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"Fuck tha Police": The Poetry and Politics of N.W.A.

Sandra Young

Sacred Heart University, youngs@sacredheart.edu

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Sandra Young

“FUCK THA POLICE”

THE POETRY AND POLITICS OF N.W.A.

No one withdrew after syllabus day. In the semester I piloted a first-year seminar course, the “Rhetoric of Protest Songs,” on the first day of class, I introduced the topic of the class and myself. However, before I gave students the syllabi, I confessed that I knew little about music. I told them I Googled and YouTubed, and read our text to gain knowledge about protest songs. I told them the “Rhetoric of Protest Songs” was a writing class, and rhetoric means persuasion. “In this class, you’ll write academic essays about protest songs. And we’ll listen to some music.”

What are protest songs? Thanks to the internet and YouTube this is the music of political activism and it’s more in-your-face-no-holds-barred-tell-it-like-it-is-speak-truth-to-motherfuckin’-power-defiant than ever. Especially in Trump’s America. It is music that shines a glaring light on abuses of power and demands change. Protest music is also poetry and a new generation is discovering the multimodal ways to blend poetry and politics into protest songs.

The first few semesters I taught this class my focus was twentieth and twenty-first century protest songs of all kinds. I gave students the freedom to choose their protest songs, hoping they wouldn’t get lost in the sometimes profane and defiant lyrics. I wondered if the mostly white students from the suburbs attending a private Catholic university would be ready to delve into both the poetry and the politics of protest songs. But I was encouraged by their response. They met protest songs head on. They researched and wrote argumentative essays about the poetry and politics of songs that spoke of war (The Vietnam War, from Country Joe and the Fish, 1968, “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag,” and Afghanistan and Iraq, from Green Day, 2004, “American Idiot”), poverty (Prince, 2004, “United States of Division”), police killings (Bruce Springsteen, 2014, “American Skin”), the environment, (Joni Mitchell, 1967-1968, “Big Yellow Taxi”), LGBT rights and pride (The Village People, 1978, “Y.M.C.A.,” and Lady Gaga, 2011, “Born This Way”), and women’s issues (Beyoncé, 2011, “Run the World (Girls)”), among other topics.

We debated, argued, challenged assumptions and stereotypes, and when discussions got dicey, especially relating to songs about domestic violence, like Tracy Chapman’s 1988 “Behind the Wall,” the class would get quiet for a few moments, and then loud as each side reinforced perspectives and prejudices. As I watched my students work to find common ground and right themselves, I reminded myself that students need to learn how to confront differing opinions and discover that heated discussions can produce cool compromises. Throughout that first semester, most students focused on the songs’ *words*, as they connected the words to *issues*, and rendered conclusions about the effectiveness of the songs in changing minds.

Then, after a few semesters, I felt confident that students *could* tackle social justice issues, so I narrowed my focus for the next semester. That class would choose songs, from the 1960s to now, by hip hop and rap artists that addressed issues confronting some members of a specific group – people of color.

This paper discusses my plan for the semester, and specifically on two of the three essay assignments, “Protest song lyrics as poetry,” and “Protest song lyrics as politics.” In this paper, I argue that two white male teens, John and Evan (their aliases), demonstrated that their generation was prepared to tackle social justice issues – even issues that sometimes only tangentially touched them. Both John and Evan wrote about N.W.A.’s 1988 ground-breaking song, “Fuck Tha Police,” but from different perspectives: John dealt with the lyrics as poetry; Evan, the lyrics as politics.

First, some backstory about the first-year seminar, a required course that replaced Academic Writing, is required. In this course, faculty across the Arts and Sciences curricula adhered to the seminar’s learning objective about teaching writing skills but taught the seminar from whatever angle they think would appeal to students. In developing the “Rhetoric of Protest Songs,” I choose protest songs because their issues, passionate, personal, polemic, and political, chronicle social justice issues. Writing about social justice issues is a form of activism.

