

TUNING IN TO A HIT PARADE PEDAGOGY

Tuning In to a Hit Parade Pedagogy

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Abstract

Contemporary popular music is a ubiquitous social, cultural, and pedagogical force. Enabled by ever-evolving and -expanding technology, its songs and lyrics are transmitted into our most public and private spaces. For this study, I present the Billboard music charts as a functioning pedagogy and curriculum. Riffing on Richter's denkbilder, Aoki's curricular worlds of plan and lived experience, Giroux's public pedagogy, and Giroux & Simon's theorizing on youth culture, I sound out messages and motives embedded within the hit parade pedagogy. DJing a methodology of qualitative inquiry, autoethnography, and free association, I listen closely to chart-topping songs by Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, and P!nk that feature themes of marginalization, and consider the paradox presented by the juxtaposition of their popularity and subject matter. I suggest that this playlist legitimizes and perpetuates its listeners' marginalization, running counter to its supposed intent to galvanize and inspire. Before signing off, I consider the implications for school-based educators and pedagogy in regard to engaging marginalization, particularly the notion of implementing a curriculum with which students may participate and sing along.

Shout-outs and Dedications

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Setting the Dial

A golden bird that flies away, a candle's fickle flame. To think I held you yesterday, your love was just a game.

-Cake, "Never There" (McCrea, 1998)

I mindlessly uttered the words above, or at least what I imagined them to be, as they slinked out the speakers of the home stereo tuned to a now-defunct A.M. hit radio station. I thought nothing of it at all— in fact, I don't even recall being conscious of the actual words themselves as they left my mouth— until my mother pointed out the irony that was the effortlessness with which I had learned and recalled an apparently random and otherwise useless sequence of words, when considered alongside my struggles to study for and succeed on tests at school.

But popular music makes for an excellent teacher, regardless of content or even one's desire to learn. Pop songs are a conglomeration of everything that grabs one's attention— hooks, wordplay, earworms, novelty sounds, rhymes, and riffs— and effectively play the listener as well as the musicians play their instruments. To wit, despite never having met or fallen for Jenny (Call & Keller, 1981), her phone number is common knowledge; although having never researched the topic, an overwhelming number of Canadians are aware of exactly when and where Bryan Adams bought his first real six-string (Adams & Vallance, 1984); and notwithstanding a snooze through history class, many have still learned which day of the week saw significant Irish bloodshed, thanks to Bono and company (U2, 1983).

Contemporary popular music is virtually ubiquitous. In addition to its traditional delivery by heavy rotation on top-forty radio stations and shelf presence at brick-and-mortar stores and specialty shops, music is available by a multitude of other means, many of which are "on-demand" and instantly summoned with a mouse-click or finger-press. Among the

new technologies contributing to popular music's ubiquity are portable mp3 players, internet-based music stores like iTunes, and online streaming services such as YouTube, Spotify, Pandora, and Songza. Physical copies of recordings have also ventured outside their traditional domains and into grocery stores, mega-marts, and coffee shops. Even further beyond these spaces, pop music is broadcasted at large in settings as varied as shopping malls, hockey arenas, movie theaters, and school talent shows. The spread of social media has resulted in yet more arenas through which one might be exposed to the most popular songs and artists of the day (Giroux, 2011).

This ubiquity is a result of the pop music industry having developed into something of a well-oiled machine. Pop singers and their products are backed by a significant marketing force that transmits their music to as many ears as possible in chase of lucrative record, concert, mixed media, and merchandise sales. This force, however, is not merely marketing its product. Rather, it is also marketing a message, one that has been termed a "public pedagogy" (Giroux, 2000; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). In doing so, a curriculum is implemented on a massive scale: at any given moment, it is reasonable to assume that there are thousands of pairs of ears listening to the same song's music, hooks, lyrics, and messages at once.

In their designation as "songs," the curricula embedded within these artifacts may be commonly misconstrued as trivial or innocuous. On a technical level, however, they contain lyrics that form texts, which in turn creates the distinct possibility of curriculum (Pinar, 2012). The aforementioned increasing prevalence, permeability and accessibility of music only underscores the importance of exploring the curricular presences found within contemporary popular song.

With this in mind, I present the following research question to be addressed in my thesis: *How do the Billboard music charts function as a curriculum?*

In researching this question, I turn my attention to a select trio of popular songs that have appeared at or near the top of the Canadian Billboard charts over the course of the year 2011, and all of which were ranked by Billboard to be amongst the top fifteen songs in Canada at the year's end. These pieces share common lyrical themes of underdogs, loneliness and alienation. Perhaps the popularity of these songs is a result of their designers having performed a reversal of John Lennon's understanding of popular music. After seeing his first attempts at marrying political message and popular song fail, he thought aloud as to why his second attempt, "Imagine" (1970), succeeded at reaching #1 on Billboard's album charts:

'Imagine,' both the song and the album, is the same thing as 'Working Class Hero' and 'Mother' and 'God' on the first disc. But the first record was too real for people, so nobody bought it...Now I understand what you have to do: Put your political message across with a little honey. (Gilmore, 2005, para. 30)

In their own journey to the top of the Billboard rankings, these pop records have apparently resisted being labeled as vapid by their listeners, although it is a designation frequently assigned to their charting competition. Maybe they have been engineered to duck this designation by employing Lennon's strategy, except backwards: to avoid being considered as vapid and empty, they are putting their honey across with a little bit of message.

Nonetheless, together they present a sort of paradox in their popularity and evoke one further research question: *What is the Billboard curriculum of marginalization, and what experiences, emotions, and coping strategies does it endorse and perpetuate?* This question encompasses the realization that songs expressing sentiments of loneliness and being

unpopular are, actually, the most popular in radio play and sales. This segues into questioning ourselves as educators and members of society, inciting consideration of whether we are getting the hint being provided by the pop charts and taking appropriate action to engage with and attend to these feelings of marginalization.

To address these research questions, I begin by drawing upon Richter's (2007) notion of *denkbilder*, Aoki's (2005b) tension-filled "cracks" between the planned and lived, and Giroux and Simon's (1989) idea of public pedagogy to riff a conceptual framework.

After laying down this framework, I will host a review of the relevant literature that focuses on observations of the influence wielded by popular film, television, and multi-media formats on pedagogical practice and conceptions. This review will also offer a short examination of hip hop's pedagogical importance in terms of its availing of opportunities for youth to engage with issues of self and identity. Introducing the genre of hip hop into my analysis provides a music-specific analogue to my own theorizing on the ways by which contemporary popular music engages with youth, as well as how it provides and shapes possibilities for self-identification.

The riff will play on as I DJ methodologies, during which I will articulate the ways in which I have thought about popular culture to produce the analytic composition of my thesis. In particular, I will draw upon bricolage as a qualitative methodology, which in turn features autoethnography and free association as its backbone.

From there, I will segue into and through the playlist of my thesis—Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," Katy Perry's "Firework," and P!nk's "Fuckin' Perfect"—to analyze how Billboard's hit parade comprises a public pedagogy, and what is embedded within such a pedagogy.

Finally, as the playlist fades out, I will sign off by signaling the implications of my analysis, specifically with regards to the role of a popular culture curriculum and its place in relation to traditional education. I will also invite consideration of the hit parade pedagogy's role in the public perception and approach towards mental health, and the subsequent ways in which curriculum creators and educators may become aware and responsive to popular culture's prevalence, impact, and influence.

Riffing A Conceptual Framework

Before being co-opted by the mainstream lexicon, “riff” was a word unique to the purposes of playing musicians. The word's etymology is largely unknown; some sources suggest it to be a shortened version of “refrain,” which carries largely the same meaning. An earlier word with much the same meaning and a musically-exclusive designation to boot—*ostinato*—derives from the Italian word for stubborn (Riff, 2001-2012). “Obstinate” would be its English relative, emphasizing the idea of persistence (Ostinato, 2001-2012).

Spawned by jazz music, “riff” originated in exclusive reference to a musical phrase that may be frequently and persistently repeated over the course of a composition (Riff, 2012). Its intent was mainly to provide opportunity for improvisation, wherein accompanying musicians repeat a reliable and predictable series of notes over which a soloist jams or ad-libs their own momentary musical expressions.

As the word began to appear in popular culture, its meaning evolved in an apparently counter-intuitive fashion. Instead of referring to the steady backbone of improvisation, a riff has come to be verbalized as the act of improvisation itself. “To riff” is to offer a “clever or inventive remark or commentary” (Riff, 2012); that is, to offer something new based on that which is already existing and accepted.

The importance of riffs, in the traditional sense, is in their offering of a comfortable and contextual basis within which one may inventively play and expand. My analysis of contemporary popular music, much like the medium itself, is “riff driven”: accompanied by the steady rhythm of Richter, Giroux, Simon and Aoki’s existing frameworks, I improvise upon their thoughts and notions to create something new to be considered. In doing so, I am “riffing” with their ideas in relation to my lived experiences as a DJ, practicing teacher, and developing curriculum theorist in the more contemporary sense.

The ideas that comprise the conceptual framework on which I riff gratefully persist throughout, both in presence and meaning, thereby affording myself the leisure of taking risks to explore and build upon these concepts. They comprise and remain a supporting role throughout my performance, providing the constant and occasionally disruptive structure beneath the improvisations that follow. These foundational ideas specifically originate from Richter’s (2007) notion *denkbilder*, Aoki’s (2005b) act of improvisation between the cracks of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experience, Giroux’s (2000) public pedagogy, and Giroux & Simon’s (1989) theorizing on popular culture, pedagogy, and youth.

Denkbilder

Denkbilder, a concept put forth by Gerhard Richter (2007) in reference to the work of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School (e.g., Benjamin, Adorno, Krakauer, Bloch), attempts to explore and qualify the space that exists between the aesthetic and the conceptual. Its complexity is methodologically inherent, as the idea of *denkbilder* necessitates describing that which our available words, thoughts, and theories are supposed to be incapable of describing.

Music, as a form of artistic expression, attempts to bridge the gap that exists between the aesthetic and the conceptual. In its transition from abstract thought to tangible object, however, it actually leaps from one domain straight to the other, thus passing by and foregoing the space occupied by *denkbilder*.

The overarching intention of the *denkbild*, or “thought-image,” is to engage with “aesthetic phenomena that, upon closer inspection, emerge as the secret avenues of critical insight (p. 3).” Much like Ted Aoki’s “cracking” of language, culture and curriculum (2005a), *denkbilder* aims to shed light on, and therefore disrupt, the usual patterns of thought and thinking. In doing so, it fleshes out insights and meanings that are often lost in transit between the aesthetic and conceptual worlds. This is a space that is indefinite and infinite, and, accordingly, *denkbilder* offers no promises of neatness or finality to its theoretical instigations.

One example of the *denkbilder* concept is demonstrated the philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin’s work in which he detached himself from traditional forms of written expression. As described by Kirst (1994), he would publish pieces consisting of three parts—a title, a narrated image, and a related thought—in an attempt to provoke and evoke meaning that resists any singular authoritative interpretation, and also entices several (im)possible interpretations.

Denkbilder’s needle travels through music’s grooves, amplifying the thoughts that song evokes by invitation and by force. In considering its omnipresence as a nuisance and even public disservice, Kant grumpily compares music to a “perfumed handkerchief in a public place” (Richter, 2007, p. 86) because of its way of imposing itself (and all that comes along with it) upon others. Richter similarly points out that, unlike the eye that may close to block out vision, “the ear has no easy defense against the intrusion of an unsolicited musical

sound” (p. 87), although he does so in a spirit of optimism that is absent from Kant’s complaint. Although Richter and Kant disagree on the value of music, they both describe hearing in relation to other senses (smelling and seeing, respectively). In doing so, they gesture together toward the idea that “music cannot be thought alone—there is always something else that wishes to be thought and experienced along with music” (p. 87). Byrne (2012) also considers songs as smells in homage to their ability to transport a listener “to a vivid memory of an early romance or some other formative experience ... they dredge up worlds, very specific places and moments” (loc. 2118).

Contemporary popular music settles into the scope of the notion of *denkbilder*, as the songs themselves are combinations of and bridges between the aesthetic and the conceptual; they cannot be fully expressed in plain words. The dynamic collaborations of music and lyric attempt to connect these two worlds, and in their efforts they highlight, in earnest, a space that may be best described as a *denkbild*.

This space between worlds, provided by the indefinitiveness of the definitive, is where *denkbilder* excels at and defies expression. Aoki sees value in this space, too. Specifically, he considers it as a temporal curricular and pedagogical site that offers a meaningful opportunity for curriculum theorists to theorize and improvise between the cracks of a curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived-experience.

Improvising Between the Cracks of Curriculum-as-plan and Curriculum-as-lived-experience

Curriculum and pedagogy are painstakingly designed with their reception in mind, but no amount of effort can make its absorption a uniform and universal process. This is the central idea underpinning Aoki’s (2005b) concept of dwelling within the tensions in between

two curricular worlds, through which he turns the spotlight onto the unattended dynamics that of a curriculum's implementation. Aoki's concept, in line with much of the rest of his body of writing, focuses intently on the experiential and personal while casting doubtful shadows on the planned, expected, and intended.

Curriculum-as-lived-experience and curriculum-as-planned are the two curricular worlds between which Aoki (2005b) situates the acts of teaching and learning. These domains co-exist in a pedagogical setting, but differ from one another in their intents, gatekeepers, influential forces, and outcomes.

