar's work. Interestingly, they appear in a popular culture publication, not a literary journal.

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call attention back to their instability and finally to their damaging impact on individuals by the end of the performance.

Stopping the first song there, Lamar then shakes off the chains and dances with an energetic freedom alongside his other 'inmates,' implying a liberation from the oppression imposed by structural racism in the song's first verse and the chorus. Kornhaber observes how Lamar wanders in the performance from a world of subjugation into a world containing, "the image of a roaring African celebration…outside of the tangle of American problems and slippery solutions Lamar's lyrics describe" (3). This celebration is precisely what histories of white domination dismantled. It's fitting then that Lamar pairs this "back to Africa" action, an act of geographical distancing from the institutions of whiteness, with the next song featured in the performance "Alright." This song was adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement (seen as controversial and divisive by many Americans who lack an understanding of the African American experience), and protestors at those rallies often chant the words of its chorus (Kornhaber 3).

Both moves, creating an African setting and performing a song adopted by the BLM political movement, rhetorically create more distance from the other, the "you" in the first song. The chorus of this second song emphasizes that "**We** gon' be alright," and the context of the performance suggests that perhaps this is an exclusionary "we," a we that exists in opposition to some other "they" out there. Thus read, the "we" welcomes in only the audience that shares Lamar's experience and understanding, leaving others on the fringe, feeling perhaps to some degree complicit in the unjust treatment that Lamar targets.

Interestingly, Lamar ends the performance, not with a "they" or a "we," but by himself, and in so doing, he reminds us of the opening line of the performance- the one

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claiming himself as a hypocrite. This final move works intentionally to call attention to the hypocritical mechanisms of his satirical production of difference and distance throughout his performance. In other words, he both critiques how white supremacy has "invented" race and fabricated difference between white and black people in order to justify the domination of the former over the latter while acknowledging that he himself emphasizes these differences and utilizes their methodology to strike his satirical pose. While standing alone on stage, with a camera directly in his face, Lamar reveals how the hypocrisy mentioned in the first line results from his identification with Trayvon Martin. He questions how he can mourn the loss of Martin- killed in 2012 simply for, as many believed, being black- while feeding into the same system of division and difference that resulted in Martin's death. Lamar thereby brings the performance from targeting others to critiquing himself, especially for his manipulation of rhetorical practices of difference that breed division- that is his use of the "you" and "they" pronouns which can be read (or misread) as black vs. white.

In his final lyrics, Lamar imagines seeking out revenge and retribution with a "plan" to creep through Martin's killer's "damn door and blow out every piece of your brain." That is until the killer's son "jumped in (his) arms," and then Lamar speeds "off in the rain." This moment reveals Lamar's satirical genius, for he plays out his rhetorical creation of difference to its devastating conclusion—which is to say its inevitable collapse. Trayvon Martin was somebody's son, and upon seeing this 'other's' son, Lamar stresses the connection between himself and this 'other' man. Deciding to turn his back on the practice of further division, he instead labels himself once more as a hypocrite. He therefore concludes by dismantling the operations of differentiating rhetoric, making his satire unique and uniquely powerful. Unfortunately, as Lamar was later forced to grapple with, the act of dismantling difference

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and emphasizing connection at the end of the performance was overshadowed (at least in popular media reflections on the show) by its incredibly effective production of rhetorical difference throughout.

All in all, Lamar's 2016 performance goes deeper than strictly establishing distance between himself and his targets. Lamar's genius lies in both creating this difference and undermining his own creation of said difference, making anyone who uses rhetoric to foment unwarranted division—including himself-- the ultimate target of his satire. While still lashing out at the problematic repercussions of racism in America, and at the historical, social, and economic constraints placed on a man in his position, he acknowledges his own complicity in the continued production and re-production of racial difference (which, at root, he sees to be the results of false and artificial discourses). Lamar's performance holds up a mirror, one which reflects the world **and** his own face, seeing the disaster inherent in the systematic production of difference. This reckoning with self in the face of a corrupted world makes Lamar's art potent and relevant for any audience.

Misunderstood:

Everything I do is to embrace y'all.
Everything I write is a damn eight ball.
Everything I touch is a damn gold mine.
Everything I say is from an angel.

Reactions to Lamar's 2016 performance abounded in praise. *Rolling Stone* proclaimed him, "…the unquestioned king of the night" a sentiment echoed throughout comments from anonymous users on the online YouTube video who deemed the

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performance- “history in the making,” “legendary,” and “changing hip-hop and music itself.” (Kendrick Lamar VEVO) There were those who could not shake the performances’ effect, while not quite being able to pin down what it meant, such as Klonbahuer who said, “The set was obviously political; it was obviously powerful,” while also asking, “What exactly did it say?” Yet, there were also reactions such as Rachel Davidson and Catherine Dobson, who wrote about the performance in *Women and Language* arguing that it advanced “controversial and polarizing messages about police brutality and racial inequity” (115). This reading reveals how Lamar’s recognition of his hypocrisy to begin and end the performance was secondary to his effective productions of difference for some readers, particularly those who felt targeted as the “you” and “they,” fairly or unfairly.

This last reading merits further exploration because Lamar grapples explicitly with it in his subsequent Pulitzer Prize winning album and his 2018 Grammy performance. The notion of Lamar’s work furthering division as opposed to my proposed reading of a hope for unification and dismantling of difference through self-satire reached a head when Geraldo Rivera of Fox News criticized Lamar’s song “Alright.” One line in particular was problematic to Rivera: “And we hate the po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho.” Rivera responded that Lamar’s lyrics and hip-hop in general had “done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years” and called the performance “counterproductive” and “exactly the wrong message” (COS).

