

**“Are My Songs Literature?”**  
**Lessons Learned from Teaching a Non-Traditional Text**

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*Abstract:* Carlson, Mootz, and Thomas provide an overview of their experiences as co-teachers during a summer pre-college program in which they taught a non-traditional text, Kendrick Lamar’s (2015) hip-hop album, *To Pimp a Butterfly (TPAB)*, rather than a conventional literary text from the Western canon.

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"Not once have I ever had the time to ask myself, 'Are my songs *literature*?'"

--Bob Dylan (2016), Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

In December of 2016, the Swedish Academy announced the 75-year-old folk-singer Bob Dylan as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. The committee's selection of a musician/songwriter rather than a traditional literary figure elicited a variety of opinions and perspectives. The equating of song lyrics with literature or songwriters as poets has both fascinated and horrified the literary establishment. For many cultural gatekeepers, Dylan's work is too "low brow," too mundane, to be classified among the most distinguished works of literature.

In the excerpted passage above from the end of Dylan's brief acceptance speech - Dylan did not attend the Nobel Banquet ceremony but his statement accepting the award was read by the American Ambassador to Sweden, Azita Raji - he returned to an earlier paragraph in the speech in which he referenced "the great literary figure" William Shakespeare. According to Dylan, Shakespeare did not view himself as a "literary figure"; instead, he likely saw himself as a dramatist. Further, Dylan casts doubt that Shakespeare ever mused about his work: "Is this literature?" Instead, Shakespeare was

likely more concerned with practical questions, such as, "Do I really want to set this in Denmark?" and "Where am I going to get a human skull?"

In the same manner as Shakespeare, Dylan claims to never have wondered if he was creating literature or if he was a figure of literary greatness. Whether or not an artist (dramatist, poet) wonders if they are creating a work of art or not, however, their creations are frequently adjudicated by audiences with varied opinions and attitudes toward the work/artist. While there may be no consensus on whether today's work is art or literature, we do know that those seeking to safeguard their own cultural interests, values, and preferences – those with power, privilege, and prestige in society – greatly sway understandings of and attitudes toward the work(s) of an artist.

In this article, we explore issues related to what "counts" as literature in schools today. We provide an overview of our experiences as co-teachers during a summer pre-college program in which we taught a non-traditional text. In this case, we describe key lessons that emerged from our teaching and reflection upon our teaching of Kendrick Lamar's (2015) hip-hop album, *To Pimp a Butterfly (TPAB)*, rather than a conventional literary text from the Western canon (e.g., William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*). Further, we explore the opportunities and challenges associated with analyzing hip-hop album as literature. Lastly, we reflect on the importance of moving beyond the current focus on "exemplar" texts as central to disrupting traditional notions of what "counts" in academic settings.

### **Inquiry as Stance**

We framed this project around notions of teacher inquiry and inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith, 2004, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009). Teacher inquiry is an empowering political stance as much as it is a way to improve one's own practice. Teacher or practitioner inquiry legitimates teachers as adept at constructing and disseminating knowledge about the teaching and learning processes. Additionally, while traditional notions of expertise in education have relied on "objective" experts, teacher inquiry validates the practitioner as capable of insights into the classroom.

Democratic teaching practices depend on reflective questioning and socially-situated constructions of knowledge. Thus, we draw upon the notion of inquiry as stance to support our understanding of a knowledge of practice. Inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009) is a "way of being," an intellectual posture, that teachers take toward their teaching. The posture is often seen as a powerful form of resistance against the sometimes isolating and lonely conditions of the profession (Dana, 2013). The stance encourages opportunities for critical questioning and interrupting "business-as-usual" approaches to teaching and pedagogy (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Further, the stance promotes learning from and with our colleagues collectively in the process of deliberating educational dilemmas, while promoting the continuous evaluation of our choices as educators committed to social change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

On a daily basis throughout our teaching in summer 2016, we met to debrief on the effectiveness of our teaching, to make plans for the lessons and experiences ahead, and to talk through dilemmas related to teaching in general and to our teaching of a non-traditional text. Then, throughout the fall of 2016 and into early 2017, we continued to meet monthly to converse, question, write, revise, and reflect on the lessons we were learning about our collaborative teaching experience. We had hopes that others might take action in their own schools, departments, and classrooms to move beyond the traditional (white, middle class, male) canon frequently served as literature with "real value" in today's schools.