Curriculum-as-plan's origins are of a rigid, assumption-laden, and goal-oriented mindset. In this world, curriculum is managed from the top down by a select few educators and administrators. This group is charged with creating a set of goals, interests, expectations, and assessments that are primarily transferable—rather than teachable—to an entire body of educators and, subsequently, their respective students. Curriculum-as-plan, then, refers to a curriculum for the non-existent “average teacher” to receive, and then impart to the equally illusory “average student.” In turn, it cannot take into account the unique strengths, abilities, and essences of the people affected and involved. As an analogy for my research, this aligns with the initial intentions of musical performers, record producers, song writers, disc jockeys, and sales clerks when presenting an audience with their wares, and speaks to how these intentions do not anticipate the most deeply individualized mechanics of interpretation (i.e., those based on personal experience, identity, and other contextual concepts) within members of their audiences.

Upon entering “a/live” learning environment, the insistence of the curriculum-as-plan is inevitably met with the dynamism of the curriculum-as-lived-experience. This curricular world is the situated one that “[the teacher] and their pupils experience,” as opposed to the

one that they are intended to experience. No longer are students “faceless people...shorn of their uniqueness” (Aoki, 2005b, p. 161) in the interest of uniform educational mandates and performance expectations, and so the teacher is presented with a dilemma: How does one accommodate a curriculum-as-plan that is based upon “a fiction of sameness,” while at the same time “listen and be attuned to the care that calls from the very living” (Aoki, 2005b, p. 161) of their students?

It is within this tensionality that teachers and students dwell. This tension is not to be construed as a negative circumstance, as Aoki evokes music to explain that “tensionless strings are not only unable to give voice to songs, but also unable to allow a song to be sung” (2005b, p. 162). So, it is also in this “space between” that contemporary popular music finds itself as pedagogy, transiting between “plan” and “lived experience.”

A curriculum’s creators (e.g., popular song writers and producers) may intend to disseminate a singular or particular message, but the nature of music complicates this intention. As an artistic medium, music inherently opens itself to an indefinite set of interpretations that are determined by its audience’s individual lived experiences, schema and worldviews—a notion to which longstanding debates over the meanings of songs such as *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967), *25 or 6 to 4* (Lamm, 1970), and *Heart-Shaped Box* (Cobain, 1993) can attest. “The important thing about lyrics,” goes an unverified quote most often attributed to the electronic musician Brian Eno (1981), “is not exactly what they say, but that they lead you to believe they are saying something” (para. 207). Adorno (Richter, 2007) agrees, suggesting that what a work of art says is not what its words say. The “truth content (or *Wahrheitsgehalt*) of a text only becomes perceptible when divorced from the author’s intended meaning,” and that what truly speaks in the work of art

is “not the author’s voice but the artwork’s own formal echoes” (p. 32). Baudelaire (1861) also riffs on the discussion, adding:

J’ai souvent entendu dire que la musique ne pouvait pas se vanter de traduire quoi que ce soit avec certitude, comme fair la parole ou la peinture. Cela est vrai dans une certaine proportion, mais n’est pas tout à fait vrai. Elle traduit à sa manière, et pare les moyens qui lui sont propres. Dans la musique, comme dans la peinture et même dans la parole écrite, qui est cependant le plus positif des arts, il y a toujours une lacune complétée par l’imagination de l’auditeur.

As translated by Ross (2013b), Baudelaire keys that “there is always a lacuna to be filled in by the imagination of the listener” (para. 1).

And so, in deconstructing the songs that follow, it would be misguided to assume any one interpretive truth exists. Instead, my research dwells in the tension-filled space between these two curricular worlds as posited by Aoki, acknowledging both popular music’s curriculum-as-plan and the interpretive possibilities allowed by the lived experiences of its creators, implementers and receivers: pop singers, DJs, and listeners.

Public Pedagogy

As an inescapable part of our social, economic and political culture, contemporary popular music wields power and influence. Its broad reach assuredly places it in what Giroux (2000) has coined the public pedagogy. The public pedagogy refers to forms of pedagogy that are different than those found in schools and are virtually always situated within the domain of popular culture (Sandlin, 2010). The concept of public pedagogy places great importance on cultural creators and consumers, suggesting that the dominant culture’s creators and gatekeepers do not simply reflect society, but that they are active in expressly

shaping and inserting their politics into the sphere of sociocultural consumption. In turn, the influence of the public pedagogy is a homogenizing force rather than one that is countercultural (as some forms of pop culture beg to be considered), arguably perpetuating the prevailing notions and values that contribute to “racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, machismo, and violence” (Mayo, 2002; Sandlin & Milam, 2008, p. 325). Moreover, the increasing privatization and fading social importance of traditional public education only serves to compound the weight of the public pedagogy. Pinar (as cited in Sandlin, 2010) encapsulates the ensuing phenomenon in recognizing that “the world...is the site of teaching,” and “that school reform has expelled pedagogy from schools, evidently into the streets, onto television, into the movies, on the Internet, through music, poetry and the visual arts, in museums, on bodies, and at the zoo” (p. xv). Pedagogical engagement is leaving the conventional classroom behind, and is taking place within the public domain alongside cultural, social, political and commercial interests.

The mechanics of the public pedagogy rely on both the roles of its consumers and producers. In terms of the consumer, public pedagogy emphasizes the “central role” of culture (Giroux, 2004) in providing the narratives and frameworks within which one may acceptably consider themselves and their relationships with others. It is in this culture, Giroux articulates, that “individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns” (p. 10). Giroux portrays the creators of this space as increasingly wealthy, corporate, and technological. This profile evidently fits that of the producers of popular music: they are the engineers of the economic, political, and social behind each chart-topping hit. Popular music, firmly entrenched as a key economic, political, and sociocultural component in Canada and

beyond, draws our attention (and a counter-response in the form of media literacy education) as a broadly disseminated curriculum of this public pedagogy.

Popular Culture, Pedagogy, and Youth

When Giroux and Simon (1989) set out to “re-examine the meaning of being schooled” (p. 1), they did so with the intent of positioning culture as a site of learning to be considered alongside the traditional school setting. In pointing this out, they emphasized the importance of being aware of the multitude of factors that organize, shape, produce and legitimate “student experience” (p. 1) in order to gain an adequate theoretical perspective from which one may study pedagogy. The “terrain of popular culture” plays a role in shaping this very student experience, and as a pedagogical site it “raises important questions about the relevance of everyday life, student voice, and the investments of meaning and pleasure that structure and anchor the why and how of learning” (p. 5). The will to navigate such terrain exists alongside a recognition that “how people come to know” and engage with knowledge is as important as “what people know,” and the effect to which both notions are governed by “the constraints of specific social forms” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 2)

In light of this significance, Giroux and Simon (1989) lament popular culture’s place in the dominant discourse, “defined as the cultural residue...the trivial and the insignificant of everyday life, a form of popular taste often deemed unworthy of either academic legitimation or high social affirmation” (p. 221). Indeed, the philosopher Immanuel Kant discounted music as occupying “the lowest place among the beautiful arts, because it merely plays with sensations” (Richter, 2007, p. 86). In a more contemporary example, Chicago Public Radio’s cerebral and critical music talk show *Sound Opinions* (Linn & Saldanha,

2012) received this phone call in response to their review of pop mega-star Rihanna's 2012 release *Unapologetic*:

Mark from San Francisco. I enjoy your show. But given that you guys only do an hour show each week, I'm surprised and disappointed you wasted valuable airtime on reviewing Rihanna's latest. At best, her music is vapid mainstream pop, consumed by vapid mainstream fans, and reviewed *ad nauseum* by vapid mainstream media. Surely there were more deserving artists that you could have given that time to.

Giroux & Simon (1989) warn that such academic and social consideration of popular culture as an afterthought would be an affront to the massive population who are invested and embedded within. Engaged individuals have authorized these cultural and social artifacts, and paying no mind to that which these individuals consider important is to disempower them. Alternatively, to give proper attention to that with which they are engaged may, in fact, be an empowering and positive movement. This notion is especially resonant in pedagogical methods, wherein "educators risk complicitly silencing and negating their students" by ignoring prevalent cultural artifacts (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 3). Apple (1993) echoes this concern, noting the danger brought forth by the increasingly corporate focus of school and curriculum that, in turn, decreases its attentiveness to the values and interests of youth.

A serious examination of popular culture brings with it a realization and affirmation of its power as pedagogy. Many interpretations have focused particularly on its ability to oppress. Giroux and Simon (1989) view popular culture as a vessel for the perpetuation of cultural and social hegemony, "reproducing and maintaining relations between dominant and subordinate classes" (p. 8). Dimitriadis (2001) subtly notes that the artifacts and texts of which it is comprised reproduce "dominant cultural imperatives" (p. 6). A more optimistic note is struck by Danesi (2008), who notes the ability of popular culture to transcend socially

constructed barriers and become a common experience and value of a wide range of otherwise-disconnected individuals. Specifically, he defines popular culture as “a form of culture that makes few categorical distinctions” (p. 3), one that does not carry with it the same class-, race-, education-, and socioeconomic status-based divisions that culture does, as a whole.

Perhaps it is this latter sentiment that makes popular culture such an engaging and relatable form of pedagogy when compared with the rigidity of the systems in place across educational institutions. Being public, dynamic and constant, it “rejects the supremacy of tradition and many of the socially based cultural practices of the past” (Danesi, 2008, p. 3). Apple (1993) notes the rate at which youth are choosing “music, film, videos and beyond” (p. 121-122) as their means of education, customizing and democratizing a tailor-made pedagogy that serves their interests and inherently maintains its relevance. Dimitriadis (2001) expands on this point, noting that a self-fashioned curriculum is one that is inherently more compelling. At the same time, Dimitriadis (2001) also suggests understanding culture as a verb in order to appropriately acknowledge its unpredictability, flexibility, and specificity that, in turn, lends itself to a phenomenological-like interpretation based upon that which can only be captured in moment and context (this also parallels Pinar and Grumet’s (1976) situating of curriculum [*currere*] as a verb). He builds upon this by describing the act of culture as “unfolding performative invention instead of a reified system, structure, or variable” (pp. 10-11), and further mentions how cultural artifacts within “conjure up a useful kind of reality in ways mediated and complicated by a whole host of specific factors and forces that (cannot) be predicted *a priori*” (p. 5). Finally, Bauman (1992) suggests that it is through such performance that the act of communication “is put on display, objectified, lifted

out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened to scrutiny by an audience” (p. 44).

In my research, I employ the conceptual frameworks described above in tandem with the methodology that follows in order to identify, parse, and suggest interpretations of the music selected for recognition and promotion by the mechanisms and machinations of the Billboard chart ranking system. My research experiments with the notions of *denkbilder* and the tension between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experience as backing instrumentation (in the musical sense) for both the expression and exploration of popular culture, pedagogy, and youth. I offer demonstratively thoughtful consideration to popular culture as both a site of profound learning, as well as one wherein a youth “performs” their identity. In doing so, I acknowledge the Billboard music chart’s inherent pedagogical value and power as a curriculum of mass dissemination and consumption.

Hosting a Literature Review

In hosting a literature review, I provide an overview of some of the existing research concerning the reach of popular culture within the contexts of education. My analysis considers popular culture’s weight in curriculum beyond the theoretical, examining the tangible influence of popular cultural artifacts. Similarly focused studies have already been carried out within a variety of cultural domains, and so the following review presents the existing research that examines the effects of popular film, television, and multi-media formats on pedagogical practice and conceptions. I also present research on hip hop’s relationship with identity, performance, and marginalization as an example of how popular culture, and specifically popular music, carries with it pedagogical relevance and the potential to engage youth. A review of the way in which one (musical) sub-genre of popular

culture has been studied will set the stage for my analysis of another music-based sub-genre of popular culture (that of “popular songs of marginalization”). The demonstration of hip hop as a site of marginalization offers a parallel for my own proposed examination of the same dynamic within the Billboard music chart, and is one of several traced throughout the literature review. Its inclusion in this review, as a sort of academic cousin to my own research (rather than an immediate relative, say), is also indicative of the dearth of research that exists on my proposed research topic. Further, delving into sub-genres acknowledges the ways in which popular culture’s influence extends beyond a macro level.

Ultimately, the following review provides an academic foundation for further exploration of the interactions between popular culture and curriculum in terms of engagement, perception, relatability, and identity. It disrupts the consideration of popular culture as a latent and distinctly non-pedagogical realm, opening up a space within which my research is situated.

Film, Television, and Multi-media as Curriculum

Working with preservice teachers, Trier (2007) enacted a twofold purpose regarding film as a pedagogical tool. Upon instructing teacher candidates to discuss the film *The 400 Blows* in theoretical and narrative contexts, he observed a broadening perspective of the concept of “literacy” among them that, until then, had been primarily composed of only “traditional” forms of institutional literacy. In experiencing this shift in their own perspectives, the preservice teachers also came to appreciate the powerful pedagogical role taken on by film, recognizing it as a dynamic that they may consider useful in their own eventual teaching pursuits. In another study, Trier (2005) employed film as a means of reflection and challenge for preservice teachers and their assumptions, beliefs and knowledge

about inner-city schools. They were asked to record their views before beginning a student teaching assignment in inner-city schools, and then together examined a set of cinematic representations of such schools that existed in the public domain. After re-recording their perspectives on inner-city schools upon completion of practicum, they “discovered the extent to which their views of inner-city schools had been formed through popular representations” (p. 171). In doing so, they became reflexively aware of the discrepancy that existed between popular notions of inner-city schools and the actual reality at hand. These findings are similar in scope to Paul’s (2001) investigation of the ways in which pre-service teachers form their perceptions of urban students and schools. Her research concluded that personal experience and commercial Hollywood films both played a significant role in shaping such perceptions. Edelman (1983) had also previously taken on the influence of film on education, although his focus was on the perception of teachers by the public at large and the underlying reasoning for this perception. In examining the characterizations of schoolteachers in films from the preceding sixty years, he pointed out that these filmic representations had crept into and significantly informed a public conception of educators steeped in stereotype. The same perspective was adopted by de Vries (2004), who performed a critical reading of the film *Mr. Holland’s Opus* from his perspective as a high school teacher, taking note of broad themes and examining where they fit into education as a whole, along with the veracity of their messages. He discovered gaps in public, teacher, and student expectations that were perpetuated and potentially reproduced within the story of the film.