This song, despite Kendrick’s satirical intentions to reveal the hypocrisy and paradox in the hatred of hate, seemed to Rivera to be judging police officers in general. While it is easy to say that Rivera missed the boat, as Lamar himself stated in interviews following the criticism, it is more pressing to examine the way in which Lamar treated this voice and

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responded to it by incorporating it into his next musical creation. Misinterpretations such as this also shaped Lamar's satirical drives in his 2018 Grammys performance, which creates rhetorical difference between himself and those who misread his work- both critics like Rivera and fans alike. This second performance, in its rageful tone, emphasized the fact that satire, because it is necessarily indirect rather than direct in its critiques, is sometimes doomed to fail in its aims.

Although Lamar won the Pulitzer for the album that undergirds his 2018 performance, he did not score the Grammy for Best Album of the Year, and many were outraged by this decision. As Caitlin O'Kane reported to CBS, "Fans have often wondered how Lamar could win a Pulitzer for his rap but lose a Grammy to the more pop-centric Bruno Mars." The Wrap suggests a possible answer: "…while the Grammy nominations had been bolder than ever, the winners were completely in the voters' usual comfort zone — which is to say, music that might recognize the influence of hip-hop, but keeps it at an arm's length while it traffics in more familiar (and to the voters, more palatable) musical territory." Thus, we find ourselves right back where we started, at the very problem of the perception of rap from those who lack an understanding of the experiences in which the music is steeped- the selfsame problem that arguably provoked Lamar's rage on stage in 2018 and his decision to decline an invitation to perform at the Grammys the following year.

2018: Back to the Stage

I'm here to remind you that the only thing scarier than watching a black man be honest in America is being an honest black man in America.

-Dave Chappelle-

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In 2018, Lamar was welcomed back to the Grammy stage, with another chance to provoke a spectrum of reactions. However, this performance emphasized the satirist's ability to respond to those voices who 'read him wrongly-' to integrate satiric misreading into the satire itself. Lamar's performance begins against the backdrop of an American flag, surrounded by soldiers in uniform, and with a play on words familiar to those of us who live in and are familiar with American culture: "America, God bless it, if it's good to you." Thus, Lamar deploys his first satirical move- a production of difference between himself as satirist and the object of his satire. The lyric divides those to whom America is good (and conceivably the targets of the song), from those who do not have the same fortune.

Rather than caricaturing the former group of people, as Phiddian states necessarily happens in satire, Lamar's manufactured difference allows for an understanding of their perspective. Lamar's use of the word "if" reveals that attitudes towards the country are dependent on perspective. Both sides of this divide are justified in their feelings about America because of their experiences of American culture. Lamar capitalizes on his own (and many voiceless others') experience, which justifies his anger and lack of a desire to say God bless America, while the experiences of others likewise justify their perspective. This introductory lyric then operates as a recognition of difference but also extends the potential for understanding that perspective is born of circumstance.

Lamar then begins his spoken part of the performance, looking to the ground, eyes downcast, describing a horrible experience that explains why he withholds praise for America as a divinely blessed nation. He recounts the tale of getting a call from his friend whose son was killed because of "insufficient funds." This line underscores the financial difference between Lamar's friend and those outside of this experience of poverty, while also revealing

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that Lamar himself, thanks to his fame and commercial success, is now distanced to some degree from his friend. The line also evokes Martin Luther King's statement that, "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'" (Genius). Thus, one line works to establish difference in a couple of ways (between varying experiences of American culture as well as between Lamar and his audience with shared experiences) while reinforcing Lamar's unrelenting gaze at the ways in which historical institutions of oppression still shape American culture today.

The story continues with Lamar's friend asking him for his prayers, and saying, "I know that you anointed, show me how to overcome." In these lines, Lamar shores up the difference between himself and his friend, who might be a representative of a wider base of disadvantaged fans who look up to Lamar. Listeners who see Lamar as prophetic, larger than life, and 'chosen' because of the privilege he now enjoys, might conceivably turn to Lamar for answers to the difficulties in life, as his friend does in the song. The use of the word "overcome" again connotes the powerful figure, Martin Luther King Jr's words, "We shall overcome," and that connotation places Lamar in a position of leadership of (and thus difference from) this fan base. Lamar's answer to his friend undermines this perceived difference in part by saying, "My spirit do no better." Not only does this line deflate the idea that he is somehow better than others, but the pun implies also that, like them, he has the knowledge of how to do better despite his failings. To have knowledge is one thing, but to have the ability to act on it is an entirely different question, and Lamar's satirical desire is to strip down this inflated image of himself.

For this reason, Lamar replies, "I can't sugar coat the answer for you, this is how I feel: if somebody kill my son, that mean somebody getting killed." He proceeds to detail how

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he might get revenge, even by waiting outside of a church for the killer of his son. Lamar further dismisses the idea that he is somehow 'above' the 'base' desire of revenge in the line, "Ain't no Black Power when your baby killed by a coward." Lamar reveals that in the midst of such horrifying circumstances, consideration for the political implications of his actions wash away. Here Lamar leaves behind any lofty goals or aspirations that his work may have- to focus on family, and familial vengeance, rather than race. He furthers this line of thinking by repeating the threat of violence to anybody who "…touch my momma, touch my sister, touch my woman, touch my daddy, touch my niece, touch my nephew, touch my brother." After these lines, which paint Lamar as violent and vengeful-exactly what critics like Rivera might think of him and his work- he says, "Matter fact, I'm 'bout to speak at this convention- call you back." This pivot shows the audience a divide between Lamar on stage (as artist, speaker and performer) as opposed to the 'real' Lamar.

