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# Detroit Youth Speak Back: Rewriting Deficit Perspectives Through Songwriting

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## ABSTRACT

*This critical ethnographic study examined the songwriting practices of youth participating in a facilitated 15-week community-based after-school songwriting class called The Verses Project in Midtown Detroit. This article explores (a) the ways in which youth used hip-hop to share their lived experiences in contrast to dominant discourses about their lives, (b) the nature of the stories they chose to tell with the music they created, and (c) the manner in which teaching artists and mentors supported youth in this work. I draw upon critical race theory as a theoretical framework specifically for its emphasis on “counterstories” that foreground the experiences of marginalized voices to speak back to dominant narratives.*

*Deficit perspectives often frame the public’s images of youth—particularly youth of color in urban areas. I argue that in The Verses Project, youth asserted the strengths of their identities and communities through music and provided profound counternarratives to dominant deficit discourses. The possibility of the production of these counternarratives provides significant motivation for offering such songwriting classes both inside and outside of school.*

In spring 2016, Michigan State University<sup>1</sup> launched The Verses Project in collaboration with the Community Music School in Detroit (CMS-D). The project provided opportunities for Detroit youth of color to develop their skills as songwriters and their artistic presence in an after-school class. CMS-D and the program funders identified literacy education as an important focus for Detroit youth and initiated this program to support young artists to develop multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; New London Group, 1996)<sup>2</sup> alongside their musicking interests (Hess, Watson, & Deroo, in press). Youth in the program drew readily on hip-hop in their listening and writing, and teaching artists and mentors supported youth to create hip-hop songs. Throughout the 15-week songwriting class, youth worked with three teaching artists, three mentors, and the university research team.

Honoring a dual focus of musicking (Small, 1998) and multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; New London Group, 1996), we initiated the project in February 2016 with three guiding research questions:

1. In what ways do students engage in musicking and multiliteracies through a songwriting curriculum?<sup>3</sup>
2. In what ways does the curriculum provide opportunities for students to build musical skills and multiliteracies?
3. In what ways do instructors facilitate students' meaning making of the curriculum?

In Week 7 (of 15), as the focus on youth's collaborative songwriting became prominent, I became interested in additional questions:

1. What kinds of topics do youth explore in a facilitated songwriting class?
2. How do youth position themselves in their music in a songwriting class that supports counternarratives?
3. How (if at all) do issues of identity manifest in youth-produced music?

These questions emerged in response to observing youth navigate and assert their identities through songwriting. In examining youth's songwriting processes supported by teaching artists and mentors, it became clear that songs youth produced challenged deficit narratives of Detroit youth.

Youth asserted their stories powerfully through music. Writing guidance and encouragement from teaching artists prompted youth to draw on lived experiences to create songs. Employing critical race theory (CRT) to prioritize the counterstory, I draw upon interviews with youth recounting their songwriting processes alongside their song lyrics to consider how hip-hop songwriting allowed youth to rewrite deficit perspectives of their lives and assert powerful counterstories. This study will arrive at the claim that the manner in which youth asserted their stories has implications for offering facilitated songwriting opportunities in school and community settings. I first explore, however, the ways in which deficit perspectives frame the lives of youth of color in urban areas, followed by a literature review of culturally responsive teaching, hip-hop education, and songwriting and a description of the methodology. I subsequently share and analyze data in the Findings and Discussion sections.

## **DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH OF COLOR IN URBAN AREAS**

In considering The Verses Project, it is important to recognize that deficit discourses often plague youth of color. Educators and society often view youth of color, particularly urban youth of color, through deficit frameworks (Castagno, 2014; Delpit, 2006, 2012; Howard, 2013). Institutions often dismiss the strengths of youth of color, instead positioning them as "lacking" particular skills due to "culture." Teachers rely on purportedly neutral narratives about "what the research shows" or a "culture of poverty" to pathologize youth without implicating themselves (Castagno, 2014). Castagno (2014) argues:

This framing of neutrality and truth are acceptable ways to articulate otherwise not nice beliefs. Difference and deficit thus become a matter of fact and niceness

continues to operate by erasing the role educators, schools, and other institutions play in creating and sustaining inequity. (p. 68)

The deficit model allows educators to rationalize students' lack of success without examining the systems and structures that assure it (Castagno, 2014). This deficit model of education views youth in terms of vulnerabilities rather than assets, strengths, and capabilities (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone, 2007, 2010; Furedi, 2004; Pollard, 2014). Dei (2000) challenges pathologizing minoritized youth and blaming them for systemic forces that shape their lives. Amid deficit narratives that structure the lives of Detroit youth of color, facilitated songwriting provides a way to write back to these narratives.

## **RELATED LITERATURE: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY, HIP-HOP PEDAGOGY, AND SONGWRITING**

This literature review focuses on three elements pertinent to implementing a community-based songwriting class that centers on hip-hop. I look first to literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching in education in order to highlight the importance of aligning pedagogy and curriculum to youth's interests and cultures. I then examine literature on hip-hop and hip-hop pedagogy to engage the primary genre selected by Verses youth. I conclude this section with a literature review of songwriting in music education, as youth enrolled specifically in a songwriting class to develop their abilities in production and creation.

### ***Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching***

The literature on culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy in education (Delpit, 2006, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009) and in music education (Countryman, 2009; Gurgel, 2016; Hess, 2014, 2015; Hoffman, 2012; Koza, 2006; Lind & McKoy, 2016) supports a curriculum rich in content relevant to youth's experiences. Gay (2010) notes that "teaching is a contextual and situational process. As such, it is most effective when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students, are included in its implementation" (p. 21). Teachers, Gay argues, must account pedagogically for students' multifaceted identities. Each classroom community requires unique material, rooted in youth's heritage and cultural practices (Paris & Alim, 2014). The inclusion of material important to youth demonstrates that teachers value their experiences and preferences.

