

Write Your Own Folk Song

Shayna Maskell, School of Integrative Studies

One way I seek to foster creativity in the classroom is through in-class group learning. Having students working together allows them to bring in their own perspectives and experiences, which can spark different ways of thinking and doing for others in the group. One such group work assignment is from INTS 344, Youth, Music, and Social Change. After reading a book chapter on the relationship between folk music and the labor movement and listening to folk songs as part of their class playlist for the day, students are tasked with creating their own folk song.

1. Pick a labor issue
 - This should be a contemporary issue. It could be the Fight for \$15, Jeff Bezos' wealth and disparities with the rest of the world, fruit and vegetable pickers during the wildfires, parental leave (and lack thereof), unemployment—whatever catches your group's interest
2. Pick a song
 - Since folk songs are simple melodies, and frequently based on well-known tunes, choose a traditional song. I have listed suggestions below, but you can choose any you want:
 - "She'll be Comin' Around the Mountain"
 - "Amazing Grace"
 - "The Ants Go Marching One by One"
 - "I've Been Working on the Railroad"
 - "This Little Light of Mine"
 - "This Land is Your Land"
3. Write the lyrics to the song
 - Remember, folk songs are about storytelling and introducing the human element to a political issue
 - These songs are both to educate and empower
 - You will need to write at least two verses and a chorus
4. Write a justification for your song
 - How did you integrate concepts from Eyerman and Jamison's chapter into your songwriting? How does your song reflect their discussion of folk and labor?
 - This should be about a paragraph and will be discussed with the class

I am always excited and delighted by not only the wide range of economic justice issues that students pick, but also the ways in which they translate these issues into a song format. Often, students' creativity is not only in the content – the way they create lyrics that tell a story – but also in the form – how and which songs they choose to write theirs to acts as another layer of meaning for their songs' lyrics.

Unemployment "this land is your land"

Verse 1:

This is our children, this is their future
From the sunrise to the sunsets
Our children are starving, they are dying
This is our America, the one we call the best

Verse 2:

They go to bed hungry; I kiss them goodnight
Tell them don't worry, the table will be ready
Our children are lied to, we have no money
This is our America, the one we call the best

Verse 3:

I roamed and rambled, looking for money
To the factories, tried to work for me and my family
I was hurting, from the hours, and the hungry nights
This is our America, the one we call the best

Chorus:

This is our children, this is their future
From the sunrise to the sunsets
Our children are starving, they are dying
Give us work, we will work, for our children,
Let them be happy, let them be happy
This is our America, the one we call the best

My song has everything to do with labor. It speaks about the harsh conditions that workers had to face to provide for their families and it was not enough. America has always been so prideful about what it has to offer to its people but has treated them like servants. My song speaks to hard working people who want to promise their children that they will have dinner tomorrow and will not starve. The conditions that the workers worked in were life threatening at many levels. In the Bierman Solidarity Forever Music and the Labor Movement reading, it talks about how factory workers singing together and creating a sense of a social community in the workplace, discuss and highlight rights that have been taken away from them. Creating folk music on your substandard wages, dangerous working conditions, long hours. Not being able to provide for your family were all factors that contributed to music during this time. A way for the workers to express themselves. Because of the labor movement, everything was surrounded by that ideal. In the Eyerman and Jamison chapter reading, it says, "instead of the myth of the people living on the land, the labor movement constructed its cultural expression around the myth of the urban worker". As technology and industry advanced, factories required more workers and paid them less with long hours in dangerous working conditions. After a while, this caused workers to stand up to their conditions and demand fair pay, hours and conditions. Just like my song, demanding a fair lifestyle, where children do not have to go to bed hungry, ~~because their parents are providing for them because they have fair pay, fair hours, and fair working conditions~~

("Unemployment" song, sung to "This Land is Your Land," from INTS 344, Youth, Music, and Social Change, Spring 2021)

For this in-class work, I imagine creativity as a multi-dimensional construct that involves a cognition process (how to apply the reading, Eyerman and Jamison's chapter on the history of labor and folk, to the creation of this song), a social or emotional process (how to use poignancy and emotion to create a labor anthem that resonates), formal and informal education (what students already know about labor and economic justice issues, in addition to what they have read for class and what we have discussed in class), characteristics of domain and discipline (the ways in which formal elements of music intersect with sociocultural concepts of social justice), social-cultural context (what labor and economic justice issues are most pressing or relevant to the students), and history (of how folk music and labor connected, of what songs were used for folk music, of how music and labor evolved historically and its impact culturally and politically). Asking students to reflect on how and why they created this specific song, in both form and content, is also an additional layer of assessment – self-assessment for themselves and their group, and a glimpse for me as to how students are understanding the texts.