Throughout my career, my pedagogy has sought to disrupt and confound students’ comfort levels. I agree with the positions of Dennis A. Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn M. Cooper in their article, “Moments of Arguments: Agonistic inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation,” in which they state that “reconceiving argument that includes both confrontational and cooperative perspectives, [is] a multifaceted process that includes moments of conflict and

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agonistic positioning as well as moments of understanding and communication” (63). In researching and writing about protest songs, I hoped my students would begin to understand their places in the web of social, cultural, civic, political, and racial matters. I hoped they would take transformative steps and link their own writing about social justice issues to what happens in their real-world everyday lives.

The text I used for my first few classes was Dorian Lynskey’s 2011, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs from Billie Holiday to Green Day*. He defines a protest song as a “political issue ... which aligns itself with the underdog” and says the “point of protest music, or indeed any art with a political dimension, is not to shift the world on its axis but to change opinions and perspectives, to say something about the times in which you live” (xiv-xv). Most of my students embraced Lynskey’s definition, and some chose songs listed in his text, though many others found their own songs online.

Protest songs are also poems. In fact, Marlene K. Sokolon defines protest poetry in her article, “The *Iliad*: A Song of Political Protest,” as poetry that, “celebrates a voice on behalf of victims of injustice, the poor, the oppressed” (49). In the wake of recent protest demonstrations, growing crowds vocalized the line, “Fuck Tha Police,” as both poetic tributes to lives lost and political statements of continued unrest. Often, chants of “Hands up, don’t shoot” or “I can’t breathe,” morphed into “Fuck the police.”

In 1988, when the lyrics, “Fuck Tha Police” permeated white communities and entranced white teens, the question was why? The simple answer: the song made their parents nuts. If parents hated a song, then it must be good as a typical teen attitude. This was a song that described an alien world of drugs, violence, sex, and danger. When Ice Cube rapped that the “police think they have the authority to kill a minority,” some teen boys heard him rapping to a different kind of “minority” – them – and they raced to buy *Straight Outta Compton*.

In 1992, Alan Light’s “Rappers Sounded Warning,” in the *Rolling Stone*, writes that Ice-T, who was also no fan of the police, recognized that there’s a “new generation of white teens listening to rap and being exposed to a minority perspective for the first time.” Ice-T says: “They’re saying ... ‘these rappers are talking to me, and it’s making me understand. Why did John Wayne always win? Weren’t we taking that land from the Indians? Haven’t we been kind of fucked-up to people?’ They’re starting to figure it out.” Ice-T was referring to white teens, and two of them, John and Evan, answered his questions.

In 2008, Marcus Reeves wrote *Somebody Scream! Rap Music’s Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power*. In the chapter about N.W.A., “Niggas Selling Attitude: N.W.A.,” Reeves reminds us that the record industry is in the business of making money. He says that “gangstafied rap was as much a verbal response to demoralizing social and economic conditions as it was an innovative way to sell records” (105). Reeves, quoting the owner of Priority Records, Bryan Turner, credits white teens for pushing the sale of *Straight Outta Compton* into the millions. “White teens in the Valley picked it up,” he said, “and they decided they wanted to live vicariously through this music.” Not much has changed today.

Living vicariously through music. It’s what many of us do. Music is connotative. Students (people) of all stripes are challenged to make their own meanings and find their own values in the music. The connotative nature of music proves that music is inherently rhetorical – it persuasively grabs us and demands attention. We interpret lyrics and construct our own meanings.

What meanings could suburban white teens take from N.W.A.? The song “Fuck Tha Police” flashed a strobe light on the lives of O’Shea Jackson (Ice Cube), Eric Wright (Easy E), Lorenzo Patterson (MC Ren), Antoine Carraby (DJ Yella), and Andre Young (Dr. Dre). It reported on their lives lived in survival mode on the sub-standard streets of Compton. Their song, not meant as a social or political commentary, was the authentic, lived experiences of these young men. It was treatise on lives lived in poverty because of economic inequality. Of homes in the inner city – a coded term for the ghetto – where danger and violence pervaded all aspects of life. The ghetto, where poorly educated boys became thugs in gangs, and then committed crimes. The ghetto, where girls became mothers too young, and then went on welfare. A place where drugs were available on every street corner. The men of N.W.A. rapped the powerful truth of their dehumanizing encounters with police profiling and brutality.