### **Context for Teaching**

The collaborative teaching experience described here occurred in a pre-college program, the "CITIZENS Guild," held on the campus of "State University" (both pseudonyms). The authors of this paper served as co-teachers for a section (n =17 students) of Reading & Writing during the course of a three-week program. The CITIZENS Guild is open to students from urban centers and rural areas in grades 6-12 in a Midwestern state who meet at least two of the following criteria: (1) first-generation college applicants, (2) low-socioeconomic income background, and (3) students of color (historically marginalized

racial and ethnic groups). The students in our classroom mostly mirrored the program demographics: 40% Hispanic/Latino/a; 25% African American/Black; 15% Asian American; 10% Native American; 5% bi/multiracial; and 5% Other.

The program focuses on developing social, cultural, and academic capital in a variety of informal and structured ways. During the summer months, students in grades 9-12 in the program live in a residence hall on State University's campus for at least three weeks. Each weekday, students in the program take a full day of academic (e.g., Mathematics, English/Language Arts, Science, and college-readiness preparation) and elective courses (including career exploration). Throughout their days, students are mentored by counselors and teachers who introduce them to university resources and help them navigate the campus. Nights and weekends are spent networking with peers and counselors through planned and informal activities. Social skills are strengthened via interactions with other students, including interactions with graduates of the program currently attending UW-La Crosse.

Each summer, English teachers in the program (n = approximately 20) work autonomously to craft a three-week course for students in the program. The course is expected to prepare students for reading and writing at the college level. In previous summers, students in grades 10 and 11 were required to read mostly traditional print texts, with each grade level being assigned a different title. In recent years, the following books were studied: James McBride's (1996) *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother*, M. K. Asante's (2008) *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*, G. Neri and Randy Duburke's (2010) graphic novel *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*, and Suzanne Collins' (2008) *The Hunger Games*.

In 2016, however, Kendrick Lamar's (2015) hip-hop album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, was selected as the primary text for both grades 10 and 11. The album, which came out in 2015, was met with wide acclaim, including 11 nominations at the 58<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards in early 2016. In addition to detailing Lamar's battles with depression and thoughts of suicide, two tracks from the album ("The Blacker the Berry" and "Alright") have been

embraced as key anthems in the unofficial soundtrack for the Black Lives Matter movement (King, 2016). While we had little prior experience teaching experiences to draw upon for teaching a full-length album as an academic text, we were eager to begin the process of planning out the unit.

### **Backwards Planning**

During the initial stages of our planning the three-week unit, we followed Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) framework for backwards planning. We began by identifying the desired results of our teaching. In the initial stage of planning, we focused on the "Big Ideas" of the unit. In this case, we identified "Identity" and "Social Justice" as big ideas guiding our teaching and student learning. Building upon the big ideas, we articulated essential questions that would serve as guideposts for our teaching. The following questions were identified as essential for our students to grapple with throughout the unit:

- What is identity? What is/are my identity/ies?
- (How) are my identities shaped and/or formed?
- (How) do music, literature, and art serve as vehicles for social change?

In addition to identifying essential questions, during our initial stage of planning, we targeted several Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) that would guide student learning throughout the unit. We targeted the following anchor reading, writing, and speaking and listening standards:

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4)

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7)
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4)
- Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1)

Along with the key standards, we identified discipline-specific vocabulary terms and other concepts that would be central to the students' sense-making of Kendrick Lamar's album (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1.** *Sampling of Discipline-Specific Vocabulary and General Vocabulary & Concepts Studied in Kendrick Lamar's Album*

<b>Discipline-Specific Vocabulary</b>	<b>General Vocabulary &amp; Concepts</b>
Allegory	Cultural appropriation
Alliteration	Oppression
Figurative language	Double consciousness
Oxymoron	Survivor's guilt
Theme	Post-racial ideology
Intertextuality	Rap braggadocio

After establishing details related to the desired results of our unit, we began the second phase of our planning, determining acceptable evidence. In this stage, we contemplated how students would demonstrate their sophisticated understandings of the big ideas and essential questions that were the focus of the unit.

