QUEER FUTURITY AND AFROFUTURISM: ENACTING EMANCIPATORY UTOPIAS IN MUSIC EDUCATION

BRENT C. TALBOT
University of Illinois Chicago, USA
btalbot@uic.edu

DONALD M. TAYLOR
University of North Texas, USA
don.taylor@unt.edu

Abstract

Inspired by the life and works of GrammyAward® winning artist, Lil Nas X, we explore ways a young Black queer musician has enacted emancipatory utopias to disrupt dominant cultural modes of being—offering unapologetic expressions and expansions of race, gender, and sexual identity. In this paper, we draw upon José Esteban Muñoz and Ytasha Womak to consider how utopian thinking through the lenses of queer futurity and Afrofuturism provides a way to dismantle the hegemonic and proleptic trappings of music education and contemplate how music learners and teachers might enact emancipatory utopias relevant to their own historically lived experiences.

Music knowledge has been passed down between generations for millennia. Embedded in this transmission process are social, historical, and political codes of behavior and being. These often unquestioned social and cultural constructions and norms shape how learners see themselves, how they formulate their identities, and how they hold a sense of belonging within their communities and the world. Cultures, and the institutions of education that reflect and disseminate their values, are ripe with hegemonic expectations that often stifle and constrain the actualization of one's fullest humanity. Consider how spaces for musical engagement reinscribe racialized, classist, ableist, gendered, or heteronormative narratives and mores. Alternatively, imagine a music education devoid of the trappings of these hegemonic constructions and expectations, where one is free to create an emancipatory utopian world in one's own image, rather than one pre-ordained or constructed to reflect the values of past generations. What artistic and musical examples exist to reflect such resistance? How might music learning spaces be designed to facilitate such untethered agency and expression? And how might this process of emancipatory utopian thinking inspire change within music education?

In her book chapter, "Utopian Thinking, Compliance, and Visions of Wonderful Transformation," Susan Conkling advocates that music educators should embrace utopian thinking to reimagine music education beyond a static status quo.[1] Yet, she warns that utopian thinking can devolve into "fanciful, unrealistic, and distracting thinking on the one hand or a dangerous, totalizing blueprint on the other."[2] Accordingly, she draws upon Henry Giroux's call for an educated hope, encouraging readers to embrace uncertainty and to challenge a culture of compliance. Motivated by Conkling and inspired by the life and works of GrammyAward® winning artist, Lil Nas X, we explore ways a young Black queer musician has enacted emancipatory utopian visions to disrupt dominant cultural modes of being, offering unapologetic expressions and expansions of race, gender, and sexual identity. In this paper, we consider how utopian thinking through the lenses of queer futurity and Afrofuturism provides a way to dismantle the hegemonic and proleptic trappings of music education and contemplate how music learners might enact utopian visions relevant to their historically lived experiences.

QUEER FUTURITY

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*,[3] José Esteban Muñoz contends that queerness is a futurity bound phenomenon, a "not yet here" that critically engages pragmatic presentism. Rather than be caught up with

issues of same-sex marriage and gays in the military, goals that defined LGBTQ aspirations for decades, he argues a need to move beyond the stifling myopic focus on the present. Muñoz urges readers to embrace a political imagination beyond assimilationist thinking in the LGBTQ+ community, even in the face of impenetrable obstacles that they may encounter. In his book, Muñoz examines the works of seminal queer artists and writers such as Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Fred Herko, and Elizabeth Bishop, alongside contemporary performance and visual artists like Dynasty Handbag, My Barbarian, Kevin Aviance, and Kevin McCarty, to deploy a Blochian lens through which to consider a potentiality that reaches beyond their historic contexts. Muñoz explains, "Unlike a possibility—a thing that simply might happen—a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense."[4] Or in other words, potentiality is a window through which to view a future, where contemporary boundaries are pushed in order to reveal new dimensions and possibilities.