The stage lights then turn off, preventing Lamar from speaking further, and the screen behind illuminates with the words, "This is a satire by Kendrick Lamar." This interruption and labeling of his work complicate in some ways the statements he made right before the fade to black. Is his musing on revenge and violence a satirical tool to explain to a less aware audience the psychology behind rampant murder in urban areas? Is it an honest confession of hypocrisy from a man who wants to promote peace yet fails to always live up to his own ideals? Bettina Love might help us to understand Lamar's self-identification as a satirist. She states that, "Lamar complicates the contemporary everyday narratives and realities of urban youth who endure the social, economic, physiological, and psychological trauma of coping with the racial injustices of "post-racial" America by indicting the system" (*Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 322).

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Lamar's performance certainly seems to point back to the system, or America itself as being the generative point for his desire for revenge. If it weren't for the "insufficient funds" there would be no murder in the first place, and no need for revenge. This line, which again points to the racial economic divide that Martin Luther King Jr. fought against, sets up an accusation of cause and effect to explain the lived experience of Lamar and other African Americans in a supposedly "post-racial" America. Lending Lamar's satire more power is the fact that, "Lamar does not hide from his flaws, but instead confronts them by recognizing that many are the result of a system that was built and thrives on racism, exploitation, entangled hierarchies, and eviscerating Black leadership in already fragile communities of color" (Love 322). By calling out the satirical nature of his performance, Lamar puts the target on his own back. By interrupting his vengeful rant to label his performance "a satire," he reflects on his own complicity in the violence he typically rails against, highlighting his own hypocrisy in a similar manner to his 2016 performance. Yet, Lamar's concern here has more to do with the potential for misunderstanding his work and his role as artist/satirist. The beginning of the performance sets the stage for Lamar to process the fact that once his lyrics leave his mouth, they are out of his control.

Lamar follows this announcement by playing his song DNA. which incorporates an audio clip of Rivera's criticism into the beat. As Will Fulton observes, "Hip-hop recordings have historically had an intertextual relationship with the past through references, via digital sampling, interpolation, and lyrical quotation" (*American Music Review*). Lamar's use of a segment from a news show departs from the more traditional sampling of a lyric from another rap artist to reveal the political potential of hip-hop performance. By incorporating Rivera's argument that Lamar's music has "done more damage to young African-Americans in recent

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years than racism," it appears at first glance to target this argument as absurd as well as the man behind it.

However, the lyrics of DNA. dismantle the distance and difference between Lamar and his supposed satirical target in such a way as to acknowledge the inescapability of this and other misreadings. The rapid fire switching of subjects in his lyrics again confuse exactly who is speaking and to whom. He says, "I'd rather die than to listen to you. My DNA not for imitation. Your DNA an abomination. This how it is when you in the Matrix-dodgin' bullets, reapin' what you sow, and stackin' up the footage, livin' on the go." The clear distinction between "I" and "you" breaks down as Lamar explains his personal existence in the matrix by addressing himself in the second person, implying that Rivera's misunderstanding is Lamar reaping what he sowed. So, what starts out by appearing to be a clear attack on the "you" (possibly Rivera) quickly crumbles and implicates Lamar himself. Echoing this is a conversation with himself cataloguing all the ways in which "you" (Lamar referring to his own experience in the second person) is not enough. Lamar here muses on the idea that Rivera might be right, that his work is open to misreading and therefore to the propulsion rather than the dismantling of systems of oppression. Grappling with this truth might well explain Lamar's untempered rage throughout the performance.

This performance directs anger- at Lamar's critics, his fans, himself, and at America, in a different way than the 2016 performance does, and ire predominates the content. Perhaps as a counterweight, Lamar incorporates comedian Dave Chappelle into the skit to add some comic relief to the rage and to underscore the complicated nature of tackling the problem of interpretation. As Chappelle states, "I'm here to remind you that the only thing scarier than watching a black man be honest in America is being an honest black man in America." This

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line, while it draws a chuckle from the audience speaks to the serious nature of the performance and the shared fear of both artist and audience. Lamar reckons in this line with the fear of being idolized by his adoring audience, the fear of being shut down by institutional whiteness, and the fear of being misread, while also acknowledging that audience members who do not share his experiences might well be scared by his honesty.

The performance ends by deepening these affects of fear and rage. Lamar adopts the persona of Erik Killmonger, the villain figure in the popular movie *Black Panther* for his final moments on stage. Killmonger grew up removed from his wealthy and privileged family who live in the fictional technology - and resource - rich African country of Wakanda, instead coming of age in the run-down neighborhoods of Oakland (similar in ways to Lamar's hometown of Compton). By adopting the persona of this villain who despises the community of Wakanda for allowing the suffering of black people to occur across the world while remaining in its protected and privileged bubble, and who also dreams of taking revenge against the oppressors rather than the forces of oppression, Lamar positions himself here in a very different light than he did in his 2016 performance. Killmonger does not strive for self-reflection as a pathway to understanding, compassion, or unity.