We decided that students would demonstrate their understanding(s) of identity and social justice by composing a "photovoice project." According to Zenkov and Harmon (2009), photovoice projects authorize students to capture and respond to images relevant to existing social concerns. The students in our class took photographs related to the ideas of identity and social justice, and then responded to their images in writing. Our goal was for students to use their photographs and their written reflections of their photos to engage their peers in discussions on the concepts of identity and social justice. Rather than a traditional essay assignment or other traditional print assignment, we decided upon a photovoice assignment in order to embrace the "new" literacies and visual texts with which today's youth are now familiar. In line with Zenkov and Harmon's (2009) notions on the importance of using "new" literacies in school, we wanted to capitalize on students' expertise with literacy activities often marginalized from school settings (e.g., spoken word; song/lyric composition; digital photography).

Finally, we set about the final stage of planning, working out details related to weekly milestones and daily lessons. We identified the first week as critical for developing trust and building community, the second week as critical for building on each others' ideas and expressing one's self clearly and persuasively, and the third week as critical for workshopping, finalizing, and presenting the photovoice identity projects. Also, in this final stage, we identified some daily structures (e.g., opening ritual, current events, text annotation, and journal writing) that would allow us to target the standards and to stay on track in supporting students with time for the demands of the final project.

Having provided details about the context of our collaborative teaching, including details our overarching goals for the unit on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, we next turn to questions about what "counts" as a legitimate text in schooling.

## **What Counts as Literature?**

When it comes to matters of curriculum and pedagogy, the questions of what "counts" and who determines what "counts" are extremely powerful and revealing (Apple, 1986). According to Zwiers (2014), dominant groups, or "the middle and upper classes tend to define what is intellectual, logical, linguistically appropriate, academic, and organized in a given setting" (p. 12). Further, the middle and upper classes tend to preserve their power and privilege by setting and enforcing the rules that protect "outsiders" from entering into positions of power. For instance, dominant groups limit "non-mainstream" groups from accessing positions of power through the maintenance of biased systems of testing and through teaching practices that empower some (e.g., White, middle-class, Christian) and serve to limit many others. These insights provide us with an understanding that what "counts" in schools, to a tremendous extent, has been mostly determined by groups seeking to maintain their own interests, values, and preferences.

This undemocratic process of determining what "counts" often leads to the exclusion, omission, and undermining of the knowledges, interests, and values of non-dominant groups in the United States (e.g., African Americans, Hispanics, Latina/os, people with disabilities, LGBTQ) and further perpetuates the existing set of class relations. While the status quo is frequently unchallenged, Apple and Beane (2007) reminds us that what "counts" in schooling has been and continues to be contested through deliberation and through teachers in schools dedicated to developing within their students a critical consciousness about the world as it exists and how it might be altered to better reflect the diversity of perspectives that surround us.

In this current era, questions about what "counts" and who determines what "counts" might best be answered through an examination of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010). The CCSS, which have been adopted by over 40-states in the U.S., set out ambitious literacy standards that legitimate the following skills and knowledge: (a) the close-reading of increasingly complex texts and (b) the reading of informational and/or non-fiction texts, and (c) forming arguments

using evidence and academic vocabulary (engageNY, 2012). Few could argue that such skills and knowledge are irrelevant to the success of a democratic citizenry. However, it is important to keep in mind that while the current emphasis offers tremendous possibilities, the narrowed focus on skills and "career readiness" simultaneously overlooks other important aspects needed for a flourishing democracy, including creative and critical negotiation of text(s) and authentic, not standardized, assessments.

In a compelling critique of the text exemplar list, also known as *Appendix B*, included in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010), Schieble (2014) pursues questions of what "counts" and who determines what "counts" in relation to the CCSS's text exemplars. The appendix serves as a list of exemplar texts deemed complex enough to be taught within a respective grade boundary (e.g. grade 9 exemplars, grade 10 exemplars). While the list has been downplayed as a "suggested" list of titles, as Moss (2013), Schieble (2014), and others have noted, publishers, states, and instructional leaders have been widely (and often, uncritically) adopting these texts for use in schools.

According to Schieble (2014), the text exemplar list is far from representative of the diversity of identities in U.S. schools. For instance, overall, the exemplars on the list continue to promote a vision of literature as a Western canon. The list contains an overabundance of European male authors, an abundance of heterosexual characters and themes, and plenty of exemplars featuring middle to upper-class and able-bodied perspectives. Omitted and overlooked, in this "exemplar" list, are perspectives from women and authors of color, along with perspectives from the poor and/or working class and perspectives from/with LGBTQ authors, characters, and/or themes.