Then, on that Syllabus Day, in that class focused on protest songs about issues concerning some people of color, I fired-up the computer and began with a montage of YouTube clips of protest songs starting in the 1960s. So, as I began my history lesson, I turned to my notes, research, music lyrics, and as much jive as a middle-aged white woman can summon.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

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“Are you ready niggas? You’ve got to be ready,” asks three black poet/musicians, the Last Poets (a name for several groups of artists), when they take the stage in Harlem in 1968. Ready for the revolution. Called the “forefathers of rap,” in Sheila Rule’s 1994 *New York Times* article, “Generation Rap,” she says that they “welded revolutionary politics, incendiary street language and jazzy musical accompaniment into a polyrhythmic wake-up call to America.” Specifically, Black America.

I explained that the “revolution” the Last Poets spoke of was often associated with the 1960-1970s Black Power movement that demanded the continuation of civil rights for African Americans. Broadly defined, the revolution is about economic, political, social, housing, and educational empowerment, with an emphasis on black identity and pride. Its artistic component, the Black Arts Movement, included musicians, poets, novelists, playwrights, and fine artists. The revolution, both political and artistic, rejected the dominant values of white American mainstream, and sought to define and establish its own framework of ideologies.

I paused. They’re listening. I continued.

Two years later, in 1970, the Last Poets thought that maybe Black America wasn’t ready for the revolution. Their spoken word, hip-hop song, “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution,” spoke a frank reality:

Niggers are scared of revolution
But niggers shouldn’t be scared of revolution
Because revolution is nothing but change
And all niggers do is change.

Soon after that declaration, their song, “Wake Up, Niggers,” was an unobvious call to wake up. However, with the salvo, “When the Revolution Comes,” they seem to have given up. They rap:

When the revolution comes
When the revolution comes
When the revolution comes some of us will probably catch it
on TV, with chicken hanging from our mouths.

Then in the final lyrics of this song from the Last Poets, they gave their black audiences a bit of a poetic and political back-hand when they rapped: “But until then you know and I know niggers will party and / bullshit and party and bullshit and party / and bullshit and party and bullshit and party...” That damning declaration from the Last Poets, I told my students, was about the lack of motivation of their own people.

Their cause was taken up by Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” I continued. Scott-Heron’s 1970 reminder was squarely directed at black audiences. Called the “Godfather of Rap” and the “People’s Poet,” he offered a spoken soulful matter-of-fact prediction:

You will not be able to stay home, brother
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag
And skip out for beer during commercials.

Because, “The revolution will be live.” Pay attention, Scott-Heron seemed to allude.

By 1971, I told my students, the revolution was getting a bit hotter, though to some, it’s still a bit confusing. Sly and the Family Stone’s funk/soul “There’s a Riot Goin’ On,” started with a call for action, “Mayday, mayday there’s a riot going down”; it explains where and what’s happening, but yet, the song ends when the “YOUTH” asks: “What the fuck is going on? / What the fuck is going on? / Can I get a straight answer?”

The revolution, I said, had stalled.

James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, seemed fed up and was giving up. In his 1971 album, 40th Anniversary Collection, the song, “There It Is, Pts. 1 & 2,” he hesitated about joining in the revolution, and said let’s just have fun, though there’s a small understated warning. Listen for it:

Wipe the sweat
Going to have some fun
Time’s getting short
we got to move
But in the meantime
Mama, we got to groove.

So, bring on the groove. Stevie Wonder’s soul/pop, “Living for the City,” in 1973, seemed hopeful and optimistic because, “His parents give him love and affection / to keep him strong moving in the right direction.” So, he kept

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going. But, like James Brown, there was a limit to what he could take in the current political environment, when he admonished his black audience in the last verse:

I hope you hear inside my voice of sorrow
And that it motivates you to make a better tomorrow
This place is cruel no where could be much colder
If we don't change the world will soon be over.