In this way, Lamar, who often dreams of an escape from the mechanisms of hate and difference, channels a very different voice by the end of this performance. For Kornbarger, Lamar stepped away here from "…his biggest virtue," being that "…he represents the hope that hip-hop can remain a force for positive conscientiousness and high-minded lyricism." This statement echoes my own and countless other readings of Lamar's previous work and performances. Yet Kornhaber reminds us that, "Lamar is more complicated than that. He was out to make a statement about black rage—and to torch the notion that he'd be anyone's

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respectability totem. 'Who am I?' he asked in his final moments on stage. 'Not your future, not your comfort, not your reverence, not your glory'" (*The Atlantic*). Lamar channels rage all the more because he utters these lines as the people around him drop to the ground to the ringing sound of gunshots. Ultimately, Lamar remains standing, alone, stripped by his anger of the ability to be read, recognized, and reckoned with in what he considers to be the 'right' way.

Lamar has attributed misunderstandings of his satirical aims as being connected to broader (mis)perceptions of rap in his discussion about receiving the Pulitzer prize. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Lamar states, "It's one of those things that should have happened with hip-hop a long time ago. It took a long time for people to embrace us—people outside of our community, our culture—to see this not just as vocal lyrics, but to see that this is really pain, this is really hurt, this is really true stories of our lives on wax." These narratives and honest dealings with them have long been held at a distance by institutional authorities and mainstream audiences alike, hampering their understanding and recognition. Alas, even despite the accolades Lamar received from fans outside and from the music industry for his artistic contributions, the road ahead, towards more productive understandings and readings of hip-hop is long and winding.

Lamar's satirical creations receive both praise and condemnation due to the ways in which he plays with generating, contesting, and negating difference. For Lamar, the objective is to "…speak on self; reflection of self first. That's where the initial change will start from," but, clearly, speaking on self does not always guarantee an understanding of that self by others, nor does it guarantee a change in the behavior of individuals or society at large (Hiatt). That is why theories of self-formation, of the rhetorical productions of difference in satire,

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and of the social construction of race help us to engage with Lamar's work, yet the art itself outstrips any one theoretical framework. This may be in part due to the dearth of existing satirical analyses of hip-hop, it may just be a persistent problem in the realm of art criticism, or perhaps it is a symptom of a genre that by its very nature resists incorporation into traditional, institutional, and authoritarian structures. Regardless, for Lamar, the drive to explore his own relationship to societal systems through hip-hop writing and performance will allow him to continue investigating issues of identity and relationality and will potentially grant him the power to change the world for the better. The question is, will the world be able to keep up?

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CHAPTER 2

The Art of Story Telling:

Using Hip-Hop as a Tool for Teaching in the ELA Classroom

Rationale/Background/Thesis:

Educators in secondary schools are all too aware of the innumerable items competing for students' attention. Life at home, friends (and enemies alike) at school, and extra-curricular activities occupy significant portions of the adolescent mind. In addition to these endeavors, many students also have instant access to a nearly endless stream of information, media, and entertainment right in their pockets. This technological boon is both a gift and a curse, and the fact is that productively engaging students' attention in critical thinking is a uniquely difficult challenge in the 21st century.

Add to this the pressure of the intensive demands placed on teachers by the educational system at large, and the work of education seems daunting. Teachers must prepare students to conquer high-stakes tests (which are often culturally biased and irrelevant) while simultaneously helping them to develop elements of their personhood: coping mechanisms, emotional maturity and regulation, a sense of citizenship and altruism, cultural competence and self-confidence to name a few. Surely, we are up to these unique 21st century challenges; that's why we've enlisted in the esteemed ranks of this profession. Undeniably though, the more tools we can equip ourselves with, the more success we can achieve in every arena with our students. In this article, I relate my experience using a genre of cultural and personal relevance to me and my students as one such tool which deepens critical literacy, elevates classroom engagement, and strengthens interpersonal relationships with students in

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the secondary language arts classroom. That genre is hip-hop. I also suggest a few methodologies for incorporating hip-hop into the fabric of language arts curriculum.

Grounding Research:

Two undisputed keys to effective pedagogy--much discussed in educational research and school leadership circles in recent decades--are engagement and relevancy (both cultural and personal). The two are inextricably connected, for education that has relevancy to student's personal and cultural lives will surely be education that engages. Educators and researchers alike, such as Crystal Belle, point to hip-hop as a culturally relevant text that emphasizes a focus on a "new literacy" which "represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice" (288). Stepping away from the sheer acquisition of skills as the defining mark of literacy and instead recognizing literacy's relationship to a "collection of cultural and community practices shared among members of particular groups" means that true literacy cannot come solely from scripted examinations of institutionally idolized texts (289). Rather, a wider range of 'texts,' especially those that students consume, and discuss in their own daily lives, should make their way into the classroom if we are to encourage the development of multimodal literacies that will serve students in school and beyond. An added bonus, of course, of this shift is higher levels engagement, due to the content's relevancy.