For the record, Lamar's (2015) album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, is not mentioned in the *Appendix B* of the CCSS. In fact, the question of what "counts" when it comes to Appendix B leads us to discover the omission of a number of genres of text that we view as important to a thriving democracy. While *Appendix B* outlines text exemplars for Literature (stories, drama, and poetry) and Literary non-fiction (informational texts including speeches and essays), other powerful and provocative genres, including musical albums, visual art genres (film, documentaries, graphic novels, wordless books),

and other multimodal and digital texts (television, video games) are overlooked. As Schieble (2014) points out, an exemplar list focused on the preservation of high status cultural knowledge, by design, limits perspectives and perpetuates existing educational inequities.

Despite the overwhelming omission of a range of authors from diverse and intersecting identities in the current era's "official" curriculum, and despite the exclusion of important contemporary genres from the text "exemplars", as Schieble (2014) notes, teachers using their professional judgment and knowledge of their students' needs and interests can move beyond the "exemplar" list by selecting texts that support the advancement of educational equity. We welcomed the opportunities and challenges that awaited us as we engaged young scholars in (re-)thinking questions about what counts and who determines what counts (or not) in schooling. In the next section, we reflect on our experiences of teaching Lamar's album, sharing key themes that emerged in our reflecting upon our teaching of a "non-traditional" text.

### **Lessons Learned on Integrating a "Non-Traditional" Text in the Classroom**

According to Belle (2016) and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002), hip-hop music is often used as "bait" in English classrooms, as a bridge for students as they move away from urban culture toward more prestigious canonical texts which offer "real literary value." However, we are in agreement with Belle (2016), Dover and Pozdol (2016), and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) on the importance of allowing hip-hop to stand on its own as a genre of text worth studying in classrooms. In this section, we report out on several key lessons we learned by allowing Lamar's (2015) *To Pimp a Butterfly* album to stand alone as an academic text offering students opportunities to gain academic skills and to further develop as critical readers and writers of text and the world (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

*Opportunities for learning "traditional" (i.e., "high-status") literary concepts and beyond.* One of the first lessons that we learned through teaching the album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, is that there are a number of parallels to teaching and learning from a conventional literary text or traditional text in terms of the opportunities to gain disciplinary knowledge and to participate in disciplinary practices. For instance, in a music album, each track can be compared to a chapter in a novel. Individual tracks, as well as the album itself, contained opportunities for situating elements of setting, plot, main idea, theme, point of view, character development, style, tone, conflict, climax, and resolution. Lamar's album is perforated with a variety of "characters," including iconic pop, rap, rock, and hip-hop legends (e.g., Dr. Dre, George Clinton, Bilal, Snoop Dogg, Michael Jackson, Pharrell Williams, and Tupac Shakur). Further, the album is well-noted for its diverse infusion of musical genres and styles (e.g., funk, soul, jazz, and blues), which, in our classroom, often led to discussions on elements of historical context, setting, tone, and style.

Along with basic elements of plot, students grappled with literary concepts confronted with when reading and discussing "high-status" traditional texts or when taking a high-stakes standardized test. The title of the album, for instance, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, was the basis for one of the first lessons related to figurative language in the album, including Lamar's use of metaphors, similes, personification, and symbolism. In our interrogation of the album's title, students did a "quick write" about how they were making sense of the album's title before talking with a partner about their initial ideas, and then participating in a large group discussion about the album's title. Through the partner-talk and discussion, students made connections related to the album's title as a metaphor for the music industry's role in taking advantage of artists in a variety of ways. As well, students made connections to the (often unfortunate) transformation that many artists make when they acquire fame and fortune.

Now, while we draw several parallels between teaching conventional or traditional texts, we must be clear that we are not advocating for teachers to use hip-hop in classrooms as a way to lure students into the study of works with "real literary value." Further, it is important to make clear that we are not suggesting that teachers can or should do to a

hip-hop text what is done to a traditional text with "high-status." Indeed, we learned that while opportunities for traditional literary analysis exist when teaching a non-traditional text such as a hip-hop album, reducing the reading and analysis of a hip-hop album to traditional methods of literary analysis would certainly limit the impact of the original medium. Skills valued in institutions like schools can be learned by treating the artist and the work as having "real" literary value, but such texts typically have much to offer beyond practices associated with the demands of a standardized literary analysis.

