SENSITIZING STUDENTS TO LANGUAGE AT WORK AND PLAY: "SHOW-AND-TELL" REVISITED WITH POPULAR SONG LYRICS

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Anyone who has pondered what it means socially (and I do not mean substantively) to teach reading and writing faces the key issue of relevance. How is our material relevant to students' day-to-day lives in an increasingly technological, consumer-oriented, and aesthetically fragmented age? While every classroom is different, the Internet has created a kind of universality across time and place. Music by the appropriately named Rage Against the Machine is instantly available in Anchorage, and grade-school students in Omaha can watch YouTube videos of breakdancers on Columbus Circle. However, the Internet's reach provides little comfort for composition teachers. Stated in a nutshell, how can we connect our non-electronic materials to flesh-and-blood students and, thereby, sensitize them to how language shapes private and social identities? My response centers on neither electronic nor print media. Rather, I look to a source that combines both: language at work and play in song lyrics.

Music is everywhere, but, at the same time, it is a common joke that the words are secondary, even unintelligible. In a 2006 commercial for Comcast's Karaoke ON DEMAND, the fearsome Mr. T interrupts a man in the shower who is butchering the lyrics to "Born to Be Wild." "Those aren't the words," Mr. T taunts the cowering man; "don't be a cultural fool" ("Comcast"). Mr. T need not stop with the man. High-toned denizens at the Met

often attend the opera without understanding a single word. The overall musical experience is what matters, the rationale goes, and, like opera, so pop: enunciating one's words even puts at risk a singer's demeanor (i.e., "'tude"). Just as Andy Rooney once joked on *Sixty Minutes* about the stagnant lyrics to Michael Jackson's "Bad" by chalking them on a blackboard ("Because I'm bad, I'm bad—come on / (bad bad—really bad")[1], we can also have good fun with our students by detaching the lyrics from their musical context and seeing what is there. What is there, as it turns out, can be alternately profound and inane.

Whether confronting kindergartners or college seniors, teachers have to begin a given day's class somewhere, reaching across the classroom divide. Call the moment what we will, but "show-and-tell" is how we break the silence directly before and after the bell rings. When students are still children, show-and-tell means presenting physical items and describing them. As students grow older and, so, become "wise" to the pedagogical moment, teachers respond by asking students to show-and-tell their thoughts or emotions: "How was your weekend?"; "Did anyone see a good movie?"; "Did you like the reading?" The effect, however congenial, remains institutional. Teachers remain teachers while students remain students. As Eleanor Kutz, Jackie Cornog, and Denis Paster assert in their 2004 essay for this journal, "we rarely place students' own experience *of language* at the center of their study of the language arts curriculum . . ." (65, emphasis added). When we do, though, we move to what is often called an authentic experience precisely because we engage students' linguistic lives. The line I am advocating is delicate. I am not saying, "If you can't beat them, join them," but I am saying that truly heuristic pedagogy sometimes means that teachers must reconsider what materials students study in order to further what skills students learn.

Arguably the core of our "students' own experience of language" is the world of music. Songs swirl through the air as students make their way to our classrooms. When students settle into their seats prior to class, their music still playing, the line

from Dr. Johnson's *Rasselas* rings in my brain: "Age looks with anger upon the temerity of youth, and youth with contempt on the scrupulosity of age" (62). The rise of hip-hop has only compounded that generational gap, in its wake what Jean-Françoise Lyotard has famously called our "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). The result, too often, is a generation "hearing without listening." Rather than angrily telling students to put away their post-modern iPods that separate their private and school identities, I try to exploit their appendages and turn their contemptuous social isolation into joyous community. "What are you listening to right now?" is an icebreaker. Then, with only the mildest sense that I am assigning them anything, I ask students to produce whatever lyrics they find interesting in terms of language or rhetoric. In a 2005 article for *College Composition and Communication* regarding "multimodal" learning, Jody Shipka cautions against approaches that are not at once "personally and socially relevant and intellectually rigorous" (284). True inquiry—not just linear processing of information and prescribed form—hangs in the balance, and show-and-tell with song lyrics is a small step in the right direction.