This shift in conceiving literacy as social practice opens the door to a student-centered classroom which values the literacies that students bring to the table. This, of course, does not mean that we should throw out standard or traditional curriculum and study whatever the students want (Funny animal videos all day?!). Students still need practice with traditional

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academic literacies to navigate the academic world and other cultural spheres successfully. What this pivot does indicate, however, is that if we fail to incorporate our student's unique literacy practices into the classroom, we will fail to fully engage them, and we will miss a vital opportunity to give them critical literacy skills that will open doors for them in the future. In short, the more literacies students possess, the better, and ideally, getting the students to see relationships between various literacies will be the most beneficial. Thus, incorporating hip-hop is one avenue in a town with many paths towards engaging alternate literacies and striving to make education a culturally relevant practice.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:

"I guess they say my dollars supposed to build roads and schools

*But my n****s barely graduate, they ain't got the tools.*

Maybe 'cause the tax dollars that I make sure I send

Get spent hirin' some teachers that don't look like them,

And the curriculum be tricking them, them dollars I spend

Got us learning about the heroes with the whitest of skin

One thing about the men that's controlling the pen

That write history, they always seem to white-out they sins."

J. Cole

My work in the classroom centered around Gloria Ladson-Billings' definition of culturally relevant pedagogy: "a type of teaching that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Kim). Hip-hop stands as one such cultural referent that both empowers and engages students, and many educators have researched and written about its efficacy. These

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educators (myself included) re-design curriculum and re-define what is worthy of teaching and learning by incorporating the interests (and literacies) of the student. By doing so, as Jung Kim states, "these educators hope to increase their students' engagement, foster a cultural climate based on community, develop critical literacy, empower identities, and create more opportunities for student voice both inside and outside of the classroom" (18). Keeping student interests, backgrounds, and cultures as driving forces for instruction is the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Hip-hop makes for a great way to keep students at the center, for, according to A.A. Akom, it is, "the dominant language of youth culture, and those of us who work with young people need to speak their language" (55). This relates beautifully to Nelson Mandela's quotation about language in general: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Hip-hop offers a pathway for our education to be effective in reaching not only our students' heads, but their hearts as well. Hip-hop, of course uses English, but it also contains a language of its own--making it an especially wonderful fit in the English classroom. In its very nature, it leads us into discussions of codes, alternative narratives, and countless other implications of the relationships between power, narrative, and language.

The trio of authors who wrote "From Rhymes to Resistance: Hip-Hop as a Critical Lens in Promoting Socially Just Teaching" certainly grasp this dynamic of hip-hop. They advocate the use of hip-hop in the classroom to promote civil protest and social change. The primary concern for them is to seize, "opportunities to hear their (students') stories, share their lives and affirm the hip-hop culture that resonates with many of them" (77). In addition to the affirmation of hip-hop, the authors also recognize the potential for social change that

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resides in hip-hop's essential quality of telling a counter-narrative, one not often visible in the mainstream culture or literature. Thus, affirming it not only values the student's experiences and interests, it also works as critique to dominant cultural norms and values. In other words, "Hip-hop provides a counter-narrative to the authority of the official school curriculum and may be used as a medium to engage, otherwise indifferent, and especially urban, youth" (72). Thus, hip-hop has the potential to engage on multiple fronts. Not only does it engage students due to their interest or affiliation with the art form, it also can engage them in critical dialogue about mainstream cultural narratives, canonization, and cultural values.

Even without reading the research[4] (which I recommend doing in your abundant spare time as a teacher), my hope is that these ideas intuitively make sense. We have felt and seen the difference between an engaging classroom experience and its opposite. It's the difference between heads down on desks and a passionate discussion. It's the difference between a rote, mechanical movement of pencil on paper and students eager to put their creations on display. The lessons that connect with students' lives- those that get a fire lit in their eyes- are the ones that we as educators should strive to create. These are the lessons that students carry beyond the four walls of the classroom, into their lives and into the world at large. Hip-hop has the ingredients necessary to make an impact of this caliber; we need only be brave and intelligent enough to make it happen. For me, hip-hop quickly transformed student apathy into participation and excitement. But, just how can hip-hop function in the classroom? The process I used to incorporate hip-hop into my English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, as well as my recommendations for doing the same, follow.

[4] See my Works Cited and Hip-Hop Resource list near the end of the article for a collection of scholarly resources to aid in pedagogical hip-hop research.

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Methodology:

You better lose yourself

In the music, the moment-

You own it.

You'd better never let it go.

You only get one shot,

Do not miss your chance to blow.

This opportunity comes once in a lifetime.

Eminem

This project was a marriage between required curricular materials and supplementary hip-hop written by me and my students, and it stands as only one possible avenue (among many) for using hip-hop to engage and excite ELA students with culturally relevant methodology. *Night* by Elie Wiesel is a required curricular reading, and despite being a little more than one hundred pages, it proves difficult to teach. When I first taught the novel, I was observed that most of the students did not want to engage with the harrowing experiences detailed in the slim yet heavy volume. I chalked this disengagement up to previous exposure to Holocaust material, desensitization by the media, and/or a self-protective mechanism. Regardless of the cause, I knew that I needed to find a way to get the students to connect and engage with the story; I needed a way to change my room from a dungeon of drudgery to an

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environment of engagement. I had a hope that hip-hop would prove itself a remedy to the apathy and distance in my classroom, thanks to my previous experiences with the genre.

Hip-hop has long been an art form with which I connect. I first encountered it in my junior high days, and I found the narratives therein exceptionally compelling. What struck me most was the way that I could feel alongside the artists. As the stories came to life through clever rhymes and emotion-filled beats, their impact changed my outlook. Hip-hop continued to be a friend of mine as the years passed on, and continually it would help me relax, learn, laugh, cope, and process. Growing up is by no means uncomplicated, and hip-hop was an outlet for me to explore, process, and get inspired throughout those formative years. I surmised that the raw connection that hip-hop provides between storyteller and audience- that bond which encourages them to feel the experiences of an 'other' firsthand- could make for a particularly impactful way to get my students connected to the horrors experienced by Wiesel and countless others.