Tillman and Trier (2007) followed suit in their study on the role played by television in affecting conceptions of teachers and principals. They performed a deconstructive reading of the school-based television series *Boston Public*, paying particular attention to the tenets of preparation, competence, and leadership amongst the fictional school’s staff members.

The authors touted the value of such an activity in not only discovering connections between notions of educational figures in popular culture and reality, but also in contributing to critically reflective educational practices, noting increased engagement with the deconstructed concepts amongst participating pre-service teachers.

One of the earliest examples of research aiming to connect popular television and curriculum is that of Duncum's (1987), which encouraged art educators to consider popular culture's place within their assigned curriculum. Duncum (1987) emphasizes the notion that the artifacts that appear mostly innocuous on the surface—such as the TV show, *Dallas*—carry with them complex paradigms that embody multiple social theories that are relevant and challenging to educators and students. The inclusion and demonstration of such paradigms should encourage inquiry and further examination, Duncum argued, rather than passive acceptance. Marsh (2000) also turned to television as a measure of the power wielded by popular culture. In her study, the author brings attention to literacy practices in schools and pre-schools, noting that their curricula are chiefly informed by and situated within dominant cultural discourses. While introducing episodes of *Teletubbies* (an immensely popular children's program at the time of publication) into nursery programs, Marsh noticed higher levels of motivation, excitement, and curricular relatability amongst preschoolers when popular cultural texts were incorporated into the curriculum and pedagogy. Such a result supports the potential for increased engagement with dynamic popular texts relative to traditional curriculum.

Still more research examines students' engagement with popular artifacts that are offered through multi- and mixed media, and the impacts such engagements have on pedagogy. These studies pay particular regard to literacy. Mahar (2003) recounted her discovery of her students' passion for *anime*, and the implications it had for adjusting and

optimizing her classroom pedagogy and literary practices. Vasquez (2003), inspired by an introduction from her nephew to the popular children's cartoon franchise *Pokémon*, noted the ways in which children's culture "is based on broad participation in a range of literacies," allowing for greater inclusivity. She also emphasizes the accessibility of popular culture's texts as an indicator of their influence and importance in the lives of students. Marsh (1999) studied the effects of introducing themes from popular culture into classrooms of 6- and 7-year-olds, observing that children who were generally unengaged with literacy activities became motivated when popular themes were incorporated.

One final study, conducted by Christian-Smith (1987), took the approach of examining how popular culture reflects, or fails to reflect, gender identity and feminist narratives. In her examination of thirty-four adolescent romance novels written in the forty years prior to her research, she concluded that the feminist narratives within did not always approximate those in society, but "are fictional rearrangements and recodings of social concerns" (p. 365).

The sampled body of research above demonstrates the extent to which popular culture engages students, and the ways in which it encourages greater overall participation as a complement to traditional curriculum. The above studies also display the tangible ways in which popular culture shapes popular conceptions of various aspects of the educational institution and society at large. This influence extends beyond a macro level, as the following research on hip hop culture and its impact on identity formation suggests.

Research on popular films, television, and literature has signaled popular culture as a recognized pedagogical force that dynamically creates and alters the usual curricular spaces. Its importance to the present research is to serve as a parallel for an exploration of the

curriculum of contemporary popular music that, to this point, has gone without such consideration.

Identity, Performance, Marginalization, and Hip Hop

Within the scope of my research, one of the most relevant, tangible and compelling examples in the existing literature relating popular music's cultural and pedagogical relevance, as well as its potential for engaging youth and shaping identity, is that of hip hop culture. Continuing to riff on culture as an action in and of itself, Dimitriadis (2001) observed in his research on hip hop culture that rap texts transcend their disseminated form and become "performances of the everyday" (p. 11). These texts wield power because they are "commodified, reproduced and perpetually offered in a variety of forms to marginalized youth" (p. 11). Despite coming from a "higher" source that may, in fact, be invested in the political and aesthetic as much as the cultural, Weaver, Dimitriadis, & Daspit (2001) suggest that available artifacts are nonetheless transformed by youth, and hip hop culture in particular may, in fact, be "coopted and recombined to fit their needs" (p. 8). These texts are also performed beyond an individualized context, and take part in the construction of "senses of community, linked to shared notions of what it means to be black and marginalized in the US and around the world" (p. 2). Emphasizing hip hop's presence as a cultural site and factor in shaping identity, Ibrahim (2004) refers to the subculture as a locale and place of being, rapping that that "hiphopness is where many young black people are today" (p. 129). Weaver, Dimitriadis, & Daspit's (2001) work further reifies the notion, considering "hip hop as what connects youth and their world" (p. 10).

"Performing" hip hop is one way that a person may relate to and gain knowledge from the(ir) world. In other words, it contributes the shaping of identity. As Ibrahim (2004)

relates in one of his explorations of the interplay between race, social identity, and learning, identity may be shaped “within and in relation to the realm of popular culture” (p. 116).

Culturally-based sites and social practices, both of which are found inside and outside of the school environment, play an active role in shaping experiences through which students construct their sense of identity, politics, and culture. Understanding the genesis and evolution of youth identity of the identities is important because, as Ibrahim (1999) suggests, identity plays a role in the government of learning. Specifically, Black students occupy a social imaginary—“a discursive space in which they are already imagined, constructed, and thus treated as Blacks by hegemonic discourses and groups”—where their membership within this imaginary influences the people and artifacts with whom they identify (p. 349). In turn, this social imaginary bears influence in determining from whom Black students learn. Ibrahim (1999) illustrates the relationship by considering learning as an “identity engagement, a fulfillment of personal needs and desires, and investment in what is yet to come” (p. 367).

If this is the case, then, one naturally wonders why youth would choose to engage with an identity by which they are marginalized. Ibrahim (2004) attributes the choice of African youth living in Southwestern Ontario to align with marginalized cultural norms to their pre-existing positioning in hegemonic discourses as Blacks. Acknowledging the personal, political, and social factors at play, he further suggests that “choosing the ‘margin’ ... is an expression of desire, and simultaneously a deliberate counter hegemonic undertaking” (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 367). In other words, by situating themselves within a counter-cultural context, youth may be better able to “find their individual voices and participate in community” (Ibrahim, 2004, p. 129) rather than losing such opportunities if they engage with a mainstream culture in a hegemonic way.

Real pedagogical value lies within these observations and realizations. Hip hop and its related identities serve as a forum through which personal and social issues may be addressed, unlike within the traditional and inaccessible contexts in which they are often found. Ibrahim (2004) writes that, in these marginalized spaces, “rap and Black popular culture can create spaces where new issues are brought to the forefront” (p. 130) and, in turn, are valuable tools to be implemented in traditional learning environments to engage issues of race, gender, and class. Having described the impact of identities and influences that youth are engaged with outside the classroom, he concludes by advertising the “urgent need for a praxis that links ‘formal’ education/learning with popular, ‘informal’” (p. 130). As Freire (1970/1993) and Ibrahim (2004, p. 13) ask, “Should we as pedagogues not couple their word with their world?”

Lending credence to popular culture is to legitimize those who are invested within, as well as to recognize the related curricular forces and spaces that normalize, marginalize, and/or empower. By establishing hip hop as one site in which both the implementers and receivers of curriculum are actively engaged in its shaping and implications, the groundwork is laid to explore other cultural and musical genres as locales of such dynamism. Specifically, hip hop serves as a rough analogue to my analysis of themes of marginalization in contemporary popular music, and whether the songs on the Billboard charts that embody these themes are offering the same tools for empowerment and identity-shaping to their listeners.

Tuning In To a Hit Parade Pedagogy (title track)

After buzzing between stations, now is the time when we adjust the the dial to so that we may tune in to the pedagogy of Billboard's hit parade. The signal is strong, the static gone, and every sound comes in clearly and fully.

In step with the self-situating of Black youths in marginalized spaces, there are parallels to be found within the Billboard music chart. In each of the songs that I have selected for deep reading and deconstruction, there is an undercurrent of marginalization—albeit one that appears to be, unlike those found in hip hop culture, widely endorsed and accepted across the population at large. This brand of music's prevalence at the top of the charts signals a large-scale social awareness of such marginalization that begs one to wonder how, if a social problem like widespread marginalization has been identified on such a massive scale and stage, it may continue to persist and remain unaddressed given such exposure. The power tensions indicated by Giroux's (2004) concept of critical pedagogy are called into play in the search for an answer. On the other hand, perhaps a song's prominence is a democratized demonstration of a social problem, and the Billboard ranking system allows a populist voice to express itself, offering a powerful medium to carry its message.

Having considered the broad reach and influence of popular culture and the role it may play in the shaping of a youth's identity (and, in turn, their learning), then "what is needed," writes Dimitriadis (2001), "is an approach that looks critically at popular texts as well as at how young people are both enabled and constrained in their uses of these texts" (p. 9). Although popular films, television, and literature have been examined, the curriculum of contemporary popular music remains largely unexplored.

Responding to Weaver, Dimitriadis, & Daspit's (2001) call for the need for "more dialogue between academics and their publics" (p. 11), the present research engages texts of contemporary popular music, and further explores the ways in which such texts may be

engaged with by the youth in their target audience. By tuning in to them, I lead an inquiry of the social structures and organizations that allow certain forms of marginalization to be legitimized and accepted through popular song, while also considering the less popular marginalized spaces that do not receive the same treatment. On a similar note, in conducting a deep reading of the texts that is informed by the conceptual frameworks introduced above, I also consider the pedagogical role played by these popular songs in shaping the worldviews and identities of the youth that they seek to reach. The pedagogical role of contemporary popular music also hints at further action to be considered by the education system, schools, principals, teachers, and curriculum creators.

I riff upon the notion of *denkbilder* to sound out the novel and unpredictable ways in which messages may be transmitted through song. Critical pedagogy's tenets encourage my reading of these messages to include their implications for hegemonic power structures and the crevices within. And Aoki's idea of curriculum-as-planned/lived-experience instigates an emphasis on, and contrasting of, the globalized intents of the music producer and the individualized experiences of the radio listener. This multi-pronged reading is guided by the following methodology.

DJ-ing Methodologies

As a DJ, I have tools at my disposal to tease out, call attention to, and explore the contents of my playlist. The selection of records, their ordering, and their representations of genre and place all contribute to the transmission of a coherent radio show to its listeners. For my radio show *Free Association*, which aired on 93.1 CKCU-FM throughout the writing of this thesis, I designed playlists and implemented the show by performing a broadcasting (as) bricolage. As advertised on the radio station's website, the show invited listeners to join

me “for about an hour at least every other Monday, usually from 3-4pm, and follow (my) train of ‘thought’ for the entirety of a genre-, decade-, and tangent-hopping playlist where each song is connected, somehow, to the ones by which it is preceded or followed. It might sound like a different show begins every 15 minutes, but it all makes sense” (Kom, 2013).

The construction of each episode usually began with one song that I was especially intent on sharing; I might have heard it on a radio show or podcast recently, or had been introduced to it by a friend, or had been reminded of it while flipping through my digital or physical musical collections. From there, I would consider and further research the isness of the song to build a bridge that would connect it to the next song in the playlist. These bridges could be built using some of the more superficial and apparent aspects of a song—that is, its aesthetics, instrumentation, lyrical themes, or the songwriter(s)’s place of origin. For example, I spun Nina Simone’s “My Baby Just Cares For Me” (Donaldson & Kahn, 1928) together with Brigitte Bardot’s “Everybody Loves My Baby” (Williams & Palmer, 1924), in which Bardot joins Simone in boasting that, despite his popularity, “my baby don’t love nobody but me.” On another episode my playlist featured the track “Call Your Girlfriend” by Swedish pop singer Robyn (Robyn, Kronlund, & Ahlund, 2011), followed by the record “I’ll Kill Her” by the French folk singer Soko (2007)—together, they created a coherent narrative of two women situated on either side of one man’s infidelity.

Other songs in the playlist were connected by less obvious threads. I played Sloan’s “Coax Me” (Murphy, 1994) and Neil Young’s “Payola Blues” (Young & Keith, 1983) back-to-back because both tracks came from albums over which the respective artists were sued by their record label (Geffen Records, in both cases). I have paired “Tears On My Pillow” (Bradford & Lewis, 1958) recorded by Little Anthony & The Imperials with “Lonesome Town” (Knight, 1958) performed by Ricky Nelson because both songs were covered by

contemporary indie artists on the soundtrack of the 2005 video game *Stubbs the Zombie* (Various artists, 2005). More connections were made based on my own autoethnography; that is, building a bridge between songs that were (and, likely, could only be) related only through my personal experiences with them. For example, I would play any track off of The Decemberists' 2005 record *Picaresque* alongside something from M. Ward's (2005) *Transistor Radio* because they once were served as the soundtrack for a two hour drive between Ottawa and Arden, Ontario around the time of their release.

Each show had several points of convergence and divergence where listeners would be able to make immediate sense of what was happening or have their experience jarred and disrupted by a sudden (but justifiable, as per the show's ground rules) change in genre, style, time period, or aesthetic. The format offered the potential for me, as a DJ, to host a show that featured limitless diversity in its content and in its curricular designs, as well as the opportunity for constant exploration and expansion of the format itself. The simple rule—that every song is connected, somehow, to the ones by which it is preceded and followed—lent grounding and legitimacy to any playlist that I could conceive.