Inspired by members of the Frankfurt School, most notably Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse, as well as the writings of Ernst Bloch, Muñoz considers the phenomenon of utopia as "a portal to another mode of queer critique that deviates from dominant practices of thought existing within queer critique today."[5] This critique function, he advocates, is a practice of educated hope, where one does not simply announce the way things *ought* to be, but instead imagines the way things *could* be.

Drawing from Bloch, Muñoz differentiates two types of utopias: abstract and concrete. Muñoz describes abstract utopias as "untethered from any historical consciousness" and instead describes concrete utopias as "relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential."[6] In contrast to the naive optimism of abstract utopias, "concrete utopias," Muñoz explains, "are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many. Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope."[7]

Drawing from Bloch's reformulation of Marx's notion of praxis, the unity of theory and practice, Muñoz expands the notion of concrete utopias to be applied to Queer Theory. This reframing provides possibility for transformation and change. As Muñoz points out, "It is the goal of enacting a world, the actual creation of that goal and the actual movement towards that goal. The concept of *docta spes* (educated hope) is the intellectual and material force that potentially produces concrete utopian thought."[8] Muñoz continues to explain that educated hope is a necessary balance to hopelessness that can lead to immobilizing complacency or cynical withdrawal. Yet, he also acknowledges that hope is a mandatory risk we must take to enact change in the world. Inherent in this quest

towards enacting concrete utopias, we must be willing to live with and embrace failure along the way. These thoughts are where Muñoz departs from other queer writers and thinkers who write about abandonment to the negative and a subsequent rejection or evasion of politics. As he states, "failures and efforts to fail have a certain value despite their ends."[9] In this way he calls for a politics oriented towards means and not ends. With utmost admiration for José Esteban Muñoz's work, we struggle with his adoption of Bloch's term "concrete" when associated with "utopia" and consider it oxymoronic and limiting. Concrete, to us, implies a fixed mindset that constrains new ways of being—something that Muñoz directly advocates against. With this concern, we offer the term *emancipatory utopias*, to better represent a realm of transformative imagining—emancipation from the social constructions that constrain marginalized identities being exactly what Muñoz articulates as a primary and powerful goal of the liberatory praxis embedded in the enactment of educated hope.

Throughout his book, Muñoz historically situates the work of visionary artists in varying disciplines who enacted emancipatory utopias that moved beyond the pragmatism associated with assimilationist thinking and the political status quo.[10] One such visionary artist to emerge in recent years is Lil Nas X, who unapologetically came out after the success of his first major hit and subsequently expressed his Black queer identity in ways that challenged the white supremacist-heteropatriarchy. Rather than making a brief announcement and returning to heteronormatively tried and true formulas for commercial success, he leaned into his intersectional identity as a Black queer artist—presenting both queer and Afrofuturistic utopian visions.

AFROFUTURISM

Previous to discussions of queer futurity and focused on emancipation from racism, Afrofuturism is "a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens;"[11] an artistic and critical framework used for liberation from forms of systemic oppression. Ytasha Womak acknowledges varied forms of fiction (science, historical, speculative) and fantasy within an Afrocentric perspective that provide opportunities for reimagining and redefining blackness for today and the future, stating, "in some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques."[12]

Although Mark Dery created the term Afrofuturism in 1994, earlier Black artists had already explored similar utopian themes. For example, musical works such as Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* album blended traditional jazz with synth sounds and funk, later serving as the inspiration for a movie of the same name in which his band travels to a new planet using music as the sole means of travel.[13]

Jimi Hendrix also explored futuristic sounds in his final album, *Electric Ladyland*, released in 1968.[14] Later, George Clinton's band, Parliament-Funkadelic, embraced science fiction by emerging from a spaceship prop on stage as Dr. Funkenstein to issue a new world of funk.