I first thought only of using hip-hop to engage the students in anticipating the text. Anticipation strategies are timeless and effective in literature studies but using hip-hop to activate background knowledge gave it a fun new twist. The following lines (a verse and a hook written by me) from Wiesel's perspective grabbed the student's attention at the onset of the unit and inspired discussion about their background knowledge on the topic:

Imagine if you had everything taken from you: everything you loved, everything you dreamed of, and everything you owned- gone.

This is a true story. It really happened, and we can't let it happen again

Verse 1:

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First they took our homes, yeah they moved us around.

They put stars on our clothes, so we could always be found.

But, we can't let this break us or hold us down-

Now, we're leaving on trains saying goodbye to our town?

Crammed in train cars like we're less than cattle,

The fear and the dark are making my bones rattle.

I'm hungry and cold, and the fear's always growin'

What the future will hold, there's no way of knowin'.

Now the train gently slows to a crawl,

I see fire and darkness, and I'm trapped inside these walls.

They're dividing up families; I start to bawl.

Then comes a new blow on top of it all.

I'm no longer a boy with a family or a name,

They tattoo me with a number and the needle stings with shame.

I don't know if things will ever be the same.

I don't know if things will ever be the same.

Hook (x2):

It's the darkest of nights,

And I can't see the dawn.

The love, the joy, the hope and the faith-

They're all gone.

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Paired with a free melancholy beat from YouTube (shout out to Majestick records), my short performance quickly lit a fire in my student's eyes, marking a significant change from my introduction of the book in previous years which was met with a tepid apathy. They began to ask, "How does the song end?" "Will you show us that again?"

At this point, I realized that I should continue to write rhymes, detailing more of the events that happen throughout the text. I also saw that I could even dangle opportunities for more hip-hop time in front of my students as a proverbial carrot. Classes who engaged in the reading and discussions were rewarded with extra performances of the first verse and hook, and they would be the first to get to expereince the second verse. The lyrics follow here:

I can hardly describe to you right now, the way that I'm startin' to feel.

It's like I'm drownin' in darkness-yeah it's true-and nothing around feels real.

They took my mama, took my sisters too, like it was no big deal.

Now I'm worried 'bout survivin', and I'll do what I have to,

I'll even lie, cheat, or steal.

I'm askin' for God to come back into my heart,

And I'm askin' for God to come and help me heal.

But I'm losin' my faith, to keep it real,

I only have faith in my three meals.

Death is all over, and it kind of appeals;

I see it as a car that has no wheels.

Somewhere to hide, to escape from inside,

Yet I fight to stay alive, just tryin' to survive because

Hook (x2)

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Soon enough, these hip-hop performances became something to look forward to amongst the occasional slog of school days—students danced in their seats, snapped fingers to the beat, and even rapped the hook along with me. Many students began asking if they could film the performance and post it on various social medias—a sure sign of engagement for this teched out generation. In fact, one student insisted on coming in before and after school to help me make a music video for the song, which can be accessed on YouTube. Thus, hip-hop, so far, had proved itself an effective tool for engagement, a motivating reward, and a way to foster relationships with students from various walks of life, but it wasn't done working its magic in room 204.

By the time we reached the final pages of the book, a thought struck me. I had been doing the heavy lifting of writing rhymes, and wouldn't it be especially powerful if the students had the chance to reflect on the novel's resolution by penning their own raps from Wiesel's perspective? This move not only challenged students' linguistic abilities, it also challenged their empathetic capabilities, which to me should be the heart of pedagogy. As the students worked on developing their rhymes, they would eagerly thrust hands in the air, "Mr. Weatherford, come check THIS out!" I witnessed students showing off their rhymes to fellow classmates and heard the enthusiastic "OOOOOOOO's" and "AAAAAAAA's" you might expect to hear from a crowd circled around two M.C.'s trading rhymes in battle. Yet, this was an English classroom, alive with an energy of creativity and passion. This was the kind of classroom I felt proud and happy to be conducting.

I originally planned to use one student's work as the final verse of the rap. However, choosing only one was a near impossible task, for the students submitted a plethora of powerful lines, perspectives, and themes from the novel's close. After surveying the

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abundance of creative and passionate lines, I decided to weave together some of the strongest writing into two different versions of a final verse. I revealed these eagerly awaited verses to my students for discussion and voting. The two different versions fostered a lot of conversation amongst my class in terms of which captured the themes of the novel best, which was most authentic, which utilized textual evidence best, and which one was most likely to have the desired effect on the audience. Indeed, my students were holding elevated conversation about author's choices with little guidance from me. After these deliberations, my classes voted upon the verse they liked best, and I can still see the pride in the eyes of students whose rhymes made it into the final product.

To wrap it all up (pun intended), the finalized version of the song and its performance celebrated Wiesel's narrative and our ability to walk that journey with him in a culturally relevant genre. The students sang along with the chorus, danced, swayed, pulled out their cell phones to utilize their flashlights, and the impact could not have been clearer. I had the students reflect on the classroom experience, and I've included that data, in their own words, in the following section. To put it in my own words, hip-hop brought new life to our classroom. Hip-hop inspired conversations that otherwise may have been neglected. Hip-hop made English class the place to be. Hip-hop provided a framework for shared and transformational classroom experiences. Hip-hop gave an unforgettable experience to both myself and my incredible students.