This same type of creativity is used in some form of group work in all my classes. For INTS 346, Art as Social Action, one exemplary activity is “Create Your Own Monument.” After reading articles on the classed, raced, and power-laden relationships underlying the creation of monuments and memorials, students are asked to envision an alternative.

Create Your Own Monument

We have read about two forms of art in the community today: monuments and memorials. Inherent in these forms of public art are power structures: who is included – and excluded – from our public spaces and how do these works (re)create histories and narratives and reinforce dominant ideologies?

For this group assignment, I want you to come up with your own monument, memorial, or community-based art project of any sort, but it should, as Baca describes "remember the past and envision the future."

Tell us about your project in 2-3 paragraphs that you will present to the class. In your description you should cover:

What: Are the materials? The medium? The dimensions? How/do(es) these elements help create meaning for your monument/memorial?

Where: Will the monument/memorial/project be located? Why did you choose this location?

Who: Is the monument of? Is it of a specific topic? Group of people? Who does it include/exclude?

Why: Did you choose the elements you did? Why did you choose the subject you did?

How: Does this this project remember the past and envision the future? How does it link to social justice/social action? How does it create an alternative narrative?

(INTS 346, “Art as Social Action,” Spring 2021)

This activity is meant to spur students’ creativity through the conscious and unconscious flow of problem identification (how monuments and memorials have white-washed history, excluded marginalized peoples and narratives, reinforced dominant narratives), speculation and creation of hypothetical assumptions (of ways that specific elements of memorials and monuments – subject, material, scale, location, etc – can be altered and reimagined to re-write those narratives), and the sharing of ideas with others (with other groups members, and then the class as a whole, who can ask questions and probe the decisions the small group made).

I also incorporate active learning through creativity in assignments due throughout the semester. In these, I aim to have students draw on their existing knowledge and apply that to creatively problem solve. One of my favorite assignments that typifies this model of learning is the final project for my INTS 347, Representations of Gender in Popular Culture, class. This assignment asks students to identify a gender-based intersectional problematic representation in popular culture and create an intervention to help ameliorate or change it.

Final Project: Gender-based Intervention for Popular Culture

For this final project, you will identify an issue related to representations of gender that you think is problematic and/or limiting in popular culture. After you have researched your identified issue, you will create an intervention, applying what you have learned. This may be a new floor display or floor plan, a board game, an educational video, children's book, a short film, set of greeting cards, or keynote address with slides and/or handouts.

After you have selected your issue, you will need to narrow down what element of popular culture you will analyze to interpret what you are "seeing." Remember, you are being asked to explore *representations* of gender and to apply theoretical concepts from both your written and visual texts. For example, you will apply concepts such as hegemony, feminism, masculinity, gender expression etc. to your research.

Examples of elements of popular culture for critical analysis include:

- A series of prime-time sitcoms; a series of prime-time dramas; a group of toy stores/departments; a group of comic strips; a group of fashion stores for males or females; a series of children's films, books, cartoons, etc.; a series of the gendered nature of Hallmark-type cards; a series of political talk shows; a series of sports shows; a subset of blogs/IG/Snapchats focused around a specific topic; online or video game series; etc.

Research: The research you propose must be complex enough to use the theories and ideas we have explored in class. That means you will want to:

- Establish what you will be examining (relationships between males and females, transgender representation in media, symbols/language used in representations, behaviors or roles of different races or ethnicities, etc.).
- Analyze your data to see where your findings fit into concepts we have studied. You will need to offer an explanation of what this problematic representation of gender is and how it constructs a specific type of gender, using at least two sources from class readings.

Intervention: Each student must produce one "product" based on their research. It could be:

- A set of gender-neutral cards.
- An advertising brochure, poster, or video.
- A video or song that parodies or corrects the representations.
- A website, blog, or podcast that educates the public about your findings
- A storyboard that represents an episode of a show

OR, something else; be creative!