These early examples were used as a means to interrupt and challenge the historical narrative of systemic oppression within a 1960s and 1970s context. However, Afrofuturism continued to thrive and be utilized in the literary and artistic fields well beyond the 1970s and provided a means for Black artists to respond to new forms of white supremacy and to reject the systems of domination prevalent in the turn of the century. Afrofuturism, as Lisa Yaszek advocated in 2006, "assures us that we can indeed just say no to those bad futures that justify social, political, and economic discrimination" and "say yes to the possibility of new and better futures and thus to take back the global cultural imaginary today."[15]

More recently, contemporary Black, queer, women artists like Janelle Monáe have extended Afrofuturism through a utopian feminist lens of empowerment. Their Afrofuturistic works are a form of resistance against the interlocking systems of domination of race, class, gender, and sexual identities, and position Afrofuturism as a more intersectional[16] expression of empowerment — empowerment being a central part of any minoritized-futurism and enactment of emancipatory utopias. Whereas queer futurity imagines new ways of expressing sexual and gender identity, Afrofuturism imagines brand new worlds beyond the limitations of current socio-political contexts. We assert that queer futurity, in conjunction with Afrofuturism, serves as a powerful intersectional means of expression for students to forge emancipatory utopias within their worlds.

ENACTING EMANCIPATORY UTOPIAS: AFRO-QUEER FUTURITY IN THE WORKS OF LIL NAS X

Old Town Road

In 2019, Lil Nas X catapulted to fame with "Old Town Road." His music interrupted and challenged notions of what country music is or could be. With its unique blend of "banjo strums and jaw-rattling bass, rural imagery and hip-hop signifiers,"[17] Lil Nas X strategically marketed the song in the country category. Like many male country artists who capitalize on bass/baritone vocal ranges to reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity, Lil Nas X incorporates the same powerful range to explore elements of Afrofuturism not usually seen in traditional country genres.

In the video opening of "Old Town Road," Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus face gunfire from distrustful homeowners who view them as outsiders. Lil Nas X runs into a tunnel that thrusts him into a futuristic Black neighborhood of 2019 where citizens stare in shock as they take in his 1889 Western garb. Throughout the song, Lil Nas X declares, "Can't nobody tell me nothing" in defiance of those who view him as unworthy of belonging. Riding through the town, Lil Nas X sings about the trappings of fame (material possessions, drugs, adultery) and then outpaces a car on his horse in a spontaneous drag race, which stands as a metaphor for his abilities and success. When Billy Ray Cyrus appears in an expensive red convertible, the two men speed away to a bingo hall where they enter a room full of bewildered white participants. Rather than shrinking away as outsiders, Billy Ray performs for the crowd while Lil Nas X leads everyone in line dancing. In this utopian vision, a white man (Billy Ray Cyrus) spends his privilege to support a Black musical colleague by challenging the unconscious biases of critics and haters who have questioned Lil Nas X's legitimacy within the country genre.[18]

"Old Town Road" broke records as the longest running number one hit on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 Songs after its release on April 5th, 2019, remaining in that spot for 19 weeks. At the peak of its success, Lil Nas X came out as gay on the last day of Pride month (June), and although he received some homophobic back-lash, he garnered enormous support from a majority of fans. Lil Nas X gained continued recognition with other hits, such as "Panini" and "Rodeo." While these songs continued to serve as expressions of Afrofuturism, Lil Nas X released "Montero" on March 26, 2021, unapologetically adding elements of queer iden-tity to his Afrofuturistic oeuvre, thus exploring a more intersectional approach to his artistry.

Montero

In contrast to the laid-back rhythmic swagger of "Old Town Road," "Montero"[19] drives forward with complex global rhythms that mark centuries of musical reappropriation by diasporic displaced people in search of historical identity and empowerment. Challenging Judeo-Christian ideas of morality, the power of Satan, and gender norms, the text of this work sheds light on the impact that ignorance can have on the oppressed. In an interview with Sa'iyda Shabazz, Lil Nas X explained,

> I grew up in a pretty religious kind of home—and for me, it was fear-based very much. . . . I want kids growing up, feeling these feelings, knowing they're a part of the LGBTQ community, to feel like they're O.K. and they don't have to hate themselves.[20]

In the song and video, listeners and viewers are invited to imagine a world where people embrace their sexuality, accept gender as a fluid construct, and claim their own power, rather than bowing to social norms.