Beyond the conceptual bricolages that guided the creation of *Free Association's* playlists, they were also influenced by the availability of the media itself. Part of each show's construction process involved thumbing through CDs, mp3s, m4as, online archives, and vinyl records to use for the show. As a DJ and theoretical, analytical, and synthesizing bricoleur, I created each episode using whatever media was within reach. The final product transmitted through Ottawa's airwaves was guided by what I personally owned or was capable of finding. The live episode was both enhanced and limited by my knowledge of content, my adeptness at research, and my physical ability to search for and obtain digital and physical material.

I have performed my analysis with similar motions, spinning a bricolage of curricular and pedagogical research methods to create a methodology that will draw out the texts of the contemporary popular songs being studied. Kincheloe (2001) promotes the notion of bricolage on the qualitative stage as research that “avoids the superficiality of methodological breadth and the parochialism of undisciplinary approaches” (p. 679). As a critical research theory, bricolage acknowledges and affords qualitative researchers as myself the potential to riff and improvise my curriculum theorizing. It is also a method that appreciates the value of an interdisciplinary approach.

As an “academic” DJ and bricoleur, I re-visited my existing knowledge of the methodological literature, researched concepts that were referenced by friends, professors, and academic journals, and thumbed through the digital and physical research archives that were available to me. The result is a diverse and dynamic methodology that is constructed of what I knew, what I came to know, and what I will continue to get to know. In particular, I have spun three tracks to construct a segment of methodologies that instructs my research. These methodological tracks are qualitative analysis, autoethnography, and free association.

In DJing this methodology, I will crossfade—or move gradually between by blending together—static-y notions of theorizing. As in one of my radio shows, a track that is being played is also anticipating and setting up the one that will follow. And, upon its time running out, a track will not disappear but will be mixed together with the next, creating an in-between space of tension and dynamism wherein myself, the listener, and the music (or, in this case, a set of methodological components) dwell together. A DJed methodology is one that is constantly anticipating, shifting and creating both itself and the expectations of the researcher and reader. Its influence on my research is dynamic, (un)predictable, and creative.

Track One: Spinning Qualitative Research Methodologies

In emphasizing the particular importance of descriptive data in qualitative research, Bogdan & Biklen (1998) state that the approach “demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial” (p. 6). This facet of qualitative methods alone suggests their appropriateness for the study of popular culture, readily validating the notion that its products warrant meticulous consideration beyond the face value at which they are presented by media or apparently considered by consumers. Qualitative research’s other tendencies also lend itself particularly well to the proposal at hand: it is naturalistic, considering the research subject in the environment in which it occurs rather than contemplating within an artificial isolation (calling back to Aoki’s [2005b] notion of curriculum-as-lived-experience); it is concerned with process, placing emphasis not necessarily on the final results of analysis but the cognitions, negotiations, applications and rationalizations that help us to arrive at these results; it is inductive, taking a bottom-up approach to theorizing and drawing conclusions from data; and, finally, qualitative research values meaning and human activity (Wolcott, 2001), reading deeply into how people make sense of their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Qualitative research is informed by critical theory, which assumes there to be conflicting goals between the powerful and disadvantaged. In the case of my research, the parties involved are a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry and the spectrum-spanning populations with which it is engaged. The dynamic interplay between these two different groups with conflicting goals is ripe for being parsed through the lens of this ideological influence. Also, as an ideology at hand, critical theory generates questions and answers regarding the proliferation and reproduction of existing social structures, organizations, and inequalities through popular music and its Billboard-based ranking system.

It is also worth noting the association between such research methods and a postmodern ideology that I, in turn, adapt for the purposes of my research. Specifically, they will be sounded out in order to make ideas problematic, especially those that are conventionally accepted in a scientific manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Here, a postmodern perspective helps to, in a sense, historicize the present so that it may be considered from a distance that allows for the dis-immersion from and re-interpretation of that which is typically accepted and encountered daily without substantial consideration (e.g., a song on the radio in heavy rotation).

Qualitative analysis's theoretical underpinnings complement the aims of my proposed research, as well. Closely linked with the phenomenological approach, its methods acknowledge the impossibility of there being one singular reality and recognize that all that is understood is based upon a set of assumptions that contribute to the existence of any number of potential truths (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As Berger & Luckmann (1967) pointed out more than forty years ago, "reality is socially constructed" (p. 1). Bogdan & Biklen (1998) describe phenomenological research as an attempt "to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 23). In my research, I speculate on the meanings of broadly disseminated popular song by attempting to account for and harness an understanding of the multitude of contexts in which they may be received and internalized. As such, I am aiming to "gain entry into the conceptual world" (p. 23) of the curriculum that is broadcast to listeners of contemporary popular music.

Symbolic interaction, another concept that underpins qualitative analysis, follows up on phenomenology by focusing on the process of assigning meaning to events, objects, and people through interpretation. As a theoretical notion, it illuminates the cognitions and variables involved in the steps that lie between awareness and interpretation. Blumer (1969)

draws attention to the importance of incorporating the ideas behind symbolic interaction by noting that all “human experience is mediated by interpretation” (p. 25), justifying the effort of delving deep into how one’s interpreted meanings develop through elucidation. Paying attention to the symbolic interaction that occurs between an individual and a curricular artifact (a song, in this case) is critical to the artifact’s analysis as an object and event to be shaped and constructed by its individual audience members.

Finally, an acute and reflexive awareness of culture plays a crucial role in the utility of qualitative research methods. Ethnomethodology, which examines “how people create and understand their daily lives...in order to live everyday life” (Blumer, 1969, p.30), reacts to and describes the interplay between the supposed meanings of the songs to be analysed and an individual’s own interpretations.

In short, the open-ended and inductive heart of qualitative research best suits my proposed study. I am not entering my analysis with the intent of verifying any pre-determined hypothesis, but am focused instead on improvisationally developing as-of-yet unknown concepts and theories based on the data collected through these methods (Sullivan, 2001). Qualitative methods, their ideological relatives, and their theoretical underpinnings chiefly acknowledge the subjective dimension of human experience. As such, they serve as the ideal track for investigating the intended and lived messages and meanings of contemporary popular music, which exist as cultural curricular artifacts open to interpretation and the attribution of meaning dependent on individualized contexts.

The methodology described above complements my conceptual framework in that it accounts for, acknowledges, and further seeks out the undetectable, non-salient, and unpredictable. My research questions are also addressed by the strengths of these methods,

allowing for a procedural yet open-ended look into the meaning and machinations of Billboard's hit parade pedagogy.

Track Two: Autoethnography

Reflexivity is paramount to my analysis, and so autoethnography is a fitting track in my DJed methodology. Put broadly, autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Boechner, 2010, para. 1). It has been described as “the use of self and self's experience to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture” (Ricci, 2003, p. 593). Autoethnography functions as a cross-section of autobiography and ethnography, yet remains independent of either (Kaplan, 1998, p. 98). Moreover, Behar (1996) appreciates it as a way to “make the ethnography as passionate as our autobiographical stories” (p. 18). Such methodology avails research to a “political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act” (Ellis, Adams, & Boechner, 2010, para. 1), allowing me to account for, acknowledge and employ my own personal histories and worldviews in my efforts to understand and analyze popular culture; or, in other words, to use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience. Autoethnography is, as Ellis (2004) wrote, a genre of writing and research that is “part auto or self and part ethno or culture” (p. 32), and is unique in its ability to display “multiple layers of consciousness” (p. 37).

Drawing on autoethnographic strategies throughout this thesis, I critically examine my intentions for my research to be as evocative as it is explanatory, to offer analysis that is “unfolding, scenic, and dialogic (in) plot” (Ellis, 2004, p. 32), and for my writing to “meaningfully and evocatively...matter and make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience, and to (originate) from an ethic of care and concern” (p. 46). As a

track in my methodology, it also suits my study in its allowance for and encouragement of expression and experience. Ellis (1993) espouses autoethnography's ability to "bring readers to the scene" in order to "experience an experience" (p. 711), all the while aiming to touch "a world beyond the self of the writer" (Jenks, 2002, p. 174).

The overarching goal of autoethnography, as considered by Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2010), is to "study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose helping cultural insiders and outsiders to better understand the culture" (p. 3). It is distinguished by including the author as an object of research, incorporating narrative text, and the tendency to "create a highly charged atmosphere and heightened emotional state with and for (the) audience...then use this energy to understand and critique my own relationships, as well as the place of these relationships in larger social structures and histories" (Ellis, 2004; Jones, 2002, p. 53-54). In step with my intentions to listen closely to the relationships between popular music and identity, I follow the lead of autoethnography by telling my "experience, story, and epiphanies that have arisen from (my own) cultural membership and identity" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2010, p. 3).

Contemporary popular music (and the proposed study's sample of popular song, in particular) often functions as a form of autoethnography in and of itself, presenting text as a "story replete with narrator, characterization, and plot line akin to forms of writing associated with the novel or biography" (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). In focusing on the culture in which the works selected for study do dwell and using my own experiences within that culture, I "bend back" on myself and "look more deeply at interactions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37) between self, other and culture that are sung and played in popular song.

Track Three: Free Association

My former radio show, *Free Association*, is an exercise in its namesake, reflecting the way in which I listen and think about music. Boundaries of genre, era, thematics, and pre-existing knowledge make way for various associations—some definitive, and others impossible to define—that connect one song with the next, creating an ever-transforming and -evolving musical landscape. My analysis follows a similar pattern; although much of it is based on tangible and linear thought, my writing is also guided by free association. In his study on the implementation of free association theory to sex education curriculum, Casemore (2010) summarizes the Freudian concept as “allowing for the description of ideas and images that come to mind when the focus of concentration is loosened and thoughts are allowed to emerge freely” (p. 310). In doing so, an unconscious thinking that “follows the mind’s movement rather than a communicative agenda” is enabled (p. 310). An underlying logic may be revealed by such associations, one that is comprised of a “chain of ideas” that are unbound by a single focus. Casemore (2010) considers free association as a particular space of thought in which emotions, desires, memories, and experiences replace the traditional consciousness of communication and rhetoric. In this, a “scene...emerges in a collage-like manner,” (Kafala & Cary, 2006), one that Ng-A-Fook (2011) illustrates as “reading snapshots...against a landscape.”

Free association, a theory and method born of and commonly associated with psychoanalysis, is drawn upon in my analysis to inform and play alongside an analysis of the content, structure, and function of contemporary popular music. As a methodology that is “partly patterned, partly amorphous” (Ng-A-Fook, 2011), it embodies the personal and contextual nature of listening to and interpreting texts in song.

Peep the Techniques

The tracks laid out above lend themselves to a methodology that is open-ended, grounded, personal and spontaneous. Consequently, my methods themselves are informed by and a reflection of this spirit. An analysis of the selected sample of contemporary popular songs is outlined as follows. I sat with my computer in my former office on the third floor of the University of Ottawa's Lamoureux building, my Grade 1 classroom in central Tokyo, and apartments in Ottawa and Saitama, Japan, surrounded by my reading materials. I constantly had literature on the theory, conceptual framework and methodology that underlies my analysis at my disposal throughout the listening and writing processes. I played the mp3 file of each selected song once through my computer speakers or headphones, listening intently and making mental notes. Once the song finished, I played it again, revisiting and reconsidering the notes I made earlier and expanding them on paper as I saw fit. After the song has been played through twice, I continued analyzing the song over repeated listens while following along with its official documented lyrics. The process repeated indeterminately, in various locations (e.g., my workspaces, public transportation, city streets, car stereo, my living spaces), over the course of which I referenced available literature and developed my written qualitative analysis informed by an autoethnographic lens and free associative thoughts and language.

Throughout these listenings, I attended to my own reflexivity, as a form of *currere*, by paying mind to and looking for patterns within the evolutions of my analysis, and also kept a separate journal (in the form of several scattered .txt files) over the course of my research to document my thoughts and feelings regarding the process. This reflexivity helped me to track and be self-aware of the changes in my approach and perspective throughout the writing of this thesis, and instigated "diffractions" that compensated for the tendency of reflections to only leave one back at the same place where they began (Haraway, 1997).

Nana Grizol (2010) sings to reflection's uncertain but compelling nature—"I never learned a lesson looking at my own reflection, but sometimes it feels useful"—and I acknowledge its tenuous and intangible benefit to my analysis.

Sample Clearance

In extracting material for analysis from the Billboard music charts, I am inevitably excluding that which I do not select. Remaining ever conscious of this, I included for analysis three high-charting songs that share similar thematic tendencies, providing a comprehensive examination of one aesthetic sub-genre that partially comprises the rankings.

One of the dynamics of popular song that I find most compelling is its goal of reaching as broad a listenership as possible, both aesthetically and emotionally, while simultaneously tailoring itself to cater to the individualized desires of its audience. Such an endeavour may explain why I have found that, after conducting a rough thematic coding, the lyrical content of half of the top ten songs on the Canadian Hot 100 Billboard chart for the year 2011 (including the number one song) revolves around love, a universal emotion that many tend to both individually personalize and globally reaffirm by seeking out real-world examples. The other prominent theme running through the songs at the top of the charts is that of partying and having fun, albeit in a narrowly-defined way, with lyrical references to drinking, dancing, and going out to nightclubs.