Yet, Stevie Wonder, too, seemed to give up.

By 1975, Curtis Mayfield's album, *There's No Place Like America Today*, continued the pessimistic black dystopic vision of Sly when he sings in “Hard Times,” that he's fearful of white America. “Cold, cold eyes on me they stare / People all around me and they're all in fear / They don't seem to want me but they won't admit.” As the song continues, the character sings that he'll “play the part I feel they want of me”; and finally

From my body house I see like me another
Familiar face of creed and a brother
But to my surprise I found another man corrupt
Although he be my brother he wants to hold me up.

Mayfield's lyrics seemed to describe 1982 New York, a hotbed of hot-button issues like crime, unemployment, and growing poverty. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, combined the angst of the 1970s and the negativism of the early 1980s with their blast of despair, “The Message.” Grandmaster Flash's Melle Mel gave hip hop voice and political perception to what's going on with these lyrics: “It's like a jungle sometimes / It makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” They rapped about “broken glass,” “people pissing on the stairs,” “rats,” and “junkies.” He says that he's “Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice.” And, like other poet/musicians, there was a warning, a petition, a plea, that repeated throughout: “Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge / I'm trying not to lose my head.”

Melle Mel continued:

I can't walk through the park, 'cause it's crazy after the dark
Keep my hand on the gun, 'cause they got me on the run
... You grow in the ghetto, living second rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The place that you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alley way...

And

It was plain to see that your life was lost
You was cold and your body swung back and forth
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song
Of how you lived so fast and died so young.

Grandmaster Flash's “The Message,” detailed the inventory of social ills in New York, but in Los Angeles a different genre of rappers was gearing up to blow the lid off the world of hip hop.

My students listened. Nodded.

The lid began to blow in the 1987 rap hit, “6 'n the Mornin',” when Ice-T brags:

6 in the morning, police at my door
Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor
Out my back window I make a escape ...
And the streets to a player is the place to be...
Gold on my neck, my pistols close at hand
I'm a self-made monster of the city streets
Remotely controlled by hard hip-hop beats
But just living in the city is a serious task
Didn't know what the cops wanted, didn't have time to ask.

Channeling the Last Poets, Ice-T seemed to be ready.

Two years later, Schoolly D's 1987 taunted, “Am I Black Enough for Ya,” and claimed that “All I need is, my blackness,” and that he was “just rough and tough, and takin' no stuff.” He swaggered that he's “too damn powerful / I'm still a bad boy.” And he finally declared: “My name Schoolly D, I'm never alone.” So, there, he seemed to say.

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While Ice-T and Schoolly D got street cred for beginning the subgenre of hip hop called “gangsta rap,” violently cock-sure musicians who associated with the gangster or “gangsta” lifestyle, still they didn’t push the envelope with their music.

Then, in 1988, that envelope was not only pushed, but ripped wide open. One group crashed into the gangster rap scene and would dare to say the unsayable.

I paused. Scanned my audience. “Are you ready? Do you know what’s coming next?” Some smiled. I continued.

Dr. Dre announced: “You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge.” He and Easy E, MC Ren, DJ Yella, and Ice Cube are Niggaz Wit Attitude (N.W.A.). The song responsible for the lid-blowing is “Straight Outta Compton,” the title track of the album of the same name, and the set-up for the song that would cement their legacy. In “Fuck Tha Police,” they used their “street knowledge” to say the unsayable: “Fuck the police coming straight from the underground.”

“Fuck tha,” I said. “T-h-a, not t-h-e. Tha. Fuck Tha Police.” They looked at me. I continued. “Do you recall that the Last Poets chanted this challenge to Black America in 1968: ““Are you ready niggas? You’ve got to be ready.””

I take a long look at my students. “Are you ready?”

N.W.A. was ready. Twenty years after the Last Poets, “Fuck Tha Police” blasted another rhythmic shockwave into the sensibilities of America. This time into White America.