Better than almost any other discourse, the world of song lyrics is a clear example of how "the rhetorical triangle" orients private self within public communication. Aristotle's view of ethos-pathos-logos codified the triangle, and twentieth-century literary critics (M. H. Abrams, in the *Mirror and the Lamp*, 1953) and Composition/Rhetoric theorists (James Kinneavy, in *A Theory of Discourse*, 1971) have reformulated the triangle's three points as writer, audience, and world, all surrounding text. From whichever of these points one wishes to begin, at issue is how form and function interplay, the results provoking critical response that is rarely exclusively centered on one point or another. With music, the multimodal interplay between lyrics and melody only complicates matters, but that complication also offers the potential that the whole can transcend the sum of the parts as we are swept along, listening to the same songs again and again. "Literature," Ezra Pound memorably defined, "is the news

that STAYS news" (29), and the same is true when we consider the best of our music. At other times, when music lists too heavily to one of the triangle's points, we *feel* as well as *know* its artificiality. Songs quickly date themselves and are relegated to "the vault" of popular culture.

Perhaps a word of caution is in order: when you broach the subject of music with students, your desk will be flooded with what look like hieroglyphs. Suddenly, ostensibly wrecked printers are magically repaired as students produce printouts of lyrics from a multitude of sites, all a simple Google search away. On a social level, that I do not know the names of the latest bands—my references are always dated or somehow out-of-fashion—empowers students because, for once in their academic lives, they "own" the material as the authorities in the room. (For this very reason, I keep a notepad and pen handy in my car when I listen to the radio.) On an educational level, fairly predictable categories emerge that reveal so much about lyrics, including how musicians negotiate grammatical boundaries, manage poetic effects toward rhetorical purpose, and reach for literary achievement. What a teacher subsequently does with the examples and categories is the lightning-bug-in-a-bottle fun that defines show-and-tell. Lesson plans and syllabus agenda items need not apply. Again, half our job at such moments is that we simply care about what our students care about.

Part I: Grammatical Functionality

The elephant in the composition classroom has always been grammar. Whether we love grammar or hate it, whether our approach is prescriptive or descriptive, that students can control the grammatical dimensions to their writing is vital to their continued success across the curriculum and beyond. At the same time, grammar has become a pachyderm either because we ourselves do not know it or, more likely, because either we do not know how to teach it or we do not see its place in the composition process. Most of the time, we cannot even agree on how to define *grammar*. Notably, Patrick Hartwell identifies five

approaches in his 1985 *College English* article (the intuitive, scientific, social, academic, and stylistic). "[T]he grammar issue," Hartwell says, "is a prime example of 'magical thinking': the assumption that students will learn only what we teach and only because we teach" (105). Hartwell more-or-less despairs that grammar is of much use to writing, but, Susan Nunan answers that the problem lies not in usefulness but in pedagogy, for grammar "should be something that shows meaning rather than merely form" (74). The music coursing through our students' iPods, as it turns out, embodies both at once: meaning in form. Indeed, many students would rather lose their wallets than something so tied to identities as their collections of music downloads.

With a few very rare exceptions, students will not defend song lyricists on the basis of grammatical precision. Nonetheless, they sense that something is afoot when lyricists play with grammatical functionality. One does not have to go far to invoke the show-and-tell muse. Old-schooler Rod Stewart begs his love's pardon for no particular grammatical error in "You're in My Heart": "You're an essay in glamour / Please pardon the grammar / but you're every schoolboy's dream." Student examples quickly pile up. Nouns become verbs (the Alkaline Trio sing, "Maybe as a baby, you dropped your rattle / And it rattles you to this day") or verbs become nouns (Johnny Lang growls, "I know you wanna quit me baby / but a quitter never wins"). For now, the lesson is that the "n" or "v" after a word listed in their dictionaries is only hypothetical (literally, *before testing*); when words move to the business of functioning in sentences, all bets are off. For instance, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians play with declarative and interrogative moods to show how *to be* can function both to denote a state of being and as a linking verb: "What I am is what I am / Are you what you are—or what?" Less mind-bending is when Bruce Springsteen is downright precise with modals: "Should I fall behind, wait for me." Whether by accident or design, The Boss is perfect with that one.