For my particular readings, I have identified three of the top popular songs of 2011 (as indicated by the Billboard Canadian 100 charts)—"Born This Way," performed by Lady Gaga (2011); "Firework," performed by Katy Perry (2010); and "Fuckin' Perfect," performed by P!nk (2010)—that share a thematic base in their appeals to the reassurance and validation of their listeners' lifestyle and individuality. These three songs are unique among

chart-toppers in their focus on narratives of marginalization, struggle, and being an underdog, without paying particular attention to romantic love. These selections also embody the contradictory nature of popular music to which I made reference earlier, in that they need to affect the population in both broad macro and personal micro contexts in order to succeed. Such a contradictory objective inherently calls out for an inquiry of its messaging and the many undercurrents that must inevitably exist within.

In 2011, both records from Lady Gaga and Katy Perry peaked at the number one position of the Billboard Canadian Hot 100 chart, and P!nk's peaked at number two. According to the same charting system, all three were included among the top thirteen songs of the year 2011, ranking sixth, eighth, and thirteenth, respectively (Billboard, 2012).

Signal and Static

My research sheds a sliver of light on what is, as of yet, a notably unexplored area in curriculum theory and academia. In my review of literature, virtually no existing research was found regarding the curriculum of contemporary popular music, let alone its implications for youth culture, power relations, and curriculum theory. In providing a deep reading of a thematic sub-genre of selected songs that rank highly on the Billboard music chart (a widely-disseminated cultural ranking metric), I hope to instigate an academic conversation on the curricular content and pedagogical implications of contemporary popular music as an ever-broadening and ubiquitous cultural form in Canada.

In addition to providing an impetus for my study, the dearth of existing research doubles as a limitation. Without a comprehensive base of literature specifically relevant to my study within the contexts of the field of Canadian curriculum studies and its respective academic journals, there is less guidance available for its direction and methodology. Also,

the selected songs only represent a small fraction of what makes up a large, transient, and ever-changing body of contemporary popular music. By the time this is written, countless other songs will have occupied the top spots across the Billboard charts. With this in mind, I remind my reader that my proposed research intends to provide a “snapshot” of a moment in time, with regards to the particular feelings and social issues of the present-day—a tenet of which the importance and merit is reflected in my study’s underlying framework of “planned”/“lived” experience and performative moments.

The Playlist

“Born This Way”

It doesn't matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M

Just put your paws up 'cause you were born this way, baby

Brimming with the hubris and knowing attitude that comes with being a bona-fide and heavily-rotated pop star, Lady Gaga opens her 2011 chart-topper “Born This Way” with two spoken lines that create an exclusive, but not exhaustive, dichotomy with which her listeners are offered to self-identify. Both available options are characterized by their dedication to a male, patriarchal figure, subverting an individual within seconds as one who may be defined and considered according primarily to the greatest masculine presence in their life (Giroux & Simon, 1989).

In the same breathy voice, she invokes religion, the presence of which hovers over the song from this moment onward. Religion has not been a common characteristic in contemporary popular music—the lone standout example is Joan Osborne’s 1996 hit, “One of Us,” that reached #1 on the Canadian Top Singles RPM and peaked at #4 on the Billboard Hot 100. As a perennially controversial topic, religion’s early invocation conjures up a

tensionality created out of the differences in “plan” between curriculum creator, implementer and receiver. Though the record’s writers (or curriculum creators) may have made a calculated attempt at perking up the ears of their audience, the listener that is introduced to the song by their local DJ is not necessarily expecting religious commentary to be a part of their listening experience. Within this tension, the song positions itself as a figurative lightning rod, putting the audience on notice that the conventional rules of popular music are not necessarily being followed (Aoki, 2005b).

Grabbing them by the ear, Gaga then instructs her listener to “put your paws up,” making an animal of them. This association hints at degradation—a dehumanized self-perspective that goes paw-in-paw with the sentiment of the social outcast. The singer’s self-assuredness and the glossy, promising context of the delivery, however, actually lend a palpable sense of empowerment and pride to the characterization. Richter (2007) endorses the power of music to provide such feeling, describing it as a “potentially liberatory instrument” (p. 104) that is filled with hope and the notion of redemption. It is with this tone and leadership that Gaga begins to earn her listener’s attention and trust, so that she may continue to have their ear as she formally begins to spread her contemporary gospel in song.

My mama told me when I was young

We are all born superstars

She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on

In the glass of her boudoir

“There’s nothing wrong with loving who you are”

She said, “Cause he made you perfect, babe”

“So hold your head up girl and you’ll go far,

Listen to me when I say”

The contradiction here is hard to miss: Lady Gaga espouses her mama's wisdom declaring us all "born superstars" and "made perfect" at the same time that her appearance is being artificially altered with beauty products in front a vanity mirror. The celebration of oneself is presented as happening only in concurrence with the transformation of oneself, rendering an individual reliant on the consumption of other sociocultural messages and commercial products to be able to obtain an image in the glass that is worth celebrating (Giroux and Simon, 1989). I am also reminded that an ambiguously defined but certainly patriarchal "he" is responsible for whatever perfection exists for the girl in the anecdote.

The baroque setting summoned by the song's imagery—speaking of "glass" and "boudoir"—situates it conveniently alongside the origins of *denkbilder*. The emblem by which *denkbilder* was inspired was composed of a motto or title, an icon, and an epigram. Lady Gaga has created a similar structure here, with the difference being that the icon is aural rather than imagery. This sonic twist creates a thought-sound, rather than a thought-image, that still abides by the tenets of *denkbilder*. Despite the slight change in structure, the song still embodies an "instantiation of a non-empirical idea" (Richter, 2007, p.11)—that perfection is natural and "you'll go far" by being yourself—that is "situated between formal structure and social resonance, between essentially aesthetic issues" (e.g., sound, appearance) and "urgently political ones" (e.g., consumerism, religion, and the politics to come later) (Richter, 2007, p. 26).

Finally, Gaga's reverence for her mother (demonstrated by the nostalgic retelling of a moment shared together as a jump-off point for self-acceptance and celebration) calls to mind the changing identity of contemporary child-rearing. As part of his case for education as social violence against children, Block (1997) makes salient the education system's increasing role (taken on willingly or otherwise) in raising children. This shift in roles is the

result of a mixture of parents relinquishing responsibility and the state's protrusion into modern life. As the state takes on a larger share of the duties of child-rearing, it becomes further empowered, taking on an awkward and questionable position in directing the hearts and minds of all children by means of its educational curriculum. The implementation of "Born This Way"'s curriculum, capably put into motion by any set of speakers or earbuds, happens on a uniquely comparable scale to that of education and thusly occupies a similar place; it, too, sets out to direct the hearts and minds of all its listeners. The ubiquity of popular culture makes it impossible to ignore (Giroux & Simon, 1989), and in the absence of traditional family advice it happily offers its own version to those who are looking for guidance. The nostalgic tone of Gaga's message further relegates the idea of mother as child-rearer to the past, and implicitly introduces the music itself as a leading curricular replacement.

Before the one-minute mark of the song, Gaga refocuses her listener and once again calls for their attention. This time, however, it is not by appealing to self-identity or controversy; those methods are done with, as Gaga is now close enough to her listener to appeal as directly as possible. "Listen to me," she shouts.

I'm beautiful in my way

'Cause God makes no mistakes

I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way

Don't hide yourself in regret

Just love yourself and you're set

I'm on the right track, baby

I was born this way

Oh there ain't no other way

Baby I was born this way

Baby I was born this way

Oh there ain't no other way

Baby I was born this way

Right track baby I was born this way

(Em)powering through the chorus for the first time, Gaga's religious intention is crystallized as a belief in a higher power that does no wrong, a position that can theoretically attract criticism from all directions: a non- or different-believer could argue against the existence of god or its effectiveness on one's appearance, while a biblical devotee could note that we are not born perfect, but rather born into sin that must be atoned for to reach the ultimate goal of messianic salvation. The tension here heightens the song's sense of drama and inherently invites more parsing and attention from the general public than much of contemporary popular music.

Regardless of god's role in the matter, "Born This Way"'s core message to its listener is apparently clear: you were born perfect, and if you simply be yourself you will be on "the right track" to wherever it is that you want to go. But several doubts are raised by the discourse that couches this curriculum. When Gaga sings, "I'm beautiful in my way," she lays self-validation as the bedrock for positivity and optimism. It is this very self-validation, however, that is endlessly challenged by a barrage of images and sounds and ideas coming from identical or similar channels of pop culture (Giroux & Simon, 1989). On the very radio station that plays this song, an advertisement might immediately follow from a sponsor company specializing in weight loss; or the song's performance might be preceded by the DJ's dissection of Lady Gaga's most recent outfit; or an advertisement for beauty products

might appear at the fifteen second mark on the lower third of the song's YouTube video. Once again, the truth is in flux and in situ between curricular worlds, where the intended meaning of the song as planned in a vacuum is challenged by the instruments of its implementation (Aoki, 2005b). Richter (2007) further articulates the impact of the message's medium in describing the philosophical relevance of *denkbilder*. He echoes the sentiment of Aoki's curricular worlds and the impossibility of either one existing exclusively, explaining that "*what* is said cannot be thought of in isolation from *how* it is said...all truth-content is tied to and mediated by its figures of presentation" (p. 2).

In the chorus, Lady Gaga flexes her position of power (as established lyrically at the beginning of the song), advising the listener in her deific presence:

Don't hide yourself in regret

Just love yourself instead

As other pop singers in this analysis, Gaga's discourse implies that getting on the "right track" away from sadness and towards happiness is as simple as following instructions beginning with "don't" and "just." The simplicity of these suggestions could be inspiring and motivating, and might even offer a small and special moment that can carry you through one challenging situation to the next. I argue, however, that this same simplicity has at least as much potential for harm once all is said and done: when the road to feeling good about oneself appears to be so easy, the individual who fails to complete the journey is only further demoralized.

This criticism of a paint-by-numbers approach to finding happiness could be construed to also implicate Bobby McFerrin's 1988 record "Don't Worry, Be Happy" that reached the #1 position on both the Canadian RPM Top Singles chart and the US Billboard Hot 100 in the year of its release. Listening to this song, the laid-back *a capella*

instrumentation and McFerrin's whistling breezily builds a steady and relaxed architecture that supports the words and sentiments gently placed on top. The song's main selling point is its humility and self-awareness: "Here's a little song I wrote," begins McFerrin, who breaks down the proverbial fourth wall in the first six words, sitting alongside the listener rather than hovering above them. He then goes on to share anecdotal advice for dealing with ubiquitous and relatable worries like late rent cheques and unhappy significant others. The entire being of the song exists to support and spread its title ethos, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," a creed that the singer personally saw and was inspired by in the making of the song (Fessier, 1988). Conversely, "Born This Way" is built on a myriad of lyrical ideas and assumptions that, much like all other contemporary popular music in the Top 40 category, are a product of a diverse team of several executives, producers, and songwriters built to push a product as much as a message (Giroux and Simon, 1989). It is not apparent that Lady Gaga had as personal of an encounter with her lyrics as did McFerrin. Regardless, the song still carries with it a positive message, although it is one that is relentlessly and aggressively drilled in by means of synthetic instrumentation and intensity; for an empirical measure, "Born This Way" checks in at around one hundred and thirty beats per minute, nearly double the sixty five beats per minute of "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Where Bobby McFerrin is offering his phone number in support of his credo ("when you worry, call me, I make you happy"), Lady Gaga might be an auto-dialer that leaves a cut-off voicemail message because it cannot distinguish between human voice and answering machine. She shouts more "don't's" and "just's" at her problematized listener:

Don't be a drag, just be a queen

Don't be a drag, just be a queen

Don't be a drag, just be a queen

Don't be don't be don't be

Sounding like an automated message because of the repetition and overlapping of each line's last word and the one that begins the next, Lady Gaga's clever wordplay signals the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer community as one audience for her curriculum. Also communicated by these lyrics (and those preceding) is the assumption of the listener's unhappiness and need for guidance, which clashes somewhat with the apparent lack of tolerance for sadness or moping in a social context that comes across with repeated "don't be a drag"s. Gaga is effectively aiming to move people from one pole of the happiness spectrum to the other in just under three and a half minutes. She assumes them to be troubled and seeking salvation at the beginning, but gives them little allowance to stay that way should they not make progress. There is no reason or justification made available to those who fail to comply with her instructions to get happy, leaving them with ever more questions if they remain discouraged by the time "Born This Way" comes to a close. She continues laying out her roadmap to self-acceptance:

In the religion of the insecure

I must be myself, respect my youth

A different lover is not a sin

Believe capital H-I-M (hey hey hey)

I love my life I love this record and

Mi amore vole fe, yah

When Gaga speaks in the first person, I wonder if she is speaking of herself or subtly motioning to her listeners to join in and sing the words themselves. Once the audience joins in, their role is transformed from being mere receivers of the curriculum to becoming its implementers as well, where they indwell amidst further muddled curricular worlds. What

was their plan when they turned on the radio or pressed play? What is the lived experience of having done so? It is the interaction of these two circumstances in which the listener is now engaged, and perhaps the consequential tension is an impetus for the rewarding motions of “striving and struggling” that will help them negotiate the differences between their current feelings and those espoused by the song (p. 164, Aoki, 2005b).

In the case that Lady Gaga is, indeed, singing about herself when using the first person, it comes across as a motivational tome, especially with the announcement of how she loves her life and her record. She is flaunting herself as proof that the “Born This Way” motto works: she practiced what she is now preaching, and doing so in a convincing fashion by having her voice, image, and vision broadcast to eyes and ears all over the world. In this way, the song’s form is its content—its very existence confirms the message found within, an arrangement covered philosophically by *denkbilder*. Walter Benjamin made the same observation about the relationship between form and content in the rolling and unrolling of a sock, which “taught (him) to draw truth from the works of literature as warily as the hand retrieves the sock from ‘the pocket’” (p. 9-10, Richter, 2007). The discovery prompts the realization that the meaning or signification of pieces of popular music, like the sock, is “not only *that* but also *how* they signify, becoming allegories of the ways in which they mean and fail to mean” (p. 10, Richter, 2007).