In addition to this final product, you will need a two-page explanation of the issue that you are addressing, the form that the originally problematic representation took, and an analysis of the meanings and ideologies created by that original representation. Moreover, you will need a discussion of why you choose the intervention approach you took and what the implications of your product are.

Evaluation Criteria

- * Course concepts are evidenced and well-integrated in your product and two-page explanation.
- * Both textual and visual course texts should be referenced.
- * References include course readings, news articles, and additional scholarly sources
- * Product and explanation reflect significant research and depth of analysis, with a focus on *representation within pop culture*.
- * Product demonstrates creativity.
- * Two-page explanation discusses an analysis of the original representation of gender using at least two sources from class readings, and the implications of your research, e.g., it answers the “so what” question.

(Final Assignment Sheet for INTS 347, Representations of Gender in Popular Culture)

This creative assignment has three phases – evaluative, generative, and exploratory. In the evaluative phases, students are asked to assess WHAT specific gendered, intersectional issues can be found in popular culture, HOW they are problems, and WHAT the implications of those problems are. The outcome of this phase is seen in the students’ rationale for their intervention. In the generative phase, students start to create mental models as potential solutions to the problem. In some cases, students consult with me during office hours to discuss the feasibility of their interventions. In other cases, students do that analytical work themselves. Finally, the exploratory phase is the adventure into their intervention: what it would look like, how it would be implemented, why it may work. Below is one such example of a student project: a reimagining of a hip-hop song. The project includes the written lyrics, a recording of the song itself (embedded so that the review committee can tickle their ears), and an excerpt from the rationale of and for the intervention:

“R3SP3CT WOM3N”

by HegeMONEY

Ayo, I’m drowning in these women,
Somebody get me a life vest,
Just kidding, I respect women,
That’s right, I’m a feminist

Women don’t exist just for sex,
Me and my boys always ask for consent,
Lil shorty is not your possession,
You are enforcing gender oppression

No, I don’t drive those expensive cars,
Catch me in my 2010 Corolla,
Consumerism won’t get you very far,
That money will try to control ya

Ayo, I just got back from the doc,
Says I got that healthy masculinity,
Being respectful is a cake-walk,
When there are girls in my vicinity

At the club and my eyes are peeled,
For any creeps tryna cop a feel,
Ladies, keep your pepper spray in hand,
Tell ‘em to back up and that is a command



Final Project

Within the rap and hip-hop genre, there is a prevalence of harmful themes regarding both gender and class. Explicit messages of misogyny, the objectification of women, and capitalism exist throughout the entire musical medium. In such songs, rappers take pride in their sexual conquests and describe women as mere vessels for sex. The emphasis on female anatomy and the constant use of offensive gender-specific terms like “bitch” or “slut” reinforces this notion. Along with this, rappers often gloat about their material possessions or their wealth throughout their music, which only perpetuates the capitalist ideology that success and happiness can only be achieved through monetary gain. Rap music, as a branch of popular culture, relies on hegemonic lyrics to keep women out of power and support capitalist agendas.

In popular rap music, women are portrayed as an inferior gender who act purely as sex objects. According to hip-hop historian Kevin Powell, the only way that men in rap can prove their masculinity is by belittling women or boasting about their sexual conquests (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). By establishing this power over women, these artists are heightening their own masculinity and furthering themselves above other men. This deliberate maintenance of gender hierarchy is supported by Dhaenens & De Ridder, who argue that artists use oppressive and sexist lyrics to “ensure a hierarchical position,” (2015). In a 2009 research study done by Weitzer & Kubrin, 67% of misogynistic hip-hop songs contained lyrics about the sexual objectification of women. In depicting women as second-rate and objects of sex, men are able to maintain dominance over women and continue to exist in a place of hegemonic power. The commonality

of this harmful representation and oppressive themes only work to support misogynistic attitudes and hegemonic masculinity.

(INTS 347, Gender Representation in Popular Culture, Fall 2021)

In this highly creative way (students have also made documentaries, treatments for a new series, a new Instagram account, new characters for video games, among other ideas that I would have never dreamed up) students are able to make their knowledge visible, externalizing representations of personal and theoretical understanding, and creating own interpretations or conclusions, which I hope shifts them away from the role of passive consumers to that of a creator of knowledge and meaning.