Student Responses:

The power of a gun can kill,

And the power of fire can burn.

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The power of wind can chill,

And the power of the mind can learn.

The power of anger can rage inside until it tears you apart,

But

The power of a smile can heal a frozen heart.

Tupac Shakur

Don't just take my word for it. In asking my students to reflect on the experience, I got a lot of positive qualitative feedback about the impact of hip-hop in the secondary language arts classroom. The overarching theme of the responses was that hip-hop made English class enjoyable and fun. Out of the 90 students who responded to my questions, 83 included a comment that mentioned how class was more fun, entertaining, or enjoyable. I strive to always foster an environment for learning that is inviting and exciting. Hip-hop aided me in this goal, and it made English a class not just that students *had* to attend. Rather, it made the class one that students *wanted* to attend. As one young lady put it, "My man's is having fun, being confident and passionate; it's lit." Seeing the teacher don a performer's hat made class far more engaging, or "lit" as the kids say. One student drew comparisons with previous experiences in English class: "It was different. Last year, whenever we read a book, we had a packet. The rap was way more fun."

The students also responded with an emphasis on how hip-hop deepened their connection with the story, thanks in part to the way that the lyrics "go hard." Hip-hop doubled down on the raw emotion resulting from Wiesel's horrific situation, putting it in a different context. As one young person put it, "I liked how the words he (the teacher) used

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made me be in my perspective and made me think in other people's shoes." Not only did the lyrical content give the student's unique access to Wiesel's narrative, the students also pointed to the use of music/melody to deepen the emotional impact and connection with the story. Simply put, in the words of students, "Music really gets to you," and "…it touches the heart." Even the students who are not big fans of hip-hop found that this approach was more engaging, while they asserted that they would like to see multiple styles of music used by their teachers.

Hip-hop also affected the emotional connection students felt with their teachers and school in general. Perhaps one of the most touching responses I received came from a student who carries a lot of emotional baggage to school every day. Between foster situations, an abusive past, and parental incarceration, selling this teen on the importance of school is no easy task. When I read their response, I was blown away. They said, "This class gives me so much relief, and my anxiety goes down. Your raps make my day." This remark helped me to realize that hip-hop not only made class more enjoyable on the surface, it had a deeper impact, making the battles of adolescence a little easier to endure. Thus, hip-hop had come full circle in my journey. What had helped me navigate the beautiful, painful, and unreal journey of coming of age, had now, in turn, done the same for another youngster.

Most students loved the experience, and the rhymes they crafted were truly incredible. I'll share a couple of their rhymes to give a sense of the depth and detail of their responses. "The cold wind hits, and God's a hypocrite" revealed an ability to reflect the internal conflict that Wiesel underwent underpinned by textual evidence. "Them throwing the bodies in those flames must have changed me some way, 'cuz nowadays, all I see is hate" captured Wiesel's character development powerfully, especially considering the haunting final line of the book.

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Wiesel concludes his narrative by saying, “From the depths of the mirror a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me” (*Night).* Two students rewrote the lines to my hook and proposed that we end the rap with a more hopeful chorus, marking a change from Wiesel’s conclusion. One student was so proud of his rap, he asked to perform it for his class. We were all blown away by his rhymes, and I was unimaginably thrilled at the authentic engagement on display, as he nervously put on a performance for the class.

Possibilities for Hip-Hop in the Classroom:

Life without dreaming

Is a life without meaning.

Wale

Perhaps you don’t feel like an M.C. Perhaps spitting bars before your students sounds terrifying, impossible, or downright absurd. Believe me, I understand. Even if hip-hop is not a passion of yours, I would encourage to consider some of the following suggestions for bringing it into the ELA classroom, for there are surely students who would benefit from demonstrating their hip-hop literacies. For more information, please consult the lesson plan and resource list which I have created (following this section) to help guide you on your pedagogical hip-hop journey. I trust that you will find, as I did, that it inspires conversation, cognition, and engagement that might otherwise lay dormant.

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Hip-hop as a Student Response

1. Use hip-hop to reflect or summarize information. At the end of a reading, discussion, or video, ask the students to boil down the information to a couple of rhyming lines e.g. "Man, what a mess, this World War II; it sure didn't help that the U.S. was isolated too." I trust you'll find students are eager to share with you and others their sweet, sweet rhymes.
2. Use hip-hop as a possible avenue for students to demonstrate their progress with independent reading assignments. Give the students the option to create a rap about their book, and you might just get a stunning summary of *Twilight* as I did this year.
3. Use hip-hop to teach figurative language. While all types abound in the lyrics, hip-hop makes for an especially powerful teacher of **hyperbole**. Exaggeration is all over the place in the lyrics, and students will have fun dissecting how and why these authors choose to stretch the truth.
4. Use hip-hop to practice vocabulary words. Have the students write rhymes about the parts of speech, literary devices, or other content area vocabulary. Combining rhyme with the vocabulary serves as a mnemonic device helping the students to better remember these terms for tests.
5. Lastly, ask your students for their thoughts on how they might use hip-hop as a way to reflect and demonstrate knowledge. Yours and their creativity is the only limit in using this engaging tool for teaching.