It goes without saying that the success of Lady Gaga as demonstrated by the song’s form/content is an outlier: only an infinitesimally small fraction of aspiring pop singers see their dream come true, regardless of how much they “be themselves” and “love (their) life.” As her listener, I am led to believe that her success both came from and now contributes to her happiness, and her happiness was and continues to be the product of her state of mind. My assumption is a potentially punishing one: should I not be able to enter her prescribed

frame of mind, I would only feel hopelessness. She does not speak in any particular depth on the finer details—high points, low points, and all those in between—of her journey to self-acceptance. Lady Gaga’s assumption that happiness and self-acceptance is simply a sleight of mind (and acknowledgment of no other factors in the equation) continues to leave no room for an alternate “right track” to be taken, or even imagined, by the listener.

“Born This Way” then seamlessly wades into the political as well as the religious, prosthelytizing that “a different lover is not a sin” before Gaga delivers an address to her followers:

Don't be a drag, just be a queen

Whether you're broke or evergreen

You're black, white, beige, chola descent

You're Lebanese, you're Orient

Whether life's disabilities

Left you outcast, bullied, or teased

Rejoice and love yourself today

'Cause baby you were born this way

No matter gay, straight, or bi

Lesbian, transgendered life

I'm on the right track baby

I was born to survive

No matter black, white or beige

Chola or orient made

I'm on the right track baby

I was born to be brave

Consider Lady Gaga's proclamation alongside Barack Obama's (2012) victory speech after winning his second presidential mandate:

It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, abled, disabled, gay or straight. You can make it here in America if you're willing to try.

Gaga and Obama adhere to the same politics of inclusion in implementing their message of hope. They both cast a large net to identify and speak directly to their followers on the basis of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation, teaching them that none of these identities alone should impede success. Here we see the common ground of the political and the popular music at the top of the Billboard music charts.

At a glance, such policy of inclusivity is a no-brainer as a positive step to take towards global harmony and individual self-actualization. In his article on "the reason of reason" in curriculum study and theory, Popkewitz (2009) takes an alternate view. "The very desire to include," as Popkewitz proffers, "is inscribed in systems of thought that create continuums of value that differentiate, divide, and abject" (p. 306). He goes on to point out that the notion and pursuit of inclusion only makes our individual differences more salient and troublesome to negotiate. In effect, despite "Born This Way"'s good intentions, its implementation may only further perpetuate and entrench the social structures and norms under which its audience is unhappily oppressed. As a counter-example, consider Gaga's and Obama's approach to inclusivity in contrast to John Lennon's (1971) "Imagine." In his plea for world harmony, Lennon only makes reference to "all the people living in the world" and the concepts of religion and class, rather than outing particular identities and groups as examples.

The instrumentation is stripped bare for a few moments in the verse above, intensifying again for a rejuvenated and uplifting rendition of the chorus.

I'm beautiful in my way

'Cause God makes no mistakes

I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way

Don't hide yourself in regret

Just love yourself and you're set

I'm on the right track, baby

I was born this way

Lady Gaga repeats the chorus that bears the weight of her missive. By the end of its final repetition, her voice is left alone with nothing but rhythmic handclaps, a couple of gospel-style backup singers, and synthetic, ominous strings. The record is stripped back down to its whispery origins, and is suddenly a reminder of the earnestness of the record's message. The core curriculum is repeated, abruptly standing alone without the instruments of intensification and aggression by which it was carried mere moments ago. The denuded track sets both Gaga and the listener off to fend for themselves in an effort to keep the sentiment of "Born This Way" strong once this song fades away into the next. It fades out more subtly than it roared in, because every pop song must offer the DJ infinite opportunities of segue to the next record, commercial break, or news and weather hit.

"Firework"

Katy Perry sets off her number one hit from 2011, "Firework," by engaging her audience in a personal, heart-to-heart conversation about their feelings. She initiates a

relationship with her listeners by asking questions that they may yearn for the opportunity to answer in the presence of a sympathetic ear. Perry asks:

Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?

Drifting through the wind, wanting to start again

Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin?

Like a house of cards, one blow from caving in

Do you ever feel already buried deep

Six feet under screams but no one seems to hear a thing

These earnest appeals engage with emotion and open the door to dialogue, and so they invite and welcome the listener across the song's threshold. Posed within the opening moments of a Top 40 pop song, the questions are also enveloped by gentle strings and silky vocals that add to their rhetorical and platitudinal feel. In this context, they are not questionable; there is no true tension here, no room for a listener to respond with "no," or even "yes, but...". The curriculum of the song is already in motion, without much concern for the lived experience of each individual listener. Instead, Perry hedges her bets with multiple ambiguous analogies that are vague enough to speak to millions, but are sung with the conviction to grab the attention of one person at a time. At this point, the pop star has taken on the role of Aoki's (2005b) "technical doer" (p. 162), in which she is embracing "a technical sense of excellence" accompanied by a faithful "compliance to the curriculum-as-plan." From the outset, the intent of the song is apparently not to invite critique or analytical thought. Instead, "Firework" is a reach for her listener's heart rather than their mind. The notion of emotion over thought crystallizes upon a re-listening of Perry's opening question that, with the mechanics of popular song in play, may have easily slipped by on the record's first several play-throughs. She asks:

Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?

Drifting through the wind, wanting to start again

In her opening invitation for emotional relation, Katy Perry invokes an anthropomorphic plastic bag.

Although they share a commonality in their evocation of aimlessness, Perry's plastic bag is markedly distinct from one of popular music's most famous reference points for human emotion, that being the rolling stone from Bob Dylan's 1965 recording, "Like A Rolling Stone." His own anthem of marginalization peaked at #2 on Billboard Hot 100, #3 on Canadian RPM Singles Chart, and was, coincidentally, released in the same year that the plastic shopping bag was patented (Thulin, 1965). The difference between the sung similes is conspicuous—one is of natural resource, the other of human-made synthetic polyethylene. This chasm hints at a cultural shift that has taken place, one in which we have moved away from the natural and sustainable and towards the personmade and consumable. With the choice of a plastic bag over a rolling stone (or other natural ephemera) as its initial emotional watermark, the curriculum-as-plan of Perry's song assumes that her listener will engage and relate more with synthetic substances rather than natural resources. This sentiment echoes amongst the differences in instrumentation between the two songs: in "Like A Rolling Stone," for example, one can easily identify the sounds of the rudimentarily-recorded tambourine, organ, piano, guitar and harmonica that form the song's backbone. Listening to "Firework," however, it becomes difficult to identify or even create a mental picture of the instruments used to create the music on the record, save for the digitally-enhanced string section. This realization underscores the synthetic and artificially-mounted aesthetic of a song that, at this point, is setting off into the raw and genuine being of its listener. This is not to say that Katy Perry's use of advanced recording technology is necessarily a bad thing, although Walter

Benjamin (1936) and Frankfurt School colleague Theodor Adorno might suggest otherwise. Adorno considered the musical composition the “most exalted model of non-communicable materiality” (Richter, 2007, p. 32), but he had fairly strict requirements for what constituted a proper musical composition. For example, he went as far as situating the technological advancement leading to musical recordings that may be played at home by oneself as a derogatory “accompanied solitude” that only allows music to give lonely people the unsubstantiated illusion that they are not actually alone. He also “saw the jukebox as a machine that drew ‘suckers’ into pubs with the promise of joy and happiness” (Byrne, 2012, loc. 2107). Imagine his reaction to portable music players and internet streaming services!

Benjamin (1936), for his part, considered any studio trickery and technological reproduction of a performance as a violation of art’s entire purpose of genuineness and authenticity. He thought of reproduction as a wobbly authority-stealer and aura-shrinker, devaluing the single authentic and original piece of art from which it derived. Any reproductive act, Benjamin (1936) wrote, would be to “to strip the object of its sheath and shatter its aura) (p. 10). Benjamin’s focus was on film, but music could have also bore the brunt of his argument that technological advancements had reduced film to mechanical production techniques that “bring out familiar motifs but reveal in them others that are quite unfamiliar and that bear no resemblance” to reality (p. 29), and that “this is a different nature that addresses the camera (*or microphone*) than the one that speaks to the eye (*or ear*)” (p. 30).

Technophobia in the arts, and specifically music, is not limited to these authors or their time period. Consider this pronouncement by the poet Heinrich Heine (1843), as translated by Ross (2013a):

This eternal piano-playing is too much to bear! ... This shrill tinkling with no natural resonance, this heartless whirring, this ultra-prosaic banging and pecking – the fortepiano is killing all our thoughts and feelings, and we are becoming stupid, dull, imbecilic. This prevalence of piano playing, not to speak of the triumphal march of the piano virtuosos, is characteristic of our time and bears witness to the victory of machine over spirit. Technical proficiency, the precision of an automaton, the identification with strung wood, the sonic instrumentalization of human beings, is now hailed and praised as the highest good.

Today, an equivalent sentiment is constantly echoed in response to auto-tune and other contemporary studio mixing magic and gloss, and the most advanced forms of technology across all artistic domains remain the targets of many purists.

Back to the plastic bag (a technological advancement that has succeeded in part because of its superficiality and its ability to be reproduced, by the way): as peculiar as it may seem, this is not the first time that a plastic bag has appeared in the lexicon of popular music. The English punk rock group X-Ray Spex gave it top billing thirty-five years ago in their 1978 song “Plastic Bag” (did not chart), featured on their debut album *Germfree Adolescents*.

Their invocation of plastic, however, contrasts sharply with Katy Perry’s “Firework.” Far from an emotionally charged, romanticized, or even benign point of focus, X-Ray Spex pit the plastic bag in a battle versus the natural world. Both singers use the bag to connect with their audiences, but in very different ways: X-Ray Spex frontwoman Poly Styrene invokes the synthetic material to galvanize, disturb, and disrupt her audience, while Perry’s intentions are to relate, reassure, and reconcile. The former’s “Plastic Bag” actually rails against the consumerist machine of which Katy Perry’s “plastic bag” is a part. The band’s distaste and wariness of a plastic society, one in which they link synthetic goods “with a sort

of processed, manufactured humanity” (Huey, n.d.), is echoed in other songs on the record (e.g., “Art-I-Ficial,” “Warrior in Woolworths,” “Genetic Engineering,” “Germfree Adolescents,” “The Day the World Turned Day-Glo”), not to mention their lead singer’s stage name.

In “Plastic Bag,” singer Styrene cries, “1977 and we are going mad, it’s 1977 and we’ve seen too many ads,” before launching into a counter-cultural rally against a sterile and unfeeling society built on a foundation of consumption:

My mind is like a plastic bag

That corresponds to all those ads

It sucks up all the rubbish

That is fed in through by ear

I eat Kleenex for breakfast

And use soft hygienic Weetabix to dry my tears.

This is in no way similar to the vision of a plastic bag that “Firework” intended to evoke thirty-three years later. Although, in an ironic twist, the alienation and insecurities expressed throughout the record by Poly Styrene may place her squarely within the demographic targeted by Katy Perry’s pop song.

In “Firework,” plastic is conjured as a serious opportunity for emotional relation and connection. And, when becoming aware of and acclimatizing to the synthetic elements found in the song itself—post-produced special effects, digitally-enhanced instruments, and auto-tuned vocal—the simile takes on an air of appropriateness. This relationship between instrumentation, message, and authenticity resonates even louder when played alongside the notion of *denkbilder*, in which the “form itself becomes the content” (Richter, 2007, p. 10),

and the content is similarly inseparable from the form. Popular song construction becomes its message, and its message becomes its construction.

Paying such close attention to Perry's plastic bag is also faithful to and justified by the process of creating a denkbild, and serves as one example of a "seemingly negligible phenomenon...(to be) read and evaluated as a sign of a larger cultural semiotics" (Richter, 2007, p. 8) that is found within popular song. As the seventh and eighth words mentioned at the 0:11 mark of a song that runs 3:48, it is unlikely that the plastic bag was conceived to merit significant consideration or call much attention to itself. Rather, the disposable and single-use analogy serves merely as a means to an end by which Katy Perry may make salient feelings of aimlessness (*drifting through the wind*), resignation (*wanting to start again*), fragility (*a house of cards one blow from caving in*), and helplessness and irrelevance (*no one seems to hear a thing*) in her listener. These opening lyrics also aim to identify, target, and capture the attention of the record's demographic of marginalized individuals. In preparing to bring them up, she must first put them down. The restrained yet upbeat instrumentation invites (rather than incites) the listener into the song's cozy confines, where a message of hope is already appearing on the horizon. She confides:

Do you know that there's still a chance for you

'Cause there's a spark in you, you just gotta

Ignite the light and let it shine

Just own the night, like the 4th of July

Perry harnesses the intimacy and trust created in the first verses of the song, in which she connected with her listener by asking direct, personal questions about emotion and vulnerability, to step into a therapeutic and even authoritative role. In this role, she walks a fine line between helpfully reaching across socially constructed barriers (Danesi, 2008) and

hurtfully reinforcing them through her place in popular culture (Giroux & Simon, 1989). She reassures her listener, saying they still have a “chance,” and offers one-size-fits-all advice for whatever the predicament may be.