This was the song that launched a thousand controversies, diatribes, and extreme over-reactions, I told my students. This was the song that triggered N.W.A. to promote themselves as “The World’s Most Dangerous Group.” This was the song that got no radio play, but managed to irritate the LAPD and the FBI sent N.W.A. an intimidating letter. This song got white America parents alarmed, got white teens tantalized, and got millions of records sold.

I stopped and looked at my students. “Are you ready?”

They were.

The day after syllabus day, I went into the details of the syllabus, and the three assignments. Here, briefly, are two of the assignments.

Essay #1 – Protest song lyrics as poetry: Protest songs are poems. In this first essay of about 500 words, choose 1 song from any hip hop group from any decade and examine it as a poem that deals with a social/cultural/political issue/problem/event. Identify the issue of the song. For this essay, you’ll use 1 literary focus area (plot, character, symbol, setting) to interpret, analyze, evaluate the poetry (lyrics) of the song, and argue how/why it resonated with audiences. The evaluation and interpretation of this song is entirely your own opinion.

Essay #2 – Protest song lyrics as politics: Protest song lyrics are political. For this second essay of about 750 words, you’ll examine any 1 song from any hip hop group from any decade that deals with a social/cultural/political issue/problem/event as a political statement. Don’t use the same issue or song from Essay #1. Use 2 secondary research sources about the song’s issue. Your argument will concern whether the song’s issue/problem/event at the time of the song resonates today. Do not research the lyrics of the song. In-text citations and works cited page.

I reminded students of my acronym W. A. S. & P., which is **W: writer.** You. **A: audience.** In college, your professor and classmates. **S: situation.** The situation is your writing assignment’s specific details. **P: purpose.** The purpose of the assignment is what your professor wants you to do – inform or argue or persuade or explain. Throughout the course, I slyly inserted rhetorical strategies and techniques, such as Toulmin’s concept of warrants and claims, methods for finding and evaluating research. For kicks, I introduced deductive reasoning. My hope was that the issues in their chosen protest songs would trigger engagement and produce aha moments of social awareness in my students. My pedagogical hope was to convert high school writers into college writers.

I don’t give trigger warnings. In my classroom, all issues are on the table, and none are censored if students are respectful of others’ opinions. This fact alone surprised many students, because protest song lyrics can be offensive. Students chose the songs, studied their lyrics, and researched and wrote. Many students found their voices, let the artists and songs speak to them, and connected current hot issues with those of the past. In doing so, students realized the relevancy of the issues. We are experiencing a zeitgeist moment for protest music. Many of my students took ownership of their positions about political issues in their writing.

My students, John and Evan, had their own zeitgeist moments, and “Fuck Tha Police” led the way. Each choose N.W.A.’s principal song for one of their essays. For John, it was Essay #1 – Protest song lyrics as poetry. Evan used the song for his Essay #2 – Protest song lyrics as politics. In John’s essay, he critically analyzed, evaluated, interpreted, and argued the song’s lyrics about police brutality; Evan’s essay focused on profiling, he added research and used lyrics to support his position. I quote from their essays.

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To be honest, I was a bit surprised that my class would embrace writing about protest songs concerning issues of some people of color. I wondered why these suburban white teens, whose lives were seemingly free of the kind of conflict rapped by protest song artists, were attracted to the music’s issues. These students had probably never experienced the situations, terrors, and unrest described in these songs. Especially, I was intrigued by what John and Evan might learn from “Fuck Tha Police.”

For John and Evan, “Fuck Tha Police” worked to shake them out of their semi-protected shells. Perhaps the song produced nascent activism in John and Evan. In doing so, they may have become just a little more aware. A little less comfortable. A little more “woke.”

Living vicariously through music. It’s what many of us do. Music is connotative. Students (people) of all stripes are challenged to make their own meanings and find their own values in the music. The connotative nature of music proves that music is inherently rhetorical – it persuasively grabs us and demands attention. We interpret lyrics and construct our own meanings.