After succumbing to sexual pleasure with a serpent, Lil Nas X (donning a pink wig and fur stole) is shackled and led to the Colosseum to be stoned by men wearing Marie Antoinette-like blue wigs. Crowd members throwing the stones are themselves made of stone, which historians surmise could be a representation of the crowd's inability to think for themselves.[21] At his death in the storyline, Lil Nas X ascends to heaven, but then rejects the entrance to the pearly gates, favoring a descent to hell via a stripper pole.

Once in the underworld, resplendent with gothic architecture in red and black hues, Lil Nas X passes a Latin phrase that reads, "They condemn what they do not understand." Yet instead of being cast as a victim, Lil Nas X is the one standing in his power. After performing a lap dance that seduces Satan, he kills the beast, asserting a narrative of strength against repressive forces. Adorning the creature's crown on his own head and assuming the wings of Zeus, the camera zooms into Lil Nas X's face showing us a gaze emblazoned with the futuristic eyes of a superhero.

Sun Goes Down

The same futuristic eyes open Lil Nas X's subsequent video production, "Sun Goes Down," which was released two months after "Montero."[22] In contrast to the swagger of "Old Town Road" or the rhythmic drive of "Montero," Lil Nas X reveals his soul most directly in the more lyrical "Sun Goes Down." Throughout this song, the artist calls upon his past to imagine a different future, free of the trappings of others' expectations and dreams for him. Lil Nas X utilizes his upper vocal range to capture the vulnerability, self-doubts, and insecurities he endured during adolescence regarding his appearance and sexuality. In contrast, he employs a deeper baritone voice to reimagine his positionality as a self-assured teen, confident in his sexual identity. Compared to "Old Town Road" or "Montero," the lyrics are more straightforward than the symbolic text noted in the other two songs. However, they powerfully demonstrate the damaging impact that bullying can have on a young person's psyche.[23] At one point, he declares:

> Since ten, I've been feelin' lonely/ Had friends but they was pickin' on me/ Always thinkin', "Why my lips so big?"/ Was I too dark? Can they sense my fears?/ These gay thoughts would always haunt me/ I prayed God would take it from me/ It's hard for you when you're fightin'/ And nobody knows it when you're silent.

In the music video, scenes of teenage angst peak at the high school prom, where Lil Nas X enters alone, without a date, surrounded by heterosexual hegemony. Frustrated, he retreats to a bathroom stall where he breaks down in tears. But as he gathers his composure at the bathroom sink, the futuristic eyes we have encountered at the end of "Montero" and the beginning of this video reemerge. Asserting his new-found confidence, he reenters the prom floor. Although much of the song acknowledges pain, the piece triumphantly concludes with the lines, "I know that you want to cry/But it's much more to life than dying/Over your past mistakes/And people who threw dirt on your name." Rather than being concerned with his stag status, Lil Nas X dances with everyone in a group, center stage, to the approving eyes of his classmates. Former tears are replaced with celebratory smiles, and the video ends with a conversion back to his futuristic eyes.

Lil Nas X's artistic journey moves from one that initially challenges white supremacy within country music in "Old Town Road," to one that challenges heteronormativity in hip hop music in "Montero," and ultimately embraces a more intersectional reality in "Sun Goes Down." Through these three examples we see the conscientization of Lil Nas X's racial and queer identities. Using Afrofuturism, then queer futurity, he ultimately fuses the two to enact an emancipatory utopian vision that actualizes his full intersectional humanity.