“You just gotta ignite the light, and let it shine,” Perry sings, suggesting that there is already something deep within the afflicted that would give them the confidence to “own the night” upon being activated. Shining light to engage with a problem is a familiar concept in the curriculum theorizing of Ted Aoki (2005), who was inspired by a lyric from the 1992 Leonard Cohen record, “Anthem”:

There is a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in

Cohen sings contrarily of light moving in the opposite direction. His lyrics suggest a more passive approach to fulfillment, one in which illumination is achieved by letting light in, rather than sending it outwards into the world. The two lyrics demonstrate a clash of extroversion and introspection as mollifiers of self-doubt and uncertainty. In “Firework,” Katy Perry is not preaching for patience to resolve the issues made salient by the song, nor is she suggesting that the resolution of the listener’s problems will come extrinsically. In insisting to her listener that “you just gotta,” the lyrics imply that the problem of the listener lies within, and it is they themselves who are personally and solely responsible for its existence, persistence, and resolution. Perry makes it seem as if overcoming hardship is as simple as following her coded instruction. The listener is told that, if only they were to be proactive about their situation, they would find themselves soaring through the sky like a firework in no time. The curriculum of the song leaves no room for the possibility that this is all easier sung than done. By placing such blame on the listener, “Firework” implicitly proclaims the innocence and absolves of culpability the social world in which they live.

There is no indication or allowance that any single factor—race, gender, class, socioeconomic status—is preventing a listener from being able to “ignite,” “shine,” and “own the night,” other than their own selves. Giroux (2001) reminds us that this is not, in fact, the case—that there are many forces at work that prevent an individual from unilaterally improving their situation.

In the end, this deception can only add to the frustration of a listener who is at first given hope by the song, but subsequently fails to ignite (perhaps they have a defective battery? No money for gasoline? Wet matches?) and cannot enact the rest of the utopian narrative embedded within “Firework”’s lyrics and instrumentation. Considered this way, the song may, in fact, serve to further discourage and marginalize. Should the listener fail at interpreting and implementing the advice from “Firework,” they will only have themselves to blame and, in turn, will feel further inferior to the successful and dominant class (Giroux & Simon, 1989).

Incidentally, by keeping its audience marginalized, this particular brand of contemporary popular music—which speaks of and to isolation, frustration, and hopelessness—sustains its targeted demographic. Here, a self-perpetuating cycle takes place, one in which deception is used to maintain power relations: through “Firework,” the dominant class creates intimacy with the lower class, offers them hope, assigns them individual responsibility, and shirks its own social responsibility (Giroux, 2001). Summarily, the listener is set up to fail and subsequently seeks help once again by turning to more commercial products— from the same deceptive dominant class—that will re-package and re-deliver the same intimacy and hope. Theodor Adorno compared this to the effect of an opiate, in which the thing is only creating more desire for itself (Byrne, 2012). The cycle will begin anew, and all the while a secret remains hidden behind the curtain: social mobility and

class-transcending success stories shouted from the rooftops by a pop artist are borne of some variation of compromise with the powerful.

As in the other songs included in this analysis, listeners are not given the opportunity to “walk on their own” (Block, 1997). Instead, they are only given the illusion of choice within the confines of radio playlists. In their quest for self-actualization, the audience may only relate their self to those objects—in this case, popular songs— that are made available by songwriters, producers, record labels, DJs, and Billboard charts. These objects are not adequate solutions for the problems to which they appeal, and carry with them the possibility of further marginalization and social stratification.

“Fuckin’ Perfect”

“Fuckin’ Perfect,” performed by Alecia Beth Moore a.k.a. P!nk (2010), became the number one song on the American Billboard pop charts in March of 2011. The record had peaked one month earlier at number two on the Billboard Hot 100, an all-encompassing chart that ranks all music genres according to their radio airplay, sales data, and streaming activity. It also reached #1 on Billboard’s Hot Digital Songs chart (based on online sales data), #2 on the Billboard Canadian Hot 100, and was ranked thirteenth and nineteenth, respectively, on the Canadian and American Hot 100 year-end charts for 2011.

The song’s opening moment features no vocals or instruments—only a conspicuous breath. Before giving way to the song proper, this pregnant pause builds anticipation for the vocals and music that will imminently colour in the rest of the aural landscape. The breath itself and the analysis it begs comprise a kind of aural denkbild, a thought-sound (Richter, 2007). It is, after all, an aural snapshot that is “fastened upon a seemingly peripheral detail...and without a developed plot or a prescribed narrative agenda” at this point of the

record, “yet is charged with theoretical insight” (Richter, 2007, p. 2). In a technological age where production booth sheen and gloss can be used to cover the slightest imperfection and tweak to the most desirable effect, this apparently marginal element is a very deliberate inclusion. P!nk, along with her songwriters and producers, have opted to begin the song with what may be interpreted to be a glimpse behind the production curtain that offers us insight into P!nk’s humanity as she begins her three-minute missive. I speculate that its inclusion is meant to lend authenticity to the song that follows, and to the notion that it will be a genuine, meaningful expression of P!nk’s feelings and emotions. At the very least, this opening breath is meant to tell the audience that this is a break from generally “contrived” pop music. Regardless of what was heard before the song began—were it an advertisement, celebrity gossip, or song from another genre—P!nk takes the first moment of “Fuckin’ Perfect” to subtly gesture to her listener that something personal and heartfelt is coming their way. In this one short breath, P!nk has initiated a transformation of an abstract sociocultural space into something different; she has succinctly declared her presence and intention, around which her listeners are prompted to arrange themselves (Aoki, 2005).

This intent to orchestrate authenticity is heightened as P!nk sings the opening words *a capella* before being joined by the resonant chords of a piano, an instrument freely associated with emotion, contemplation and classicism (Casemore, 2010).

Made a wrong turn, once or twice

Dug my way out, blood and fire

Bad decisions, that’s alright

Welcome to my silly life.

In step with the emotional tone set by the song’s opening, P!nk begins lyrically with an admission of vulnerability, referring to “wrong turns” and “bad decisions” that she has

made over the course of her life. She acknowledges that she has made missteps, and goes on to normalize them as simply being part of her “silly life,” thus rendering their occurrences as having been average and expected. This acknowledgment serves to create an image of her for the listener as someone who is imperfect, according to the standards of the society that has judged her actions as mistakes. With this autobiographical admission coming from P!nk herself—a successful, well-known, and entrenched pop-cultural figure as demonstrated by her commercial and radio presence—the listener is being told that it is normal to have experienced similar setbacks. The opening lyrics also introduce a narrative of perseverance for P!nk’s character, as she sings that she has “dug (her) way out, blood and fire.” This discourse adds another layered message to her confession of past mistakes, telling her listener that she has overcome these bad decisions only because of a taxing effort and persistent drive to do so.

Mistreated, misplaced, misunderstood

Miss ‘No way, it’s all good’, it didn’t slow me down

Mistaken always second guessing, underestimated

Look I’m still around.

As the accompanying acoustic guitar (unplugged for authenticity) and catchy percussion backbeat (giving the song its poppiness) make their entrance, P!nk’s voice rises in intensity. Her inflection in many of these words is that of an individual who is bemoaning or crying out about their situation—while, of course, singing at the same time. Referring to the ways in which she has been “mistreated, misplaced, underestimated, and misunderstood,” P!nk situates herself within the marginalized segment of society, a place from where she can sit and explore alongside the intended receivers of her song’s curriculum (Aoki, 2005b). The irony is apparent in her singing about themes of perceived imperfection, the struggle to be

understood, and marginalization, in a song that was, at one point, the most-often played pop track on North American radio stations. Although these feelings are mostly commonplace in the mainstream population, a school-aged youth may not yet be aware that their experience is “normal”—that, for example, as many as one in five Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder, including major depressive episodes (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2012)—as they search for their own definition of the word, thereby identifying with P!nk over the other pop singers on the charts who make no mention of such feelings of abnormality and marginalization.

In the same breath, she allegorically quotes herself as saying “No way, it’s all good” at times when it is, in fact, *not* all good. She paints herself as someone who shelters the issues by which she is marginalized within her private persona, and carries on publicly as if none is the matter. She seems to neither condemn nor condone such actions, which is disappointing, considering that the song goes on to make the case that perceived imperfection is not something of which one should be ashamed or silent. Themes of perseverance are underscored again as she ends the verse with the declaration, “look, I’m still around.”

Pretty pretty please, don't you ever ever feel

Like you're less than fuckin' perfect

Pretty pretty please, if you ever ever feel, like you're nothing

You're fuckin' perfect to me.

In the song’s chorus, P!nk makes a direct appeal to her listener. But who is her intended listener, and what is their intended experience? One might imagine that she is communicating with one particular individual with whom she has a personal relationship, or speaking to a character from her autobiographical past. The song, however, is heard by

millions of people worldwide, many of who may be expected (and encouraged by the construction of the song) to make it situationally meaningful on a personal level. This is complicated, however, by the inherent design and function of the record; like the students in Miss O's classroom, the listener's uniqueness "disappears into the shadows when they are spoken of in the prosaically abstract language of the external curriculum planners" (Aoki, 2005b, p. 160). In this case, it is the vague and catch-all lyrics that swallow any opportunity for a listener's individual context to be truly appreciated or recognized in the song. Such is the nature of popular music, and the listener is tasked with meeting the performer half-way. David Byrne (2012) of Talking Heads fame acknowledges the presence and the practicality of this arrangement between implementer and receiver:

I know from writing lyrics that some details—names, places, and locations—are desirable; they anchor the piece in the real world. But so are ambiguities. By letting the listener or viewer fill in the blanks, complete the picture (or piece of music), the work becomes personalized and the audience can adapt it to their own lives and situations. They become more involved with the work, and an intimacy and involvement becomes possible that perfections might have kept at bay. (loc. 1964)

By not drilling every lyric down to the finest detail, P!nk leaves open spaces for the listener to define as they wish. In turn, these spaces create a greater opportunity for close emotional connection. The tension between specificity and ambiguity is carefully navigated in "Fuckin' Perfect" and other similar pop songs, allowing the curriculum-as-plan to be tweaked and re-imagined in order to be at its most effective.

In his writing on ethno/graphy and discourse, Aoki (2005c) emphasizes "language is no mere communication tool... 'linguaging' participates in creating effects" (p.324). This principle is present and calls for attention in the context of "Fuckin' Perfect." P!nk begins the

chorus's emotional appeal with "pretty pretty please," a phrase that carries with it close discursive ties to childhood. Freely associating with the concept of childhood, one may begin to dwell on themes of innocence, purity, and sincerity (Casemore, 2010). By bringing these discursive themes to the forefront, P!nk's appeals appear to be genuine because of their childlike nature, and so they encourage the listener to consider her words as being driven by genuine emotional and caring instincts.

Accompanied by a lush instrumental arrangement and a driving percussive backbone, P!nk pleads with her listener to never feel "less than perfect" or that he or she is "nothing." P!nk had defined the term earlier in the discursive absences of her references to imperfection (Aoki, 2005c). Within the cracks of the song, perfection has been implicated as a trait held by an individual who does not make mistakes, is privileged, resides in the purportedly "happy" and mainstream population, and does not experience any adverse emotion. By this definition, one would be hard-pressed to think of any individual who may be considered as perfect. Here, we again see the ways in which P!nk is speaking to an unquantifiably broad segment of the population but is managing to put her message forwards as an apparent personal appeal.

The lyrics of the song do not offer advice, but rather comfort. P!nk sings, "you're fuckin' perfect to me," indicating to her listener that there exist different definitions of perfection, and that hers is one that is totally inclusive. The singer is reminding those that embody the same socially "flawed" traits as she that they should not consequently feel outcast or upset, but rather take reassurance in knowing that they are not alone, and that it is possible for them to be "perfect" in their own way. This line of thought firmly situates perfection as a universally desirable trait and, although pleasantly idealistic, problematizes its pursuit.

In the North American capitalistic meritocracy, perfection is the concept to which corporations and individuals are groomed to aspire. It is a measure of success and a badge of honour, and is symbiotic with the consumerocracy that encourages and allows someone to buy what they want in their continued quest for perfection. Imperfection, on the other hand, is to be hidden away and corrected; every imperfection, from skin blemishes to personality traits, has its own specialized and commercial antidote. P!nk tries to fly in the face of this traditional definition, earnestly attempting re-define perfection as something that is simply in the eye of a very generous beholder (i.e., her) and attainable by swapping dictionaries. The song may allow the listener a moment's respite, but they cannot live in P!nk's world forever (and perhaps not even longer than the three-plus minutes that "Fuckin' Perfect" runs)—the mainstream understanding of perfection will persist and inevitably rear its head during measures of self-worth. As her efforts are cancelled out by the more oppressive definitions of perfection propagated by other popular culture artifacts—billboard advertisements, movies, television, books, and the rest of the Billboard Hot 100—as well as the subtle nuances within her own music as explored in my critical reading, the net result of "Fuckin' Perfect" becomes merely a reification of the importance of perfection (Giroux & Simon, 1989). Placing perfection on a pedestal, the frustration of chasing it and failure to achieve it are coincidentally made as salient as the planned curriculum of the song itself.

You're so mean when you talk about yourself, you were wrong

Change the voices in your head, make them like you instead.

So complicated, look happy, you'll make it

Filled with so much hatred, such a tired game

It's enough! I've done all I can think of

Chased down all my demons, I've seen you do the same.

Between the lines of this verse, P!nk makes reference to mental illness. When she sings of an individual who talks about oneself in a negative light, she may be singing of the experience of depression or anxiety; when she sings of voices in one's head, she may be singing of psychosis or schizophrenia; and when she sings of demons, she may be singing of any multitude of mental health issues, although the use of the word "demons" commonly lends itself to discourses of addiction.