But what meanings could suburban white teens take from N.W.A.? The song “Fuck Tha Police” flashed a strobe light on the lives of O’Shea Jackson (Ice Cube), Eric Wright (Easy E), Lorenzo Patterson (MC Ren), Antoine Carraby (DJ Yella), and Andre Young (Dr. Dre). It reported on their lives lived in survival mode on the sub-standard streets of Compton. Their song, not meant as a social or political commentary, was the authentic, lived experiences of these young men. It was treatise on lives lived in poverty because of economic inequality. Of homes in the inner city – a coded term for the ghetto – where danger and violence pervaded all aspects of life. The ghetto, where poorly educated boys became thugs in gangs, and then committed crimes. The ghetto, where girls became mothers too young, and then went on welfare. A place where drugs were available on every street corner. The men of N.W.A. rapped the powerful truth of their dehumanizing encounters with police profiling and brutality.

How did my students fit into this scenario? Were my students living vicariously the lives of N.W.A.? When Ice Cube declared, “We can go toe to toe in the middle of a cell / Fucking with me cause I’m a teenager,” did John and Evan see themselves? Or were they indulging in teenage bravado? Were they re-casting the established stereotypes of blacks in jail cells? Did they have any idea what the song was truly about? Did they grasp the irony of white teens glomming onto a song directed at black audiences? Did they even know what “white privilege” meant? “White privilege” – that term itself freighted with controversy.

I would find out. In his Essay #1: Protest song lyrics as poetry about “Fuck Tha Police,” John (white, 18, upper middle class) was up-front in recognizing his white privilege. His familiarity with Macklemore’s 2005 song “White Privilege” propelled us into a 30-minute (almost half the class) discussion. When I asked the class to define “white privilege,” it was a long few seconds before someone spoke up. In that conversation, a few eyebrows arched, one or two voices shrilled, but no chairs were tossed. And maybe for some of my students, there were tacit insights into understanding white privilege and its place in their lives.

In Essay #1, the point of this short first essay allowed students to familiarize themselves with the processes of college writing and workshopping. In all of their essays, I stressed that student opinions are important as long as they don’t contradict facts, and that their interpretations and analyses of their songs must be entirely their own points of view. I hoped that when students opined about their songs and connected the lyrics to issues, conversations would lead students to see how hot political issues of the past are still relevant today.

For Essay #2, I introduced research. Though I continued to encourage my students to find their voices and express their own opinions, they also critically examined other opinions from their research. Even though this was a first-year writing course, and even though I don’t require deep dives into research, I did expect due diligence when they researched their protest songs’ political issues. I allotted a significant part of class time for researching, questioning, and drafting. Remember, I gave my students lots of freedom in choosing their songs. So, I figured they owed it to me to stay focused.

For John, the issue for Essay #1 (protest song lyrics as poetry) of “Fuck Tha Police,” was easy – police brutality. Yet in his pre-writing phase, he dug into why he was moved by the song. In a workshop discussion about his draft, he pulled up Macklemore’s “White Privilege,” on his laptop and pointed to these lines: “Hip-hop started off in a block that I’ve never been to / To counter act a struggle that I’ve never even been through.” And:

So here comes history and the cultural appropriation
White teens with do rags trying to practice their accents
From the suburbs to the upperclass mastering a language
But hip hop is not just memorizing words

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It’s rooted in authenticity something you literally can’t learn

But I’m gonna be me so please be who you are.

John followed Macklemore’s advice.

John said that he wanted his essay to show how rebellion was in the “eye of the beholder,” and that his rebellion – a tattoo – was how he was, like Macklemore insisted, “gonna be me.” So, this 18-year-old did get into the poetry of “Fuck Tha Police” by interpreting the character of MC Ren. John said that when MC Ren took the stand in N.W.A.’s pseudo-courtroom drama of mocking the police, he explained how and why he made decisions, and how MC Ren asserted his right to be who he is. John wrote that when the cops pulled over MC Ren, when “‘Lights start flashing behind me,’” he said, “‘that shit don’t work, I just laugh / because it gives em a hint, not to step in my path / For police, I’m saying, ‘Fuck you punk!’” John said that “MC Ren makes a decision to laugh at the cops because they’re ‘scared of a nigga’, and that ‘Taking out tha police, would make my day.’” John wrote: “I’m not a gangsta, but I can rebel. I’m not going to really laugh at a cop that pulls me over, but later I might.”