ACTUALIZING ONE'S HUMANITY: DISRUPTING PROLEPTIC NARRATIVES AND EMBRACING DISCOMFORT

Through Lil Nas X's contributions, we see that music can serve as a vehicle for people to consider and challenge the status quo. Conkling encourages teachers to provide learning spaces that allow opportunities for transformational pedagogy relevant to students' lived experiences. She advocates that connecting lived experiences to learning provides space for students and teachers to situate their own potentialities, recognizing that although the past has shaped us, it does not have to define us. Such an approach requires teachers to be cognizant of what cultural psychologist, Michael Cole, calls *prolepsis*, whereby caregivers consciously or unconsciously impose upon children a future vision of the world based upon their own past experiences.[24] Prolepsis from this perspective serves as a form of enculturation that may project unwarranted hegemonic expectations onto children—delaying and preventing them from developing their own future narratives. We see Lil Nas X respond to these unwarranted projected expectations most directly in his song *Sun Goes Down*. In this video, Lil Nas X employs both anapolepsis (flashing back to one's past) and prolepsis (flashing forward to a potential future) to defy the expectations society has thrust upon him as a Black

queer man. The emancipatory utopian vision Lil Nas X creates in *Sun Goes Down* disrupts his past and reconstructs his present and future—reclaiming the very tools of prolepsis that others have used to oppress and define a world for him and reemploying them to liberate himself and actualize a world of his own making. This reconstructive emancipatory process aligns with the type of "concrete utopias" José Esteban Muñoz explores within other artists' works in his book. As Muñoz states, "it is thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough."[25]

Lil Nas X's enactment of emancipatory utopias in *Sun Goes Down* not only imagines new possibilities, but actually creates new realities for him in the present—serving as an emancipatory function in his own life. We assert that this process of reconstruction is a vulnerable, yet powerful, act requiring a willingness to embrace discomfort as one questions previous constructions and expectations of societal norms. Megan Boler refers to this process of reconstruction as a "pedagogy of discomfort." In her book, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, she observes: "Silence and omission are by no means neutral. One of the central manifestations of racism, sexism, and homophobia is erasure."[26] In our neo-liberal world, where humans are seen as disposable laborers, those in minoritized statuses (in their pursuit of acceptance) are even more vulnerable and susceptible to erasure, as the pressures for conformity may lead individuals to embrace assimilationist pathways of resistance. Take for example the notions, embraced by some, of a post-racial world (assumed by the election of our first Black president) or a post-gay world (assumed by the availability of gay-marriage or participation in the military), where sensibilities perpetuate neoliberal assimilation that privileges those whose intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and ability most resemble the dominant hegemony.[27] As an alternative to the possible exclusions embedded in "post-" paradigms, Benjamin Kampler and Catherine Connell (2018) suggested that Muñoz's (2009) concept of utopian queer futurity embraces the power of discomfort thereby "[envisioning and capturing] change without the limitations inherent in the concept of post-gay" or by extension post-racial.[28] Within educational transactions, Boler's pedagogy of discomfort provides a bridge to consider how utopian visions may open space for equitable learning and transformation.

Embracing discomfort requires a willingness to move beyond mere self-reflection of the present to consider how cultural and family histories have impacted beliefs and how actions based on these beliefs affect others. As we consider positionality, Boler advocates that teachers and learners inhabit an ambiguous sense of self that may be discomforting.[29] Interrogating and challenging one's sense of self may lead us to question what we are taught to trust and what we are taught to fear. Lessons learned in life may vary according to history,

family, religion, and individual personality differences. Boler notes that collective witnessing "involves recognizing moral relations not simply as a 'perspectival' difference . . . but rather, that how we see or choose not to see has ethical implications and may even cause others to suffer."[30] Although challenging, embracing ambiguity and flexibility has the potential to fuel greater connection with others and with our own more clearly defined sense of self. As we seek to understand our genealogies in relation to others and question the familiar, we have the opportunity to discover deeper connections and greater comfort within new paradigms of becoming.[31]