We next expand on a second lesson learned through our teaching of Lamar's album related to the multidimensionality (e.g., print, audio, visual, multimodality) of hip-hop. We provide an argument that hip-hop necessitates a more dynamic approach to teaching literature than what has been traditionally valued in school settings.

*Opportunities for engaging in multidimensional approaches to literacies.* Based on experience, film and multimedia often are integrated in limited ways in today's classrooms. For instance, it is not uncommon for students in English Language Arts classrooms to be "rewarded" for finishing a play or novel by passively watching a film version of the text for several class periods. While there is merit in viewing film versions of literary texts after reading them in classrooms, we think there are more engaging and effective alternatives to this "reward approach" to studying text and literature.

Throughout our teaching of *TPAB*, we explored Lamar's music and related texts through different mediums, including print, audio, and in many cases, video. We found that students who may have struggled with the reading demands in a traditional English classroom experienced success during our time together because they were not limited to reading the text in a traditional sense. Instead, students were eager to make sense of the main ideas and themes that emerged from Lamar's tracks by consulting multiple genres (e.g., news, reviews, biographies, blogs) and exploring multiple representations and interpretations of various tracks. Students used Genius.com and other informational sources to explore multiple layers and multiple genres of text. Students who may have struggled using conventional methods of "reading" (e.g., print-based), for

example, picked up on key conflicts and figurative language particularly during their viewing of the album's videos and after their consultation of other genres of text (e.g., news, Genius.com, YouTube).

This moving back and forth between different modes of text (print, audio, and visual), we discovered, seemingly impacted our students as they began expressing themselves more artistically in their daily journaling, as well as in their final photovoice project. While a few students' sharing of their final photovoice project resembled the traditional "author's chair" reading from a text, many of our students' final projects were much more of a performance than a reading. Several students commented that this was the first time they had ever performed in front of classmates, but that they were empowered to perform their composition as a result of our study of Lamar's multidimensional text(s).

Along with the multidimensionality aspect of the text, student performances reflected the social and political issues surrounding the text, particularly in relation to the historic events that occurred in early July 2016. We next expand on our learning about the importance of exploring, questioning, and processing contemporary social and political issues in schools.

*Opportunities for exploring, questioning, and processing sociopolitical issues* In summer 2016, local and national events provided students with countless opportunities to make direct connections from the world to the central topics in Lamar's album, including, but not limited to: institutional racism, power and oppression, police brutality, and leadership. At the local level, for instance, our students were processing the then-recent arrest of an 18-year-old African American female at a nearby shopping mall by officers using excessive force. On the national level, during our first days with the students, we processed Jesse Williams' remarkable acceptance speech at the BET Awards.

A week later, the unarmed Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were killed by police officers. Their murders resulted in outrage and protest across the nation. A day after Castile's murder, a sniper in Dallas, TX, killed five police officers following a peaceful demonstration march against police brutality. Our students entered the classroom with knowledge of and questions about these social and political issues. We could not set aside or avoid these events, happenings, and issues. Importantly, Kendrick Lamar's album requires his readers/listeners/viewers to contemplate a host of issues that cause "discomfort" for many, particularly those privileged by their race/ethnicity, skin color, primary language background, and/or socioeconomic status.

In *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue that schools are, and ought to be, political sites whereby students engage and deliberate on political questions. According to the scholars, it would be a detriment to our democracy if classrooms were stripped of political content. At the same time, Hess and McAvoy (2015) give voice to a central paradox of preparing students in schools for democratic participation: "the need to provide students with a nonpartisan political education on the one hand with the need to prepare them to participate in the actual, highly partisan political community on the other" (p. 4). As teachers, we side with Hess and McAvoy's (2015) assertion that the classroom should be conceived as preparation for democratic participation. At the same time, we are mindful that our role(s) as facilitators of democratic deliberation is not for the advancement of a particular platform or politician's agenda.