Introducing mental illness into the popular consciousness is admirable, although the way in which P!nk proceeds remains questionable. Richter (2007), by way of Walter Benjamin's socks, underscores the "signification of the rolling and unrolling, significations that signify not only *that* but also *how* they signify, becoming allegories of the ways in which they mean and fail to mean" (p. 10). As a pop singer, P!nk is granted artistic license to be crafty in her expression and communication, but these lyrical ambiguities and codified references to illness signify and speak profoundly of mental health's true level of acceptance in popular culture. By masking and hiding mental afflictions behind colloquialisms, their stigmata are not reduced or addressed. Instead, they are reinforced as that of which we do not speak openly or confront directly.

In presenting these problems that may affect one's self-esteem and ability to function within society, she responsively offers solutions that, at face value, appear simplistic and easily attainable. Her advice, paraphrased, suggests that her listener "look happy," realize that "you were wrong (to be mean to yourself)," and that "you can succeed because you have succeeded before." The earlier themes of struggle and perseverance enter the lyrical landscape once again, but this time they appear in a therapeutic context rather than the autobiographical sense invoked beforehand. By establishing herself earlier in the song as someone who has been through the problems that her listener is purported to be experiencing,

P!nk has placed herself in a position of authority, through which she may legitimately offer meaningful, encouraging, and helpful words to those in similar situations. A listener leaning on this advice, however, will undoubtedly be frustrated by its inadequacy in helping them to feel “perfect,” consequently increasing their dependence on similar corporate popular culture artifacts through which they may continue to cope with their afflictions and strive for ultimate perfection (Giroux & Simon, 1989). The “therapy” offered is simplistic and even invalidating. It undermines the seriousness of the symptoms and the topography of their root causes. Perhaps this is asking too much of a pop song, but the effects of “Fuckin’ Perfect”’s confrontation with mental illness will ensue nonetheless.

Following a flourish of strings that again heighten the emotional intensity of the song, P!nk enters into the chorus again, reminding her listener once more that they are perfect by the her own definition of the word. Exiting the chorus, the song’s instrumentation sheds its string section, piano, wailing guitars, and driving percussion, left with only a percussive guitar beat at the forefront over which P!nk pseudo-raps:

The whole world’s scared so I swallow the fear

The only thing I should be drinking is an ice cold beer

So cool in line, and we try try try, but we try too hard and it’s a waste of my time

Done looking for the critics, cause they’re everywhere

They don’t like my jeans, they don’t get my hair

Exchange ourselves, and we do it all the time

Why do we do that? Why do I do that?

Why do I do that?

In shifting her singing, P!nk’s song crosses genres, morphing from its vulnerable origins into a more aggressive and in-your-face tone by appropriating certain tenets of hip

hop. This sort of change, commonly known as a bridge, is prominent in popular songs. In this case, its fashioned use may be attributed to the need to retain a listener's attention or the desire to appeal to a larger number of listeners across multiple musical styles. "If a listener can predict where a piece of music is going," explains Byrne (2012), they "begin to tune out. Shifting off an established pattern keeps things interesting and engaging for everyone" (loc. 2006).

In addition to these motives, however, the change in style also transforms P!nk from someone who is held back by her problems to someone who no longer regards them as problems and subsequently can no longer be held back. She embraces an underdog mentality by rapping that she is "done looking for the critics...they don't like my jeans, they don't get my hair," writing off those who may critique her for the way she dresses and looks. By making specific mention of these facets of identity, P!nk identifies clothing and hairstyle as means through which one may express themselves in a non-conformist fashion. At the same time, she is contrarily reminding her listener of the corporate agenda of consumption in which they are expected to participate in order to build an identity (Giroux & Simon, 1989).

On the theme of conformism, presumably in the pursuit perfection, P!nk identifies the act of conforming ("try try try") as "a waste of my time." She goes on to question the reasons for conforming: in an apparently intimate moment of the song, the newly-adopted and brash instrumentation melts away as she frustrated asks herself, in a style that is more parts actor than singer, "Why do I do that?" There is an uncomfortable tension in this comment, where the listener does not know how to react to the apparent breaking down of a singer in the middle of a recording. It is heightened by the sudden and momentary silence by which it is accompanied. P!nk dwells within this place of uncertainty and invites her listener to dwell with her. Both parties benefit from being inside the tension-filled space provided by the

potentially uncomfortable musical lapse, as they have the opportunity to reflect on their feelings and experience a tension that problematizes conventional understanding and provokes new thoughts (Aoki, 2005b). The silence and uncertainty is t of this moment is eventually and abruptly shattered by P!nk's assured and powerful return to the microphone, punctuated by an emphatic and triumphant "Yeeeeeeaaahhh!!!!!" that triggers the return of percussion, acoustic guitar and strings to the forefront. They accompany her as she leads the song through the chorus twice more.

As the song comes to a close, P!nk brashly and proudly struts her vocals more than she has at any point on this record, definitively demonstrating that she is an individual who has, indeed, persevered and continues to move forward in spite of her uncertainties and anxieties. As the chorus plays out its final rounds, she accentuates the line, "you're fuckin' perfect" on a vocal track that is layered above the original, reminding the listener of the song's essence as it careens towards its close.

After nearly four minutes, P!nk finally goes silent, and the song ends as it began—with a breath, although this time it's one of exhalation.

Fading Out

"Cynicism isn't wisdom," sings Nana Grizol (2010), "it's a lazy way to say that you've been burned." And here, before drawing any conclusion, I must remain reflexive and responsive instead of certain and definitive; "it seems, if anything, you'd be less certain after everything you ever learned." It is misguided and cynical to assume that the critical analyses above are reflective of the true intentions of every record label, producer, DJ, musician, and singer of popular music. I have argued that the popular music carries with it a meaningful curriculum of immeasurable impact and implications. Despite my allegations of its status as

being part of an oppressive and hegemonic curricular force, and even being one in and of itself, I must acknowledge its magical and transcendent ephemeral qualities. I have illustrated in detail my own interpretations and insight into several pieces of popular music, but have kept in mind all the while that there is no such thing as a singular musical experience. “How music works,” pontificates Byrne (2012), “is determined not just by what it is in isolation but in large part by what surrounds it, where you hear it and when you hear it.” He continues:

How it’s performed, how it’s sold and distributed, how it’s recorded, who performs it, whom you hear it with, and, of course, finally, what it sounds like: these are the things that determine not only if a piece of music works—if it successfully achieves what it sets out to accomplish—but what it is. (loc. 31)

In short: popular music can be interpreted (or even appropriated) by anyone to be anything. I have used the songs and lyrics quoted to support my analysis, but interpretation ultimately lies with each listener and their personal, contextual experience with these records. This does not necessarily preclude the presence of a particular curricular message that the song was designed to implement. Consequently, each listener finds themselves dwelling within and navigating this tension-filled space between interpretation and intention—that is, between the message being offered to them and the one that they would like to hear.

Signing Off

By riffing on the concepts of Giroux’s public pedagogy, Giroux & Simon’s popular pedagogy and youth culture, Richter’s denkbilder, and Aoki’s tension-filled space for indwelling between the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experience, I have tuned in to the hit parade pedagogy and turned it to eleven. Throughout the analysis, the

backing track of public pedagogy brought to the forefront the implications of popular music for hegemonic power structures and their nooks and crannies; the backing track of popular pedagogy and youth culture illuminated the ways in which our social structures and corporate interests legitimize, condone and perpetuate “marginalized” people and spaces by shaping the worldviews and self-identities of youth through the curriculum of popular song; the backing track of denkbilder instigated unusual patterns of thought and thinking about the aesthetic phenomena of popular music that, when disrupted and exploded, come to emerge as the secret avenues of critical and theoretical insight; and the backing track of Aoki’s curricular worlds contrasted the intents of popular music’s curriculum with its real-world implications and praxis, and provided a tension-filled space in which the analysis could acknowledge and play on the relationships between the interpretive possibilities of chart-topping hits. In turn, the Billboard music chart’s status as a pedagogical heavyweight has been made apparent, and with a steady ear we may begin to listen more closely to its ubiquitously disseminated and digested curriculum.

In particular, this conceptual framework teased out several key themes from the hit parade pedagogy. Chief among these themes is the contradictory nature of a chart-topping narrative of marginalization. Each of these records in my playlist enjoyed time as the most played, purchased, and listened to popular songs in North America and beyond. Paradoxically, this suggests that the popular majority that moved these songs up the Billboard rankings is actually made up of outsiders and “marginalized” individuals. By presenting the majority as the minority, the privileged and powerful class that actually comprises the popular minority flexes its influence, reifying and protecting its own social and political status. “All music is political, right?”, answered the Montreal progressive rock

band Godspeed You! Black Emperor (2012) when asked whether politics shapes their music in a recent interview with *The Guardian*. They continued:

You either make music that pleases the king and his court, or you make music for the serfs outside the walls. It's what music (and culture) is for, right? To distract or confront, or both at the same time? So many of us know already that shit is fucked. Meanwhile, most of us are hammering away at a terrible self-alienation, mistreated, lied to, and blamed.

The illusion of a “normal” majority full of happy and confident people is perpetuated through the popular music curriculum, and through its dissemination the dominant class disempowers the larger “marginalized” group by publicly and brazenly approaching them as if they are social outliers. As a popular majority, they are disarmed by the conviction that they are misfits and imperfect citizens. The legitimacy of the listener’s marginalization is never challenged or questioned; rather, it is condoned and normalized by the narrative of marginalization featured in the song’s curriculum-as-plan. The singer acknowledges social afflictions and personal problems, but only as a prelude to an education of how to take control of your life and join the successful, happy, and illusory majority.

This education comes in the form of remedies that are simple and vague, although the pop singers do offer compelling cases for their efficacy by sharing their own autobiographical details, not to mention the inherent authority and powers of persuasion that come along with their current position on the popular pedestal. The solutions appear well-meaning and empowering, encouraging the listener to be a better person by having faith in themselves. In my readings of the selected popular songs, however, I found that the suggested remedies were more reminiscent of snake oil than effective medicine. By focusing their advice on what the listener of their song must do—“*you* just gotta ignite the light and let

it shine,” “change the voices in *your* head,” “just love *yourself* and you’re set” (emphasis added)— these records place the onus of recovery squarely on the listener, who is told that they are solely responsible for their afflictions. In turn, the prevalent social class is absolved of its own responsibilities in offering meaningful solutions and assistance to those in need. Audiences are encouraged to reach for some expectation imposed upon them by popular song, instead of actually engaging a praxis of self-acceptance. As a counter-example, Wreckless Eric (1989) takes a pragmatic stance in his song Depression where he begins, right off the bat, against a defiantly jangly and oxymoronically upbeat musical backdrop:

Forgive me if I don't seem myself

I was feelin' alright then I fell

Into this depression, depression, I'm disconnected

...And there ain't no one who can take this weight off of me

It won't last forever, but that's sure hard to believe

...Oh I can think of a million reasons to be happy

But that don't work on me

I could be anyone, I could be anywhere, but I'd still be in this depression

...Forever and ever, where will it end?

He is as frank, descriptive, and detailed as the titling of the song would suggest, offering the listener no illusions or hope about the future. Comfort is still found, however, in the record's honesty and up-front nature. Wreckless Eric claims no triumphs and offers no quick fixes, allowing his afflicted listener the assurance that their experience is neither unique nor easy; there is nothing terribly wrong with them. The curriculum of the popular songs in my analysis take a different approach, suggesting to their listener that they must fix themselves and that there is a prescribed manner for doing so. The listener continues to bear

the burden of self-improvement and social success, feeling responsible for their failures to follow the singers' advice and searching evermore for the solutions, inspiration, and hope—all of which are, conveniently, packaged neatly into contemporary popular music. Each song necessitates its own consumption.

As popular music will continue to offer its own version of therapy for those afflicted with mental illnesses and other personal issues, it is imperative that effective education persists in busting the myths perpetuated by popular culture and unattended to by the pseudo-psychology of the Billboard charts. Depression and other afflictions are being appropriated in fun-house mirror fashion and commodified as opportunities for cheap therapy sessions and desires to be sated by a singer's public persona and music. Greater educational emphasis needs to be placed on an appropriately coherent and cohesive curriculum of mental health issues that rivals the ubiquity, persistency, and universality of the pop music curriculum.

In a sense, the most difficult work has perhaps already been done by the popular songs on my playlist. Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, P!nk, and their teams of managers and songwriters have put the notion of mental illness into the public consciousness and onto the collective table as something to be discussed, addressed, and considered in a public way. My criticisms of their exact approaches notwithstanding, their success on the Billboard charts has, at the very least, given educators and everyone else a jump-off point from which a meaningful conversation may begin. My research and the dialogue it has started between friends, family, educators, colleagues and half-strangers are but two examples of practical evidence of this notion.

I suggest that educators resist the inclination to consider popular culture as an adversary of or competition for their provincially sanctioned curriculum, but as an instigator

for blurring lines between the traditional and non-traditional. In doing so, we invite thoughts and conversations that transcend this ever-disappearing border.

This curriculum should mirror popular music in one important way, and that is that it be participatory. The hit parade pedagogy permeates because of its openness to participation: sing along, play the music on your own, remix the record, write new lyrics, buy a CD, go to a show, wear a t-shirt or sew a patch onto your backpack. The consumption of a song is active and engaging for its listeners, contrasting sharply with a conventional education curriculum that is too often thrust at and done to its attendees. Calling back to Pinar's (2012) notion of curriculum as *currere*, in which he invokes the notion of running alongside, my research and analysis sounds out the importance of a curriculum with which we may sing along.

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