In music education, Lind and McKoy (2016) contend that youth must have "opportunities to engage with music in ways that are congruent with their own lived cultural experiences with music" (p. 72). To enact such opportunities, educators may include a range of musics related to youth's interests and musical practices (Gurgel, 2016; Hess, 2014; Hoffman, 2012) and shape their pedagogy to align with youth's home experiences (Delpit, 2006, 2012; Gay, 2010).

### ***Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop Pedagogy***

Hip-hop can serve as a site of identity development as well as support youth to articulate social issues (Petchauer, 2009; Söderman & Folkestad, 2004; Turner, 2012). English education scholars take up hip-hop in education contexts more frequently than music education scholars (Kruse, 2016) and point to hip-hop as a youth-driven musical form important to culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Alim, 2007; Stovall, 2006). More recently, scholars connect critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000) with hip-hop to formulate critical hip-hop pedagogy (Akorn, 2009; Alim, 2007; Williams, 2007) to facilitate Freirian *conscientization* or critical consciousness through analysis of hip-hop lyrics in particular. Hip-hop also potentially serves as a counternarrative to dominant discourse (Akorn, 2009; Baszile, 2009; Hallman, 2009)—a point I take up in the section on CRT. Because of its strong connection to English education in academic scholarship, much of the hip-hop literature focuses on lyrics, rather than musical analysis (Hill & Petchauer, 2013). This article examines both lyrical and musical elements of youth's songwriting practices.

### ***Songwriting and Music Education***

Much of the songwriting literature in music education focuses on legitimizing songwriting as a practice for music education (Kratus, 2013, 2016; Williams, 2011). This article bolsters this argument, drawing on CRT to show the value of using music to share lived experiences and shape counternarratives to dominant discourses. I further consider what engaging in songwriting as an educational practice entails for the individuals who participate in these opportunities. Scholars identify collaboration and cooperative learning as fundamental to this creative process (Davis, 2005; Hill, 2016; King, 2008; Miell & MacDonald, 2000; Riley, 2012). Collaborating in friendship groups plays an important role in the success of songwriting programs (Green, 2008; Miell & MacDonald, 2000). Green's (2008) work emphasizes, for example, the centrality of friendship collaborations to the success of a popular school music program. Songwriting also potentially fills psychological needs, providing a medium to work through emotional issues. Literature from music therapy points to the therapeutic benefits of songwriting for coping with grief, trauma, and deep psychological issues (Baker, 2013, 2015; Baker & Krout, 2012; Dalton & Krout, 2006; Riley, 2012). Songwriting can also help youth build self-esteem (Baker, Wigram, Stott, & McFerran, 2008; Draves, 2008).

### ***The Verses Project***

In putting forward hip-hop as the primary genre in The Verses Project, teaching artists deliberately drew upon the interests and passions of CMS-D youth, aligning with literature on culturally relevant pedagogy. Youth enrolled in an after-school songwriting class to further develop skills in music creating and producing, working collaboratively to create music that honored their experiences and addressed difficult issues that were, at times, emotional.

## **CRT AND COUNTERSTORYTELLING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

I mobilize CRT as a theoretical framework for this article because it privileges the counterstory. Counterstories foreground the stories and experiences of marginalized voices to counter dominant narratives (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano, 2001). Dominant narratives or majoritarian stories (Delgado, 1993) are stories produced by dominant groups that provide a shared reality among “ingroup” members to reinscribe and naturalize their dominance (Delgado, 2000, p. 60). Delgado (2000) argues that counterstories from “outgroups” aim to “subvert that reality” (p. 60). Such stories also challenge “social and racial injustice by listening to and learning from experiences of racism and resistance, despair and hope at the margins of society” (Yosso, 2006, p. 171). Counterstories, then, speak back to dominant narratives.

Stories become counterstories when they incorporate five aspects of CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002): (i) “the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination”; (ii) “the challenge to dominant ideology”; (iii) “the commitment to social justice”; (iv) “the centrality of experiential knowledge”; and (v) “the transdisciplinary perspective (emphasizing historical context).”<sup>4</sup> Cruz (2012) positions *testimonios* as significant counterstories. Following Beverley (1993), for Cruz (2012), *testimonio* is “storytelling that challenges larger political and historic discourses and undermines other official knowledge meant to silence or erase local histories of resistance” (p. 461). Cruz (2012) argues that such testifying provides a way to counter “subsuming histories” (p. 461). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) extend this notion and argue that employing critical race methodology with rich counterstories “give[s] voice and turn[s] the margins into places of transformative resistance” (p. 37). They contend that counterstories build community among marginalized groups, challenge dominant discourses, and put forward different narratives.

Music, and hip-hop specifically, can be a vehicle for the counterstory. Aidi (2014) argues that “today music is the realm where Muslim diaspora consciousness and identity politics are most poignantly . . . debated and expressed” (p. xxvi). In education, noting the significance of stories shared through hip-hop, Hill (2009) fosters a storytelling community in a high school hip-hop lit class in which youth share their own experiences in response to stories encountered in music lyrics. Hill asserts that in placing their own experiences in dialogue with hip-hop texts, youth engage in “wounded healing”—processing traumas with the class community. While not positioned explicitly as counterstories, both lyrics and narratives from Verses youth unsettled dominant narratives about privilege and the valuing of some lives and stories over others.