During show-and-tell, too much grammatical analysis of lyrics can elicit the response, "But it's just music!" Most lyrics, after all,

are dashed out on booze-stained restaurant napkins, right? I cheerfully agree—almost. Rather, I want students to spot when the resulting lyrics are not quite so profound as their authors might have us think. In the James Bond-familiar "Live or Let Die," Sir Paul McCartney tries valiantly to avoid dangling a preposition but, in the end, fails: "in this ever-changing world in which we live in" (I wonder how Sir Winston Churchill would respond given his famous quip, "Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put" ["Churchill"]). In the same general vein, I hope that students would never want to touch one who, like the "back-in-the-day" Jim Morrison, would say, "I'm gonna love you until the stars fall from the sky / For you and I" (to the lyric, I ask students, "Is it *that* difficult to find a word to rhyme with *me*?"). While I draw the line with patent solecisms, little seems at first helped when we dwell on issues about common usage. Comparative conjunctions are a battle almost not worth fighting (Puddle of Mudd laments over a lost love, "She tore my feelings like I had none"). Nobody wins with split infinitives (Rob Thomas argues to his Spanish Harlem Mona Lisa how "I could change my life to better suit your mood" / 'Cause you're so smooth"). Elsewhere, Joan Osbourne probably does not mean the past tense when wondering, "What if God was one of us?" Pink should use the reflexive form when she argues that she subverts her own best interests: "Don't let me get me." To revise "Don't let me get myself," my students rightfully counter, would ruin the song, but that we are even having the conversation is enough for me. Students, in short, may bend, break, or mutilate whatever "rule," but I want my them to discern grammatical functionality—that is, not to be able label words as given parts of speech but to know, in a very Zen fashion, what words do in their noun-ness, pronoun-ness, verb-ness, and the like.

Embedded in everyday grammar is the "f-bomb." If you happen to have the curricular prerogative to discuss the word in the classroom, the ensuing lessons cover a lot of ground with very little material. Moreover, by considering the word *as a word* and

thus acknowledging its reality in our lives, we defuse its social power by bringing it into the "dry" Academy. Etymology grounds the process. No, despite the "urban legend" behind the title of Van Halen's 1991 album title, the word did not derive from a legal acronym for "For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge" ("What"), but it does involve a certain historically enduring grammatical malleability. At first, students think that considering the word is discordant to a proper education, if not vaguely scandalous. But, I spoil the fun: do they, in fact, "get it" when we laugh at discussing the word's functions as noun, pronoun, verb (transitive and intransitive), and adjective (especially the participial form). They also can explore the peculiar case of an English infix ("unf**kingbelievable"), grammatical mood (especially the imperative), rhetorical expletives (readying students for the far-more insidious grammatical expletives, *there*, *here*, and *it*), and changing semantics based on occasion. A long list of earthy lyrics might be cited, radio often expurgating the word, fooling nobody. 50 Cent: "He ain't f**king breathing." Puddle of Mudd, in their lament: "She f**king hates me." Blink-182 : "You f**ked up my life." Unlike Thomas' "Smooth," Eve 6 is almost pedantic in not splitting infinitives: "I promise not to try not to f**k with your mind." The list grows and grows. Then, just to confuse my students, I throw down a socio-academic gauntlet: eliminate the f-bomb from their speech. While I am at it, I add *like* to their project of self-editing, but that's another story.

Part II: Rhetorical Purpose

Beyond grammar and sentence craft, song lyrics show how invention responds to occasion. Figurative language peppers the majority of songs, so simply noticing as much is not enough. Rather, our objective is to sensitize students to how style relates to rhetorical purpose—and when the effects of those choices fall a bit flat. As always, students can trump my allusions, but I can at least get the party started. Simile: "Like a flower / Waiting to bloom / Like a lightbulb / In a dark room / I'm just sitting here waiting for you / To come on home and turn me on" (Norah