When John related the character of MC Ren in “Fuck Tha Police,” he discovered he had an unlikely kinship with the rapper. John recognized another teenager in the rapper, and he didn’t let his white privilege get in the way of his empathy. What I learned is how John understood the lyrics as powerful tools for sociopolitical change. In John’s writing I saw the onset or maybe continuation of activism when he debated with his class about white privilege. He linked the political power – the “authority” – of the police over MC Ren because “the niggas on the street is a minority.” And he analyzed the character of the rapper (now a middle-aged man), he saw a teen rebel, like himself. Although, as John admits, he’s not about to go gangster.

Let’s also remember that the line, “Fuck the police coming straight from the underground,” isn’t the first line of the song. In the opening, N.W.A. set up their own courtroom drama in which we witnessed a rapping script complete with speaking parts for the rappers and a cop: “[MC Ren as Court Officer]” says:

Right about now, N.W.A. court is in full effect

Judge Dre presiding

In the case of N.W.A. vs. the Police Department

prosecuting attorneys are MC Ren, Ice Cube

and Eazy-motherfucking E.

In creating their own bizzaro episode of “Law and Order,” the rappers sought a reversal of that classic paradigm. They put the cops on trial in a kangaroo courtroom fantasy.

What John taught me, a middle-aged, white woman, was to move past the shock of the profanity-laced, explicitly violent lyrics of “Fuck Tha Police,” and focus on the rappers as characters in the song, and how they used language. Then, in my research, when Geoffrey Baker suggest in his 2011, “Preachers, Gangsters, Pranksters: MC Solaar and Hip-Hop as Overt and Covert Revolt,” I listened again to the song, and I heard the rappers testify. I heard them use their “street knowledge” to tell their stories of daily abuses, and become masters of their “imagined domain” (237), the courtroom fantasy, which is, as Baker says, is the “end-point of every narrative” (237). John had moved past the lyrics to envision himself on trial and defending his right to be himself.

Looking past the jarring lyrics, I also saw N.W.A. as hyperbolic humorists who wrote playful poetry. In writing “Fuck Tha Police,” N.W.A. accomplished what Baker asserts is the “most graphic violence...violence that is performed *graphically: in writing, in language*” (238). Furthermore, by setting the song in a courtroom, the rappers used parody in a mocking re-enactment of real trials, says Bryan McCann, in his 2012 article, “Contesting the Mark of Criminality: Race, Place, and the Prerogative of Violence in N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton*.” By making fun of the LAPD, the rappers cast off the stereotyped “mark of criminology” seared on them by white America, and became tongue-in-cheek tricksters having a bloody good time while the authorities – politicians, cops, and parents – heard their figurative language and wordplay as literal threats.

Evan, another 18-year-old, began his Essay #2 (protest song lyrics as politics) about “Fuck Tha Police”:

There will always be a problem in the world of politics....In the 1970s and 1980s...law enforcement was not serving justice to every citizen. They targeted African Americans, mainly young black men because they believed they were involved in drugs, robbery, or murder. Protesting against police brutality...artists creating music to help speak out...[the] N.W.A. wrote ‘Fuck Tha Police’...to show how the neighborhood of Compton, California was affecting them, but then they had an effect right back on them with these lyrics, ‘Smoke any motherfucker that sweats me // or any asshole, that threatens me // I’m a sniper with a hell of a scope // Taking out a cop or two, they can’t cope with me.’

Sandra Young • “Fuck Tha Police”

He found research from *Billboard*, in Alex Gale’s “Ice Cube: ‘Police Have Become Our Worst Bullies.’” Evan writes: Ice Cube, a member of N.W.A., spoke ... about the politics he faced during the times he was creating music. Gale had interviewed Ice Cube, who states, ‘We wanted to show that when we did a song like ‘Fuck Tha Police’ that it wasn’t just about us...It was more of an anthem for people to be able to fight back and to have a song they can all rally around...We wanted to show that our music had an impact on the community as a whole.’