I further assert that honoring hip-hop in education facilitates a reframing of deficit narratives that plague youth of color and the elevation of underrepresented voices. Drawing upon Smith-Maddox and Solórzano (2002), Akom (2009), for example, recognizes these deficit images and reframes the discourse:

Central to our work is the conception that students are not culturally deficient, but rather, enter classrooms with rich and diverse experiences, some of which raise serious questions about what counts as knowledge in the field of education and beyond. As a point of departure, we challenged our students to think of themselves, their families, and communities as resources and sources of strength. (p. 58)

This strengths-based approach is consistent with pedagogy of teaching artists in The Verses Project. Focusing on strengths allows youth to counter dominant discourse. Bazile (2009) points to ways in which hip-hop culture can emerge as “the counterstory that works to challenge the logic of the majoritarian story and its supposed commitment to a socially just democracy” (p. 11). Hallman (2009) likewise notes that careful facilitation that fosters youth’s “authentic voice” (p. 39) may provoke them to produce counternarratives—a point salient to this project. Following the work of Akom (2009), Bazile (2009), and Hallman (2009) and drawing on music produced by The Verses Project participants, I assert that a carefully facilitated songwriting class affords these young songwriters the opportunity to create powerful counterstories that subvert the dominant deficit discourses that plague Detroit youth.

### ***Positionality***

As a white, female music educator, I fit the typical demographic of music educators in the United States and Canada. I taught elementary and middle school music in a school with significant socioeconomic need in a city school district in Canada. The students at the school were predominantly youth of color, and they also navigated deficit discourses about their experiences. I am currently a music teacher educator at Michigan State University. In considering a Detroit community music program through CRT as a White scholar/educator, I see my role in this work similarly to the way Bergerson (2003) positions herself in CRT work:

We [White people] must not assume to speak for people of color. Our role is to use our experiences as whites to increase awareness of how racist actions, words, policies, and structures damage the lives of our students, friends, and colleagues of color. (Bergerson, 2003, p. 59)

I worked with youth for more than 6 years in school music programs and witnessed the ways in which deficit discourses framed their lives. As such, my interest in this work relates to how I can position my work to support youth to disrupt these deficit discourses while heightening awareness of the ways in which deficit discourses operate and can be interrupted among music educators with privilege that includes White privilege (McIntosh, 1988).

### ***Methodology***

This ethnographic study examined youth’s songwriting practices in a 15-week community-based songwriting class. The Verses Project took place at the CMS-D—the commu-

nity engagement extension of the College of Music at Michigan State University—that primarily serves communities of color. Since opening in 2009, CMS-D has provided accessible, affordable music education to Detroit youth.

The program was literacy driven initially. I found myself more interested in what youth enacted musically and lyrically to position themselves in their communities and in the world. I therefore focus in this article on the potential of facilitated songwriting experiences specifically. The research team consisted of two College of Music faculty members, one in music education (myself) and one in composition, and a faculty member and a doctoral student in teacher education at the College of Education.<sup>5</sup> The College of Education faculty member and I both drew on experiences as former teachers in urban schools to combine understandings of music and English education. We found alignments between musicking (Small, 1998) and multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; New London Group, 1996) and understood musicking and multiliteracies as constituting wide-ranging activities in and beyond schools and sought to honor youth's multifaceted expressions of musical and literary practices.

Twenty-six youth from Detroit started the 15-week Verses Project and 24 youth completed the class. Youth ranged from ages 9 to 15 (Grades 6 to 10) and attended Detroit public or charter schools.<sup>6</sup> Of the 26 youth who began the program, 24 were Black, one was Latina, and one was White. This article focuses on two songwriting groups, The Detroiters and D.I.W.X.M. (see Table 1). Upon entering the program, youth demonstrated a range of musicking practices including writing original songs, creating hip-hop beats, and playing different musical instruments.

Four local teaching artists and three mentors facilitated the class. Detroit-based teaching artists included Will,<sup>7</sup> professional poet and Fulbright scholar; Jennie, a multi-instrumentalist folk singer; Jon, a pianist and Detroit techno artist; and Conrad, a professional recording engineer and guitarist. Mentors included Elizabeth, Verses program

**Table 1**  
Overview of Focal Youth Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Songwriting team	Role
Nathaniel	12	The Detroiters	vocalist
James	11	The Detroiters	producer
Nate	13	The Detroiters	vocalist
Mia	12	The Detroiters	lyricist
Chloe	12	The Detroiters	lyricist
Joy	14	The Detroiters	vocalist
Wynnie	15	D.I.W.X.M.	vocalist, guitarist
Xander	14	D.I.W.X.M.	producer, violinist
Darnell	15	D.I.W.X.M.	vocalist
Irina	13	D.I.W.X.M.	lyricist
Melody	15	D.I.W.X.M.	vocalist

manager and a French hornist; Alex, a violin performance major at a Midwestern university and avid songwriter; and Jessica, CMS-D's gospel choir director. Teaching artists and mentors drew on their expertise to develop literary and lyric-writing ability, instrumental and vocal technique, performance skills, and technology-based songwriting techniques. As local artists, all Verses Project facilitators knew the Detroit community and music scene intimately and provided youth with insights into the local performing world. They encouraged youth to share their lived experiences of the city.

### ***Data Collection***

The university-based research team collected data in spring 2016, drawing on critical ethnographic techniques (Calabrese Barton, 2001) that included observations over 15 weeks; field notes from 10 collaborative curriculum-planning meetings with teaching artists, mentors, and university researchers; three semistructured focus group interviews with youth (Madriz, 1998); 30 student-produced artifacts; and 15 researcher memos.

*Observations.* Observations occurred across 15 weeks, from February through May 2016 during the Monday night literacy and songwriting class at CMS-D. Researchers kept detailed ethnographic field notes (Peshkin, 2001) with "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) as participant observers (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010) and positioned two video cameras to record events at the front of the classroom and at the culminating open mic listening party. Artifacts collected included youth music in progress, youth lyrics, pictures of artists' instructions, journal entries from writing prompts, and teacher notes and documents.