Jones). Extended metaphor: "I'm on a highway to hell [. . .]" (AC/DC). Personification: "Hello darkness, my old friend [. . .]" ("The Sound of Silence," Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel). Tautology: "Life is life" (Bob Dylan). Enthymeme (more or less): "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose, / Nothing don't mean nothing honey if it ain't free [. . .] ("Me and Bobby McGee," sung by either Kris Kristofferson or Janis Joplin, lyrics by Fred Foster). Accosting semantics (here regarding aggregate terms): "A Crow Left of the Murder" (Incubus, in a song that ends, "Do you get it yet?"). Sometimes, rhymes even become meaning: "I have a crazy idiosyncrasy / It's affinity to serendipity / And this eternal epiphany / No hypocrisy or duplicity" (Dispatch, in the appropriately titled "Bats in the Belfry"). Suffice it to say that, if music is anything, it is rhetorical.

Sooner or later when discussing figurative language, we come to Alanis Morissette, a veritable case study all by herself. Poor Alanis caught more than a bit of flak when her "Ironic" from *Jagged Little Pill* (1995) did not exactly match the literary sense of *irony* as the incongruity between expectations and realities: most of her illustrations are merely unfortunate events, including "a black fly / in your Chardonnay" or "A traffic jam / when you're already late." Students almost seem gleeful in pointing out the problem. Then again, maybe Mo Rocca is correct in commenting on VH1's *I Love the 90s* that "Alanis always gets the last laugh though. We all sit here, saying her song isn't ironic, but in fact, that's pretty ironic that she wrote a song called 'Ironic' that wasn't really ironic. Those Canadians are pretty crafty" ("Irony"). Regardless of which side of the Alanis debate students find themselves, the pedagogical principle remains the same: to get students to pay attention.

In the same general category of figurative language, we would be remiss not to mention literary allusion. When spun into song lyrics, allusion creates—with a nod to Aristotle—a certain ethos. Not surprisingly, the idea surfaces on the Internet: an entire site, *Literary Allusions in Popular Music*, is devoted to exploring the references of songwriters. A sampling gives a general idea.

Green Day asks in the title to one of their songs, "Who Wrote Holden Caulfield?" The Crash Test Dummies plumb their listeners' cultural literacy in "Afternoons and Coffeespoons": "Someday I'll have a disappearing hairline / Someday I'll wear pyjamas in the daytime / Afternoons will be measured out / Measured out, measured with / Coffeespoons and T. S. Eliot." And Johnny Cash (popular with some students because of *Walk the Line*) goes for the Bible in "The Man Comes Around": "And I heard, as it were, the noise of thunder: One of the four beasts saying: 'Come and see.' And I saw. And behold, a white horse." At issue to all such moments is occasion: does literary allusion feel forced, too weighty for rhetorical purpose? By considering that question, we can then turn to how students bring authority to bear in their own arguments.

Part III: Generic Appreciation and Canonical Judgment

The term "one-hit wonder" invokes the discussion about those moments when songwriters "get it right" in embracing well-worn genres: songs about growing up, boy meets girl, boy loses girl, escaping social pressure, living in small towns or big cities, politics, and, finally, writing songs. Everyone has favorites, but that we engage why one song sneaks up on us and, subsequently, stands the test of time while another does not is the beginning to generic appreciation and canonical judgment for all sorts of media, not just music. "Will U2's music really have air-time a hundred years from now?" as the pink-glasses-wearing Bono claimed in a 2005 interview ("Bono"). Or, as the then-24-year-old British schoolboy-costume-wearing Angus Young (of AC/DC) said when asked by *Newsweek* in 1982 whether he was impressed by the rock scene, "It can't be [any good], if we're doing well" ("Sonic"). In an essay accompanying the interview, Jim Miller effectively amplified Young's dismissal: "After 25 years as America's favorite pop music, rock seems mired in a mid-life identity crisis. Is it pop art? A sound track for advertising? A tool of teen revolt? Youth

music for old people? A brand-name product to be marketed like Clearasil?" (104). The Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" was the prophetic first offering MTV played on August 1, 1981 ("Video"), and it is an open question whether matters have changed, much less improved. Both Bono and AC/DC are still played. Whether thumbs up or down to today's music, students, in order to discuss something beyond music's evocative appeal ("Where were you when you heard such-and-such song?"), must entertain questions of transcendent quality.