As stated earlier, acknowledging our various identities involves a process of vulnerable reflection where one must consider one's position in collective relationship to others. Perceptions of community may vary according to circumstances related to socio-political positioning. For example, in past decades when LGBTQ+ visibility was more fraught with danger, some LGBTQ+ individuals—recognizing the finite limitations of time—enacted emancipatory utopias by living a life they envisioned rather than waiting for legislative or social approval. Some invited friends and family to wedding ceremonies to celebrate long-standing monogamous relationships that were not yet legally recognized; some pursued open relationships that resonated with their personal values; and some placed pictures of their partners on their work desks knowing that they may be fired for "inappropriate behavior." Collectively, LGBTQ+ individuals have learned that identity can be expressed in many ways, at different points in life. As Muñoz demonstrates throughout his book, visionary musicians, artists, and writers have led the way in enacting utopian visions that reject static notions of identity. The three examples Lil Nas X has produced, provide clear, viable examples of enacting emancipatory utopias through music. Although not all works are suitable for the classroom, Lil Nas X's vulnerable and empowering acts of resistance against hegemony serve as a model for educated hope within and outside the music classroom.

ENACTING EMANCIPATORY UTOPIAS IN MUSIC EDUCATION

The three music videos described earlier provide an example of a Black queer artist imagining futures with varying expressive markers that capture the complexities of one's past lived experiences. As such, futurity can serve as a curricular philosophy within music education, reminding us that we need to leave space for all people to express their own futurities, without shaming or excluding those who do not fit a preconceived mold. To avoid the proleptic trappings associated with preordained notions of music making,[32] we see a need to reimagine

the curriculum to provide students and ourselves with a creative flexibility that acknowledges the multiple ways that students might express their identities at different points in time.

We recognize that the call for diversity and inclusion does not provide a new proposition within our field, but too often, discussions of social justice and equity are relegated to extra-curricular additions to the standard canon. Although well-intentioned, we argue that inserting specific units that celebrate minoritized populations (for example, Black, women, or trans composers, to name a few) can unintentionally tokenize these groups and recenter dominance—especially if all other units through the year primarily feature the music of dead white men.

Consider the utopian artistic work Lil Nas X produced in "Montero." Although perceived by some as highly charged, it captures the struggle and ultimate victory over the internalized homophobia and proleptic projected heteronormative narratives he had felt pressured to enact. The power of this work leads us to question the damaging effects of the world and society we have constructed and how music classrooms contribute to such oppression. Teachers, students, and administrators may often unknowingly promote heteronormative narratives that may be damaging. These often occur through gendered labeling of voice types or the assumption of heterosexual attraction through casual conversation during various warmups, repertoire, staging, or musical activities. Small changes in vocabulary and repertoire selection can generate great impact in K-12 classrooms, leading to the cultivation of safe music learning environments where students are free to question hegemonic narratives in their own lives, are affirmed to express and enact their identities, and are provided opportunity to see their selves represented in the curriculum.

Between releasing "Montero" and "Sun Goes Down," Lil Nas X posted a letter on Twitter to his 14-year-old self that included the following:

> I know we promised to never come out publicly, I know we promised to never be 'that' type of gay person, I know we promised to die with the secret, but this will open doors for many other queer people to simply exist.[33]

The concept of Freirian praxis (reflection + action) is seen in this reconstructive note, as Lil Nas X reflects upon earlier forms of internalized oppression and then embraces the liberatory power of coming out—moving beyond self-analysis and reflection to take action as a model for other queer youth. Exercises in futurity may help music educators interrupt proleptic narratives that could inhibit students from seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum. Moving forward, we invite readers to consider the power of engaging with the types of

reconstructive actions Lil Nas X took within his own artistic work. For example, teachers with students might ask the question: "What type of (musical) letter might you write to your past self?" "How might this exercise open doors for reimagined possible selves?" In these ways, teachers and students together may enact utopian visions that reflect lived experiences and disrupt proleptic and hegemonic narratives.