*Curriculum planning meetings.* Weekly curriculum planning meetings took place after each class among teaching artists, mentors, and researchers. In December 2015, the teacher education faculty member and I created a curriculum for the 15-week program in consultation with the research team, the director of CMS-D, and two teaching artists. Two weeks after the class concluded, the full team discussed and evaluated class successes and challenges.

Curriculum development occurred with the project proposal. As such, while we were able to consult with two teaching artists during a conference call, we developed the curriculum as researchers and educators without the teaching artists. The constructed curriculum, as a result, did not particularly drive instruction, as the skills and pedagogy of the teaching artists were well-developed and distinct from our own practices as music and literacy educators. Curriculum meetings thus became increasingly important and served as a team debrief of the day's class and explicit planning for the next class. The limited use of the created curriculum demonstrates the problematic nature of creating curricula without the educators who ultimately deliver it.

The curriculum for the latter two-thirds of the 15-week program focused on three components: a writing prompt to focus youth on a topic at the beginning of class related to their city, music, artists, and beyond; an open mic session through which

youth could share music or poetry both original and covered; and work in songwriting groups using Apple's Garageband app. The writing prompts usually encouraged expressing experiences or analysis of some kind. Typically facilitated at the beginning of class, teaching artists asked students to create a "where I'm from" poem describing their city—a poem they subsequently developed through individualized work with Will. Other prompts included a question of who might constitute Detroit's "new Motown." Teaching artists also asked youth to draw favorite people, places, or things in their journal. Much of the work in journals was place based. These three prompts encouraged youth to consider their city in ways that might provide possible lyrics. Beginning class instruction also sometimes involved explicit teaching about musical or lyrical concepts. Teaching artists shared knowledge of rhyming lyrics effectively, using the pentatonic scale to create interesting melodies, and utilizing Garageband. Much of this instruction occurred explicitly because of needs identified in the previous week's curriculum planning meeting. For critical analysis, teaching artists and mentors drew on both music from the youth and music they felt youth should know. Over the 15 weeks, they engaged with several songs, including Rihanna's "Stay," Adele's "Hello," and a Quincy Jones song. On one occasion, teaching artists and mentors asked youth, "What makes you like a song? What makes you hate a song, and why?" Facilitated by teaching artists, youth analyzed the effectiveness of lyrics, melodic writing, and accompanying music videos. To begin the process of creating music, teaching artists and mentors explained the blues form, historicized it, and had youth create their own blues songs in groups on the second day of class as an entry point to future songwriting work. The second curricular component—the facilitated open mic—also played an important role. Artists invited youth to share their creative work, and youth shared a range of artistic practices with peers including spoken word poems, covers of popular songs, original songs and poetry, YouTube videos of performances, and hip-hop tracks they created (Hess et al., in press). For the purposes of this article, I focus on the third curricular component—intensive work in songwriting groups.

*Focus group interviews.* We conducted three semistructured focus group interviews (Madriz, 1998) in the penultimate week of the program that lasted approximately 30 minutes. Collaborative songwriting groups consisted of five to seven youth. Three of the five songwriting groups participated in focus groups. Interviews focused on the roles of music in the participants' artistic practices, the issues and ideas that informed the participants' songwriting, their thoughts about participation in collaborative songwriting, and the manner in which this experience shaped their artistic practices. Researchers recorded and transcribed focus group interviews.

*Research team meetings.* The research team met weekly for 45 to 60 minutes during travel to and from CMS-D. The notes typed by one member of the research team became researcher memos. The team generated 15 memos during data collection.

### *Data Analysis*

We constructed categories of data analysis based on research team discussions and data produced through ethnographic notes, interview transcripts, and researcher memos (Charmaz, 2014). In exploring the ways youth engage in musicking and literacy activities through opportunities provided by teaching artists and mentors, a number of themes emerged through data analysis. This article explores the ways in which teaching artists and mentors guided youth to share their lived experiences and the nature of the stories they chose to tell through their music.

## **FINDINGS: POSITIONING SONGWRITING AS COUNTERSTORY**

Carefully facilitated by teaching artists and mentors, songwriting provided a powerful vehicle for Detroit youth to tell their stories. Through music, artists encouraged youth to produce narratives about their realities and share their own experiences of Detroit with specificity or more generally. Songs also often served as a call to action. Teaching artists supported youth to create music that communicated counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) through the assertion of youth's own unique voices.

This section focuses on the work of two songwriting groups—D.I.W.X.M. and The Detroiters. Because three researchers regularly attended sessions, I worked extensively with D.I.W.X.M. and less frequently with The Detroiters. My experience with these groups was greater than with the other three groups; as such, they are the focal groups of this article. Youth in these groups ranged from ages 11 to 15. Teaching artists grouped youth strategically so that each group comprised a producer and a combination of vocal and instrumental specialties and abilities.

The Detroiters—Nathaniel, James, Nate, Mia, Chloe, and Joy—created the song “Struggle,” which featured irregular and unpredictable rhythms and meters, underscoring the unsettling theme. Youth alternated between sung and spoken text with an echo on the word “struggle.” The rhythmic and metrical complexities challenge listeners, but youth easily navigated these musical intricacies. At age 11, the group's producer, James, was the youngest of the five producers. Lyrics were a team effort and Nathaniel, Nate, and Joy sang on the track.

D.I.W.X.M.—Darnell, Irina, Wynnie, Xander, and Melody—produced “Detroit.” The song opened with a three-chord ostinato over a complex produced-beat running throughout the song courtesy of Xander, the group's producer. The chorus featured Wynnie on acoustic guitar and the bridge was spoken. Melody, Darnell, and Wynnie sang on the track and Wynnie and Irina took the lead on writing lyrics.

This section explores the ways in which these songs and the participants' motivations for their production run contrary to dominant deficit narratives about Detroit and Detroit youth, drawing upon observations, song lyrics, final CD tracks, and transcripts from the culminating listening party interviews and from focus groups with both bands.