Then, Evan added his considered opinion:

N.W.A. was trying to warn people about what was going on politically...Ice Cube believes that their song’s significance is that it shows the problem that the police are trained to win no matter what and that they are not held accountable for their actions even if it’s killing an innocent kid. He also believes that politicians...try to discredit rappers who speak out about political issues.

Recall during our earlier debate about white privilege, that John referred to Macklemore’s 2005 song, “White Privilege.” Then, Evan countered John with Macklemore’s 2016 “White Privilege II.” His favorite parts of the song, he told the class, were when Macklemore (and Ryan Lewis) introduced other voices and opinions, like N.W.A. did in “Fuck Tha Police.”

In his essay, John wrote that, “...like the cops in ‘Fuck Tha Police,’ these other voices/opinions didn’t seem to see what was happening around them, nor did they understand the irony like in ‘White Privilege II.’ When Macklemore raps, ‘It seems like we’re more concerned with being called racist / Than we actually are with racism...”

Evan, like John, seemed to connect the dots from Eazy E’s raps questioning cops’ motivations, when he quoted “They put out my picture with silence // Cause my identity by itself causes violence” to Macklemore’s raps about questioning his own motivations: “If I’m aware of my privilege and do nothing at all, I don’t know...So what the fuck has happened to my voice if I stay silent when black people are dying.”

In writing about “Fuck Tha Police,” John wrote about the lyrics as poetry and Evan about lyrics as politics, they seemed to be “checking their white privilege.” Were John’s and Evan’s arguments about police and profiling forms of activism? Had John and Evan earned their “‘woke badges’”? These are some of the questions that Amanda Hess posits in her 2016 *New York Times Magazine* article, “Earning the ‘Woke’ Badge.” To be considered “woke” Hess says, is “a back-pat from the left,” an acknowledgement that you grasp the historic struggle against prejudice and racial injustice. “‘Woke,’” Hess notes, “denotes awareness,” but also “connotes blackness. It suggests to white allies that if they walk the walk, they get to talk the talk.” But Hess and others cautioned that if whites appropriated a black culture then they must be willing to confront other whites.

John and Evan endorsed Hess’ call to action when they both discussed Macklemore. At the end of his “White Privilege II,” Macklemore raps:

The best thing white people can do is talk to each other

And having those very difficult, very painful conversations...

I think one of the critical questions for white people in this society is what are you willing to risk

What are you willing to sacrifice to create a more just society?

Yet, if whites risk over-playing the “stay woke” mantra, they might wind up like the cop on trial in “Fuck Tha Police,” when Dr. Dre proclaims, “The jury has found you guilty of being a redneck/white bread, chickenshit motherfucker.”

In that class focused on issues concerning some people of color, my students studied song lyrics that ran the gamut of current political talking points: police brutality, domestic violence, profiling, Black Lives Matter, gun violence, and civil rights. They formulated positions, debated, and argued. They shared opinions, outrage, and sometimes optimism.

By specifically writing about the poetry and the politics of N.W.A.’s 1988 song, “Fuck Tha Police,” John and Evan helped their classmates realize that police brutality and profiling has never really stopped. Now, when students hear the names Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, and too many others, they may connect N.W.A.’s song to the demonstrations and protests happening now. In fact, in Chris Moore’s 2015 *Mass Appeal* article, “‘Fuck Tha Police’: N.W.A.’s Most Courageous Song is Still Relevant as Ever,” Ice Cube states, “‘Fuck Tha Police’ was four hundred years in the making. And it’s still just as relevant as it was before it was made.” In a world of 24/7 social media and cell phone videos, students can see what’s happening around the country.

My students may not have known that when they researched and wrote about protest songs they were entering an ongoing conversations about the role of social justice activism. They do now.

The next semester, on syllabus day, students knew what to expect. No one withdrew from that class, either.

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