Hip-Hop Close Reading

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1. Implement a close reading of hip-hop lyrics that supplements a class text, theme or topic. For example, "Where I'm From" by Jay-Z makes for awesome analysis of the elements of personal narrative. "Changes" by 2Pac can make connections between past and contemporary issues of race in America. The list could go on and on, but perhaps you don't have a lot of knowledge about hip-hop. In that case, flip the script and ask your students to identify and analyze hip-hop lyrics that connect with class texts or topics.
2. The confines of curriculum often require that hip-hop be a supplemental text, rather than a standalone unit. However, if hip-hop education continues to gain traction, as I hope it will, a unit in hip-hop literacy can transform students from their current passive consumption of lyrics to critical reading of hip-hop discourse with which many students are already engaging.

Sample Lesson Plan and List of Rap Resources:

You never know if you could ever be,

But if you never try, you will never see.

Lupe Fiasco

Lesson Title: Changes by 2Pac

Brief Overview: In this lesson, students examine a Tupac song, "Changes," to explore themes of racism and reconciliation, with a special emphasis on how an author's word choice impacts the tone of a piece. This lesson would make an engaging supplement to any novel that deals with issues of racism in America- historically or present day.

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Standards Addressed:

CCSSRL9.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSSRL9.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Materials Needed:

- Printed copies of the lyrics to "Changes" by Tupac Shakur
- Highlighters (not necessary, but students sure love 'em)
- Access to the song via YouTube, Spotify, CD, etc.

Activities:

1. Warm-Up: Have students respond to the following prompt in a writer's notebook: "Racism is less of a problem in America today than it has been in the past. Agree or disagree and explain your thinking."
2. After giving students some time to write and reflect, have them engage in discussion on the topic (whole class, pair share, or another format that floats your boat).

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3. Bridge the gap between the topic discussed and the song studied today. Distribute the lyrics and read through the poem once as a class. Discuss historical context of Huey Newton, Black Panthers, and the election of Obama.
4. Have the students read through the lyrics again with a partner trying to determine what the speaker (Tupac) feels about the topic of racism. (Offer a list of descriptive tone words as a scaffold for students who need an accommodation).
5. Students share out the word(s) that they chose to describe Tupac's emotion. Explain that all of these words describe Tupac's **tone.** Provide students with a definition of tone, if you have not previously discussed it.
6. Next, ask the students to highlight 3 lines, words, or phrases that reveal Tupac's attitude/emotion in the song. Each partnership will then share with the class the tone they selected and their evidence to support their claim.
7. Likely, the partnerships will have different words to describe the **tone**. Explain that a piece of writing can have multiple tones, and in fact, authors choose to use a variety of tones for a variety of purposes. Future lessons can focus on how and why authors alternate their tones.
8. To finish the activity, have the students imagine what Tupac would have to say about America and racism currently. Would his tone be the same? What lines might he write? (Students can create their own, or they can explain why he might reuse lines that are still relevant).

Pedagogical Hip-Hop Resources:

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Syntheses from Emery Petchauer- In 2009, and again in 2015, Petchauer published reviews of the various approaches educators and researchers are employing for pedagogical hip-hop. The articles give a sense of the accomplishments as well as the gaps that exist in the literature. It is a great starting place for exploring the literature, as it links to many other resources.

The Harvard Hip-Hop Archive and Research Institute: Not only does their website contain compelling pictures, posts, and articles, this team's mission is to "facilitate and encourage the pursuit of knowledge, art, culture and responsible leadership through hip-hop." Thus, they accommodate queries of all kinds and can point one in the right direction to learn more.

The Hip-Hop Ed Movement: This organization publishes content (videos, articles, and tweet forums) that aim to increase youth engagement and critical literacies through hip-hop. They also host a yearly conference, and their website has a list of downloadable articles.

Musing on the Future:

Never lookin' back or too far in front of me-

The present is a gift,

And I just want to be.

Common

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Going forward, there are countless ways and opportunities for me to improve this craft. Perhaps, this is one of the greatest gifts that a career in teaching entails. We are able to constantly reflect on our practices, examining both our successes and shortcomings, to make the next year the best one yet. For me, the goal is to incorporate hip-hop more regularly into my classroom. I am currently producing raps from the perspective of Atticus Finch, Odysseus, and Romeo. A more regular inclusion of hip-hop in my classroom will also aide in my other goals for the future.

One such goal is striving to foster conversation and study in my classroom of the generic nature of hip-hop. Letting students explore the history of the genre is one more way to get them critically examining how literary genres develop over time, how they depend on certain conventions, and how truly outstanding authors find a way to both follow and break the rules of the game. Hip-hop also lends itself beautifully to discussions of intertextuality, examining how artists recycle famous phrases and beats into new creations. Tracing the history of the genre also allows for considerations of the potentially problematic aspects of hip-hop. The art form has received flak throughout the years for an abundance of troublesome content. The contained violence, misogyny, homophobia, materialism, and explicit lyrics make considerations of this art form especially potent, and especially important to bring to light in the right manner.

For, if students are already consuming these texts, is it not our responsibility to steer them towards a more critical understanding of the ramifications and consequences of their content? Is it not crucial that we guide students in deciphering the complicated layers of satire, rhetoric, social critique, and irony? A course on hip-hop, both its history and its

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contemporary moment, is the goal for me. Once it’s complete, I look forward to sharing it and stretching the ever-growing reach of hip-hop studies.

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