### ***“Struggle Is Real”: Youth Articulating Their Realities***

*Vignette.* The Detroiters work with instructors Jennie, Will, and Alex, who urge the group to focus on lyrics in the seventh class. Youth play casually with an available djembe and keyboard. “Let’s focus in a few more minutes,” says Jennie. “Struggle is real everyday / Kids are getting killed / Detroiters can survive.” As lyrics emerge with loose accompaniment, youth offer up claps and high fives. They have a verse: “The struggle is real everyday / Kids are getting killed / The struggle here is / Something lost in time / Detroiters can survive.” Seven weeks later, the lyrics have evolved from their original form:

Verse 1

Struggle is real  
Kids are getting killed  
Detroit is lost in time  
I’m gonna lose my mind.

Verse 2

Take a walk in the park  
Runaway from the dark  
Fight for what’s right  
Head towards the light.

Verse 3

The struggle is real  
Kids are getting killed  
We’re all stuck in time  
Some live on a dime.

Verse 4

Detroit is love  
Detroit is life  
We fly higher than a dove  
Like an animal we fight. . . .

“Struggle” highlighted challenges that youth faced. The irregularity of the meter underscored the unsettledness and unpredictability—a feeling reinforced by interspersed descending keyboard melodic lines. While I use the language of Western classical music to describe the music, youth did not use this theoretical language. Instead, they drew on different musical strategies to underscore their lyrical message purposively throughout their collaboration. As a listener, the unpredictability of the timing left me unsettled and increased the impact of their lyrics.

The equally powerful lyrics spoke to serious issues. Lyrics like “some live on a dime” note the poverty present within their community. Lyrics shared personal experiences and sent two strong messages to youth in the program and their community.

Youth communicated their “struggle” but also put forward a narrative that shared positive aspects of living in Detroit—“Detroit is love / Detroit is life.”<sup>8</sup> Youth shared the importance of this city to their experiences. As committed Detroiters, teaching artists and mentors continually prompted youth to recognize strengths of their city. Lyrically, youth created a powerful “both/and”<sup>9</sup>—an expression of the seriousness of issues they faced juxtaposed with the strengths of their city. Encouraged by teaching artists to express this narrative as counterstory by articulating their own realities, youth centered experiential knowledge in their work. Moreover, with their positive words of the city, they challenged dominant deficit knowledge about Detroit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

***“Find Success and Hope on My City’s Ground”: Youth Expressing Their Experiences of Detroit***

Watson (2016) notes words of a Verses youth that encapsulated an ongoing theme in the class: “I don’t want to say bad things about Detroit.” In literacy work on the project, Watson highlights tendencies of youth and teaching artists to share positive aspects of the city. Writing prompts encouraged youth to consider their city, and teaching artists urged youth to think about representing Detroit positively musically. As researchers, we were unsure of the emphasis placed on positively framing the city—wondering if this drive toward positivity might result in youth being disingenuous to what they might otherwise put forward. These two songs actually offered a balance between positive and negative experiences.

*Vignette.* The open mic finishes in Week 12 and songwriting groups form, heading off to their working spaces with the day’s snack—an orange and some fruit snacks. D.I.W.X.M. gathers at a table in the corner of the now-empty main class space. Irina’s notebook is open with lyrics scrawled in pencil for Verse 1:

This city is a mystery  
 It’s hot, it’s cold, it’s in between  
 Some faces do look grim  
 But there’s happiness within  
 There’s people dying  
 There’s people crying.  
 But you don’t care  
 Sick-outs gone crazy, city’s in a  
 Panic. Ghetto life’s gone manic.

Darnell and Irina tease out a melody to the verse while Xander plays the beat he produced on the iPad. Wynnie, meanwhile, sits with an acoustic guitar. She goes back and forth, jotting notes in her notebook and fingering chords softly on the guitar. Ten minutes later, she looks up triumphantly, ready to share her work. Strumming a sequence of chords on the guitar, she sings the chorus she just wrote, eyes intensely focused on her notebook:

Bright lights, amazing sounds  
 Find success and hope on my city's ground  
 Start low from there we grow.  
 Don't be surprised,  
 there's positivity in  
 the city  
 Prosperous and gorgeous.  
 Listen to the city's history.  
 There are beautiful days up ground.  
 Listen to the sounds of Motown.

The group erupts in cheers and Wynnie smiles, recognizing her achievement. Inspired, Darnell records the first verse, his gentle baritone voice capturing the complexities of the city.

Encouraged by instructors, members of D.I.W.X.M. asserted their feelings and hopes for the city and pointed to its rich musical history, highlighting Motown. While the group's verse spoke to complexities of the city, the chorus was effusive. The music aligned with the lyrics. Xander laid down a string track tracing a minor chord for the verse. By contrast, Wynnie's confident guitar chords and melody rung out in major, creating a counterpoint to the somber verse. The positive narrative D.I.W.X.M. communicated about Detroit in the chorus contradicted mainstream media discourse. Alongside the lyrics, the chorus's defiant major chords also interrupted deficit discourses, ringing out a positive message. D.I.W.X.M. youth shared thoughts about the song and Detroit at the listening party at the end of the project in their interaction with the audience:

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What is, like, the moral of . . . the song—is there a moral to it? . . .

DARNELL: Well from the way I see it, Detroit just, in this song doesn't seem like just a city, it seems like an ideal evolving into that.

WYNNIE: I think it's just, yeah, Detroit through our eyes and how we see it—the good and the bad. 'Cause some people just see it bad but when you're here, you see it all.