One approach to the issues of genre and canon is that a song must defy too-easy, eviscerating parody. Can one categorically parody Led Zeppelin? I think not. Jimi Hendrix? Rock sacrilege. However, the Rolling Stones (in their sixties now) were a sanitized, reductive self-parody of their once-rebellious selves at the 2006 Super Bowl halftime show (no doubt by corporate design given Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" the previous year). When Metallica was honored by MTV on May 6, 2003, Jim Breuer joked that any song can be Metallica-cized: "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands," he throatily growled. In the audience, the band's lead singer James Hetfield was stunned. "I don't sound like that," he protested, but, on quick reflection, he could laugh at himself and acknowledge that, yes, he does (BBC). Hetfield should not feel too bad, content that the days when he could use some underground, Napstar-like word-of-mouth promotion are long since behind him.

Part IV: Student Trust and Global Literacy

Regardless how much we as teachers of writing would like to consider otherwise, so much about what we do centers on overcoming student resistance to what we teach. We need to convince students, in a word, to trust us. By using song lyrics as legitimate examples of language at work and play, we lead students to become aware, as I like to say, to "why we are doing what we are doing while we do it." Given this sense of awareness, students live the rhetorical triangle when they discuss song lyrics. With lyrics, students know what Wayne Booth famously labels

"the rhetorical stance." A mumbling, eyes-closed singer fairly embodies "the pedant's stance," which, Booth describes, "consists of ignoring or underplaying the personal relationship of speaker and audience and depending entirely on statements about a subject" (173). On the opposite side of the music, the spectacle of "lip-synching" degenerates to "the advertiser's stance," a clear indication of "undervaluing the subject," Booth continues, "and overvaluing pure effect [. . .]" (175). Music's examples of these two problems are familiar, and students understand in their core selves Booth's objective of the "proper balance" of artist, audience, and subject (172). More importantly, they are ready for the magic of how writing can sometimes even drive their very thinking.

Although the concrete practice of show-and-tell underlies my spirit and approach for using song lyrics, we live in a new age of "global literacy" (a term Isagani Cruz nicely defines as composed of cultural literacy, scientific literacy, and multiple literacies ["Global"]). Stabilizing our classroom environment is thus more difficult than ever, but in that challenge the cliché that music is the universal language offers a dose of comfort. Indeed, a quick survey of the "icons" who endure (the likes of Dylan, Springsteen, Stevie Wonder, or Aerosmith) demonstrates that they do so because what they offer transcends the fickle musical trend of the moment, and their language craft is no small part of their legacy. For us to ignore this fact—so crucial to the soundtrack of our students' lives—borders on pedagogical negligence. When we do attend to it, though, we may echo Metallica's middle-aged guitarist Kirk Hammet, who might as well be describing our role as teachers in considering his own status: "We're still a viable band—bring it on [. . .]" (Fricke 67).

Notes

[1] All lyrics readily available on the web via Google searching. Nonetheless, the appended list of web sites offers a general survey.

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A General Survey of Web Sites about Lyrics

<www.lyrics.com/>. Search by artist or title, this huge site has various charts, people, dedications, and events.

<www.lyricsfreak.com/>. Search by genre, artists, albums, or lyrics.

<www.lyricsmania.com/>. For up-to-date lyrics, with wide classifications by genres. Also linked to various partner sites.

<http://pclit.pbwiki.com/>. *Literary Allusions in Popular Music*. "Popular music," the site begins, "is saturated with allusions to literary texts. This wiki is devoted to identifying such literary allusions and providing ELA teachers with resources for incorporating music in the classroom."

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Mondegreen>. "Mondegreen." TV Tropes. The title is a term for misheard song lyrics and was coined by Sylvia Wright in 1954, in an essay for *Harper's Magazine*. The site includes a good survey.

<www.songfacts.com/>. Back-stories to songs; one can spend hours getting lost in favorites that are linked to YouTube videos.

<http://songmeanings.net/>. A much-needed site about enigmatic lyrics, organized by artist.