To help all of our students as they gained greater understandings about the role of music in working toward social justice, we engaged our students in what Johnston (2004) refers to as "noticing and naming." As we modeled how to notice and name realities embedded in the texts (e.g., hyper-masculinity, misogyny, suicidal ideation, etc.), we also invited our students to see themselves as "people who notice." Noticing and naming the manifestations of patriarchy, male privilege, sexual objectification, white supremacy, and consumerism, provided us with opportunities to support students in their development of critical literacy (Lewison, Flynt, & Van Sluys, 2002). Students situated new meanings and understandings of these powerful and once-abstract themes and

concepts in our large group deliberations, small group debates, as well as in the journals they maintained.

### **Limitations**

While we had the opportunity to engage our students in learning about Kendrick Lamar's *TPAB* album during a pre-college summer program, it is important that we address a few of the challenges commonly associated with teaching "popular culture" texts in schools. We are mindful that the incorporation of a non-traditional text, such as a hip-hop album, into a traditional public school setting may be more challenging than the experience we have highlighted. For instance, in many districts, classroom texts must first gain the endorsements of the district's curriculum coordinator, a departmental chair, and/or even the school board. The genre of hip-hop often has been criticized for its (re)presentations of profanity, hyper-masculinity, misogyny, homophobia, and consumerism. As Dover and Pozdol (2016) explain, these issues cannot be side-stepped or swept under the rug, and instead must be acknowledged in order to effectively navigate (Stovall, 2006). While we provided students with a "clean" (edited/censored) copy of the album's lyrics, we also held multiple conversations with our students about issues related to the power of language, and the power behind decisions to use (or not use) particular words or phrases.

We also recognize that many teachers and even parents have reservations about including popular culture and/or non-canonical works across the English Language Arts curriculum. Such critics may struggle with the idea of teaching about an author and/or genre that is unlikely to be tested on a high-stakes standardized exam. Given the pressures to teach to the test and the consequences for failing to meet "adequate yearly progress," we recognize this as a legitimate concern. At the same time, we struggle with the idea that teaching and learning should be sanitized, standardized, and/or apoliticized. Given that reading achievement scores in the U.S. continue to remain steady or decline (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010; Buehl, 2014), we are open to the idea

that our students may benefit as readers, writers, and thinkers from reading and critically analyzing contemporary texts.

In addition, we should be clear that teachers cannot make assumptions about today's students as being devoted followers of hip-hop music. Indeed, we were in communication with a variety of students who were skeptical about a hip-hop album as being instructional for their "college readiness." Not every Generation Z student has a strong affinity toward hip-hop music, nor do all Generation Z students necessarily understand, value, and appreciate the music, history, and artistry of hip-hop. It is important, therefore, for teachers to help all students in their understanding of hip-hop as a movement that grew out of social, historical, and political marginalization. Lastly, teachers must keep in mind that regardless of content, not all students arrive at the same understandings at the same time. As with the teaching of any content, we found it beneficial to confer with individual students, at times, to interrupt misconceptions and to break down our purposes in "reading" *TPAB* as an academic text.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Throughout this paper, we have provided an overview of our collaboration as teachers in a summer pre-college program. We have argued that the current definition of what "counts" as an academic or "exemplar" text is narrowed to the extent that it excludes a variety of perspectives, genres, and themes. Further, we have argued that while many English/Language Arts teachers use hip-hop as a bridge from contemporary culture to works with "real literary value," hip-hop artists and albums can stand alone as authors who and texts that offer students opportunities for gaining valuable academic skills and for developing a sociopolitical or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To be clear, we are not making the argument that traditional canonical texts have no place in schools today. Neither do we claim that urban (Newhouse, 2017) or hip-hop texts are more valuable than canonical texts often cited on "exemplar" lists. Instead, we hope to encourage teachers to move beyond the narrow selection of what "counts" in schools

(e.g., the CCSS's text exemplars) by being critical of the range of perspectives, genres, and themes examined in the classroom.

While we make these arguments as teachers, it is important to consider what the students said as well. At our final meeting, after the sharing of photovoice projects, students reflected, in writing, on the value of studying Kendrick Lamar's album. We asked students if Lamar's album had academic value. From the perspective of many of our students, Lamar's album definitely has a place in schools, as one student convincingly argued on a final reflection of the course: "Not only does Kendrick Lamar use rhetorical devices, such as figurative language, double entendres, and allusions, but he addresses real world issues. I feel as if we do not speak enough about the real world in school, so we can start with the music industry."

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