Youth valued their city, and, as Wynnie pointed out, they “see it all.” Detroit-based teaching artists modeled being the voice of Detroit and communicating its strengths. Teaching artists and mentors in the program shared their own musical and artistic work during the class open mic. Will shared a number of poems and spoken word pieces throughout the class. A poem he wrote for youth in the program expressed this notion of speaking for Detroit. Entitled “Progenitors,” Will's poem suggests that youth are the voice of the city. He begins, “I know who'll sing my city's song / of work, / of pride.” Teaching artists encouraged youth to represent Detroit in the world in a way that defied the often-crushing stereotypes. Their artistic examples demonstrated ways that they, themselves, represented Detroit artistically. Youth responded to the teaching artists' call and wrote of “their Detroit.”

The Detroiters discussed their song “Struggle” in their focus group. While many classes opened with writing prompts, they did not necessarily become song topics. As poet-in-residence, Will often facilitated lyric writing. He helped groups brainstorm ideas and gave quick writing assignments, including asking all group members to write a quick lyric about a common idea, drawing at times upon youth’s “where I’m from” poems. These quick activities moved along the process of lyric writing, which often proved difficult. In constructing “Struggle,” The Detroiters listed many possible topics. They recognized that Detroit threaded through their list of ideas. Focused now on the city, they listed positive and negative aspects of Detroit and noted that while society often views Detroit negatively, they felt the positives of their lives in the city outweighed the negatives, as discussed at the open mic listening party:

JOY: See, that’s what society sees it as, that there are more bad things than there are good things but once you’ve been here for a while and you live here, it’s a lot more good things than the social media or the news shows.

JAMES: ‘Cause people be lyin’ . . . Especially on Wikipedia.

JOY: Like, some news, like, press, they just overexaggerate things about Detroit, and then . . . they will, like, put mostly put the bad things that happen and, like, there are good things that happen.

Youth further noted that the media only portrays Detroit positively when there is an “occasion” or a “holiday.” As city residents, they saw a different story and recounted it musically.

The Detroiters understood how the media characterized their city; with their music, they opposed dominant perceptions of Detroit. When Will helped youth brainstorm what they knew of their city, they recognized many strengths of Detroit and conveyed them musically. Lyrics like “Bright lights, amazing sounds,” “Detroit is love / Detroit is life,” and “Listen to the sounds of Motown” challenged dominant narratives about Detroit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Their music also highlighted some historical context for youth’s lived experiences.

### ***“Sick-Outs Gone Crazy”: Counternarratives With Specificity and Generalizations***

D.I.W.X.M.’s “Detroit” included some specificities of the Detroit context. Verse 1 recounts “Sick-outs gone crazy, city’s in a / Panic. Ghetto life’s gone manic.” Youth’s experiences of teacher sick-outs—Detroit teachers calling in sick en masse three days in January 2016 and two days in May 2016 to protest and draw attention to the conditions in schools that included roaches, rodents, water damage, mold, massive class sizes, and not being paid for days worked (Carter Andrews, Bartell, & Richmond, 2016; Pearson, 2016)—became a regular part of group discussion.<sup>10</sup> The Detroiters initially considered the sick-outs as their song topic, although they ultimately moved away from the idea, preferring “not to say bad things about Detroit” (Watson, 2016). D.I.W.X.M. included a brief note in their song, honoring their perspective on the

sick-outs. This specificity was important to some groups. D.I.W.X.M. also pointed to Motown as specific to Detroit with the lyric “Listen to the sounds of Motown.” Teaching artists routinely mentioned Motown in class discussions. Other lyrics spoke to experiences more generally or personally, providing broader counternarratives about Detroit. In framing these lyrics as counterstory, specificity offered historical context for youth’s current experiences. The intercentricity of race and racism structured both teacher sick-outs in response to public school conditions and youth’s experiences of these protests, recentring experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

***“Then It’s Time to Stand and Shout”: Effecting Change and Calling Audiences to Action***

Youth’s music also at times served as a call to action or a provocation toward change. Teaching artists and mentors honored these provocations. The bridge to “Detroit” by D.I.W.X.M. urges audiences to action. In stark contrast to the sung minor verse and major chorus, Darnell spoke the bridge slowly and powerfully over Xander’s iPad-produced keyboard chords swelling dramatically under his voice, emphasizing his words:

So many people think they know.  
But they will never see the shows.  
If no one will speak out,  
Then it’s time to stand and shout.

The lyric “time to stand and shout” perhaps speaks to the youth’s desire for audiences to recognize “their Detroit.” The spoken text in contrast to other sung lyrics highlights the bridge. The group’s verses illuminate some of their struggles while the chorus highlights the group’s favorite aspects of the city. Finally, through the bridge, the group members communicated *their* story to others. Melting into the final chorus, the bridge dissolves into a reassertion of the youth’s Detroit—“positivity in the city.”

Later, in a focus group, members of the Detroiters spoke to how they hope that audiences will respond to the song “Struggle:”

JAMES: I want people to be more helpful to people because you don’t know what they’re going through because they’re not gonna tell you unless they want to and you’re not really gonna know anything unless they tell you something. You should try to help them.

Joy echoed James’s sentiment and noted that she hoped the song would shift how listeners choose to help people in their communities. Mia extended these notions toward broader implications:

MIA: I feel like struggle, like the meaning of that to me—it depends on what you’re going through, like everybody has different forms of struggle, so it’s kinda like—there might be something that I’d struggle with less than other people, so I feel like this might teach people a lesson to, like, not judge a book by its cover.

The Detroiters wished to change people's perceptions of Detroit, but also wanted people to rise up and act on the struggle—to act with generosity and not prejudge a person or a situation. As a White, politicized researcher, I read the group's call to action differently than the group asserted it. I read it as a "rising up." The group's notion of "rising up" was actually more a "rising to the occasion." The group's call to action was kind and promoted a generosity of spirit. In considering the group's music as a call to action, to understand it as the group described it, requires more than resistance. It requires openheartedness. Recalling Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) tenets of the counterstory, this call to action aligns with both the explicit commitment to social justice and the centrality of experiential knowledge. The mismatch between the group's intention and my interpretation, however, reminds educators and researchers to be aware of how their own identities enable assumptions about teaching, learning, and research processes.

***"Continue to Listen to Whatever It Is You're Hearing in Your Head Musically": Find Your Voice***

Teaching artists regularly encouraged youth to listen to their own voice, trust it, and put forward their own stories. In sharing their own work, teaching artists and mentors modeled honoring individual voices. Youth's counterstories then came directly from their distinctive perspectives. Jon, a pianist and acclaimed Detroit techno artist, contextualized the value of honoring one's unique voice in the music scene at the open mic culminating listening party in May 2016 in front of 24 youth and their communities, noting that Detroit is a city that "choos[es] not to follow." Drawing on Motown, jazz, techno, and gospel, he historicized Detroit artists' persistence in asserting their inimitable voices in the world and the positive global response. Finally, he urged youth to value their experience and their own important voices:

JON: So, I just wanna say to everybody that took this 15-week course, continue to listen to whatever it is you're hearing in your head musically. Continue to write whatever it is you feel, whatever emotions you feel. Continue to write whatever poems that come to mind, whether it's a thought, whether it's an idea, and make sure you guys keep in touch too.

Teaching artists and mentors encouraged youth to contribute unique narratives about their city, rooted directly in their own experiences. Their narratives and music connected to a long history of Detroit artistry. In encouraging youth to value their own voices, Jon validated youth's attention to their experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Facilitated by teaching artists and mentors, youth created counternarratives to deficit discourses through recounting lived experiences, positioning their work as a call to action, and rewriting negative discourses that circulate about Detroit both specifically and generally. Moreover, their music communicated ways that they perceived their community should behave. Youth hoped that "Struggle," for example, would move listeners to be more generous. Both "Detroit" and "Struggle" provided strong responses to narratives circulat-

ing about the city. Teaching artists and mentors encouraged youth to tell these stories—to be the voice of their city. With their support, youth’s music drew upon all five tenets of the counterstory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Their music challenged dominant ideology, including racialized deficit narratives of Detroit; committed to social justice through calls to action; centered experiential knowledge through the expression of youth’s experiences of Detroit and teacher sick-outs; and placed their experiences within a larger disciplinary context through expressing specificity of their realities.

Teaching artists and mentors supported youth to create music that underscored the lyrics, facilitating youth to integrate spoken text with melody to highlight particular sections and weave in and out of major and minor tonality. The metric irregularity of “Struggle” emphasized the struggle’s unpredictability. Youth used certain instruments to highlight particular messages. The string line outlining the minor chord in the verse of “Detroit” expressed challenges of the city, while the descending melodic piano line in “Struggle” contributed to the sense of foreboding and uncertainty of the struggle.<sup>11</sup> Lyrics alone did not write the counterstory; rather, lyrics and music jointly unsettled dominant narratives about Detroit youth.

## **DISCUSSION: PRIVILEGING SONGWRITING IN U.S. AND CANADIAN MUSIC EDUCATION**

In considering the research questions, teaching artists and mentors supported youth to engage in musical and literary practices to share lived experiences and issues of importance. Drawing on fluency with hip-hop culture, Garageband, and iPad technology, alongside multi-instrumental and vocal skills and writing and spoken word experiences, youth called upon already-present musicking practices and multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; New London Group, 1996) to produce their music, relying on explicit teaching from teaching artists and mentors to extend their existing knowledge. With guidance, their use of technology improved throughout the class and they developed ways to shape lyrics and music complementarily. In collaborative groups, they drew on strengths of individuals and learned to produce together. Teaching artists supported their work through continuous facilitation, through modeling their own artistry, and by working with all groups to allow each group access to their expertise. Their reminder to youth to be the “voice of their city” encouraged youth to tell their stories of Detroit and develop pride in the city. The secondary research questions, based on songwriting groups, explore the ways that teaching artists and mentors facilitated youth to focus on lived experiences in their city. While youth did not explicitly position their music as counterstory, they pointed to deficit media narratives of Detroit and were specific about their intent to tell a different story.

Framing youth’s work in a community music songwriting context as counterstory offers a powerful rationale for a paradigm shift in music education to prioritize carefully facilitated songwriting programs. Viewing youth’s music and their work in the

program through a CRT perspective reveals three possible gains of participation in such programs.

First, teaching artists and mentors encouraged youth to use music to subvert deficit perspectives of their lives and their city through counternarratives, putting forward, for example, the strengths of Detroit in the face of negative media attention (Uberty, 2015). Artists positioned them to be the voice of their city through participation in songwriting class. As a genre, hip-hop is well-suited to providing counterstories to dominant discourse (Akom, 2009; Baszile, 2009; Hallman, 2009). Hip-hop culture was fundamental to youth culture in this class. Because teaching artists were culturally responsive, hip-hop became the selected project genre, providing an invaluable tool in this setting. Youth in other settings may find different genres better resonate with their experiences. The opportunity, across multiple genres, to share lived experiences in ways that defy common perceptions of youth allows youth to set the narrative and define their experiences on their terms—a key argument for carefully facilitated songwriting programs.

Second, the manner in which teaching artists and mentors facilitated songwriting allowed youth to directly address the systems and structural forces that affect them, identifying, for example, the violence that impacts their lives through the song “Struggle” and the strength they derive from their experiences. Encouraging youth to identify systemic issues with songwriting may move listeners to recognize systemic and structural factors at play in youth’s lives and act on these issues. Locating issues as structural rather than individual is powerful, even without action. Movements in resilience education focus on helping youth “bounce back” from conditions that affect them (Pollard, 2014), locating the responsibility for change in the individual and exonerating the system. Facilitating youth to identify systems without implicating them as solely responsible for changing these conditions is a powerful move.

Finally, artists also encouraged youth to value their own voice and artistry, allowing youth to narrate their experiences on public record through songwriting. By asserting their stories with teaching artist support, youth refuse to allow society to define them. Instead, youth write the terms of how they wish their community and society to understand their lives. Facilitating songwriting programs for counterstorytelling potential creates significant opportunities for youth to assert their presence in their communities (Hess et al., in press).

This move to include songwriting programs for counterstorytelling potential is, however, complicated. My positionality as a White, politicized researcher meant I misinterpreted youth’s call to action rooted in kindness and generosity as a “rising up.” Songwriting provides a medium through which youth can tell their stories on their terms. Music educators and researchers, however, must be wary of the kinds of assumptions I made and the way that my positionality interfered with the participants’ intended message. Moreover, encouraging youth to share experiences could easily further dominant deficit understandings of youth. Artists could encourage youth to share hardships that perhaps reinforce stereotypes about “urban youth.” Teaching artists and

mentors in this program deliberately encouraged youth to tell a story of Detroit not captured by mainstream media. They facilitated youth to communicate their strengths and assets through songwriting. Teaching artists actively fostered the counterstory.

Teaching pedagogy is crucial to the implementation of any songwriting class with similar intentions to The Verses Project. Teaching artists' use of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009) or culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010) to center youth's own musical interests in hip-hop was fundamental to the program's success. Youth did not appreciate the few Western classical theory-type lessons, and teaching artists ultimately left theory alone, allowing youth to find their own way musically through their intimate knowledge of hip-hop. The writing prompts and facilitation including the "where I'm from" poems and reflection upon favorite people, places, or things also contributed to the class's success and the positive narratives about Detroit. Will heavily facilitated lyric writing and youth moved from uncertainty about lyrics to using lyrics to powerfully express their ideas. Teaching artists and mentors also honored lived experiences inside and outside the music. Youth shared experiences in their music but also often debriefed personal events in the context of open mic or in casual conversation with peers, teaching artists, mentors, and researchers. Youth were not just musicians in this songwriting class; teaching artists and mentors honored their full humanity. Instructors also encouraged youth to be the voice of their city and assert their own voices strongly. Moreover, they shared their own work as examples of artistic expression of story. The combination of these facets of pedagogy set the conditions for counterstorytelling.

If songwriting facilitated to honor assets and strengths provides an opportunity for youth to counter deficit discourses that frame their lives, then there are important implications to gain from the manner in which teaching artists and mentors facilitated this community music class for school music. In considering what the critical strengths-based facilitation of songwriting programs could mean for youth in schools through a CRT framework, I add my voice to others who call for robust songwriting programs in school settings because of the centrality of songs in youth's musical lives (Kratz, 2013), the potential of songwriting to promote musical autonomy and independence (Kaschub & Smith, 2013), and the manner in which songwriting through technology may help youth realize their creative potential (Hickey, 1997). Songwriting may also facilitate critical pedagogy (Kaschub, 2009), a notion resonant with enacting songwriting to counter deficit discourses. What the present research adds to the extant literature is the idea that a facilitated critical strengths-based songwriting program may enable youth to counter discourses that negatively frame their lives. When school music education includes songwriting, educators can support youth to explore their strengths and lived experiences and assert them musically. This assertion powerfully addresses societal narratives that impact the student population—particularly racialized, urban youth. Importantly, music educators must also be open to genres embedded in youth culture, including hip-hop, that resonate with youth's experiences. The inclusion of this type of program in schools would allow youth in-school opportunities to extend school music

to facilitate an expressive program that encourages them to “listen to whatever it is [they’re] hearing in [their] head, musically” and create accordingly.

## AUTHOR’S NOTE

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## NOTES

1. The university and the community music program wish to be identified, and the institutional review board has authorized this identification and the identification of the teaching artists by first name.

2. Researchers purposefully shifted the discourse on literacy conceptualized as reading, writing, and presentation skills to multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; New London Group, 1996). Multiliteracies honors the multilingual and multimodal ways that individuals in a technological world engage in literacy across different languages and diverse modes, including written language, oral language, visual representation, audio representation, tactile representation, gestural representation, representation to oneself, and spatial representation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Taking up literacy as multiliteracies enabled researchers to recognize the breadth of ways that youth enacted literary activities across multiple modes. Musicking similarly honors the multiplicity of ways that individuals engage in music, extending far beyond the role of the performer to include performing, listening, rehearsing, practicing, providing material for performance, or dancing (Small, 1998, p. 9).

3. As researchers, we understood these practices as multifaceted and were eager to see the diversity of ways youth enacted literary and musical activities that extended beyond traditional notions of literacy (reading, writing, and grammar) and Western musical conventions (including rudiments and notation).

4. See Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, pp. 25–27 for further explanation.

5. The research team included myself, Vaughn W. M. Watson (assistant professor of teacher education), Matthew Deroo (doctoral candidate, teacher education), and Mark Sullivan (associate professor of composition).

6. One student was homeschooled.

7. With the permission of the artists and the Institutional Ethical Review Board for the university, artists in this project are identified by first name. Artists cultivate a reputation for themselves based on their artistic work and community engagement and their identities were crucial to understanding what they offered to this project.

8. See Watson (2016) for additional commentary on this theme.

9. See Allsup (2015) for a both/and argument for music education.

10. See Watson (2016) for additional commentary on teacher sick-outs.

11. Again, I use theoretical terms from Western classical music to describe youth’s music. Outside of the terms “major” and “minor,” which youth periodically included in their discussions, this theoretical vocabulary was not a regular part of their discourse.

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