Futurities, envisioned more broadly as tools for interrupting hegemonic assumptions in music education, open space to question the status quo. What might such a music curriculum look like in ten years? How might we, as music educators imagine new ways of being musical in schools? What types of activities may emerge to foster new ways of musicking? Reimagining the music education curriculum, inspired by the liberatory lenses of queer futurity and Afrofuturism, requires a willingness to own one's power regardless of the consequences. Much like Muñoz's observations of queer visionaries who were willing to risk condemnation in order to forge new and necessary paradigms for progress, music teachers must be willing to embrace the unknown—and sometimes uncomfortable—in order to enact new visions of music making, even if we face disparagement from our peers. Boler offers that this "represents an engaged and mutual exchange, a historicized exploration of emotional investments. Through education we invite one another to risk 'living at the edge of our skin,' where we find the greatest hope of revisioning ourselves."[34]

In all three music videos, Lil Nas X asserts a place across varying music genres, referencing the power of his artistic skills as opposed to bowing to external trappings associated with public opinion and material success. Much as he was willing to interrupt perceptions of how country music *should* be performed in "Old Town Road" or how male artists *should* perform masculinity in "Montero" and "Sun Goes Down," music teachers might consider how they might re-envision and interrupt hegemonic structures that may not serve students' and their own needs.

Inspired by Randall Allsup and Cathy Benedict's call for an "importance of a vision crafted in reciprocity that allows all of us to engage meaningfully not only with music but our lives as well," we wonder what might happen if music teachers challenged the hegemonic discourses of music education by replacing traditional structures with other artistic venues that lend themselves to collaborative work, free from the binaries of competitive winners and losers?[35]

Imagine a world of high-level music making inspired not by competition with others but fueled by an interest in providing students with opportunities to express their artistic potential in mutually supportive, cooperative environments rather than focus on the goals and decision making of the music teacher.

What would it take for music teachers to facilitate creative learning experiences to express, explore, and honor the identities represented in the classroom? How could funds be used to support frequent performing experiences that respond to community needs? In considering these emancipatory utopian visions, music teachers must also consider what criticisms they may encounter from those who disagree.

As Boler notes, when teachers disrupt hegemonic structures, colleagues, parents, and students may respond with defensive anger, representing an attempt to protect their identities, beliefs, and investment in the dominant culture.[36] What might music teachers lose in recognition from other directors in the field? Are music teachers' convictions strong enough to withstand any criticism or unfair accusations from those who might assume they have lost their competitive edge? To what extent can music educators envision new ways of collaborating and interacting with educational peers?

Re-envisioning the curriculum, through the lenses of queer futurity and Afrofuturism, is an act of courage requiring teachers to consider their place within dominant structures and ways they can help students celebrate their uniqueness. Imagine a classroom where ensemble directors take the time to ask students to consider their intersectional positionalities, as well as their collective identity as an ensemble, and to reflect those identities through the music performed. What would it take for directors to engage students in researching and choosing the repertoire to be studied? Furthermore, how might providing students with such agency prepare them to choose their own music to perform outside of school and after graduation?

General music classes often offer the greatest flexibility to enact new ways of musicking. For example, a teacher might present Amanda Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb," read at President Biden's inauguration, as a means of inspiration.[37] After a discussion regarding the historical and cultural underpinnings of this landmark poem, students and the teacher might choose sections of the poem to set to music together. Much might be gleaned in understanding what decisions were made to envision their composition. When music teachers are willing to learn alongside students, they have an opportunity to demonstrate the type of vulnerability needed for collective action. This vulnerability not only provides students with opportunities to forge new musical paths, but also provides an opportunity to explore the varying perceptions of daily life as people positioned in the world.

On May 20, 2021, Lil Nas X accepted an honoree award from the *Native Son Now* organization that was created as a "movement and platform for Black Gay Men who inspire, empower, and celebrate each other." In his acceptance speech, he shared,

> Far too many of our youth are struggling to find acceptance. We are taught
> to hate ourselves for who we are, and we are punished for living openly and
> proudly. I made the decision to be myself and open doors for the rest of my
> life. Some people say I'm pushing an agenda and I am: it's called liberation.

Lil Nas X's works embody tenets of Afrofuturism and queer futurity to liberate
and actualize his humanity. Similarly, music teachers who enact emancipatory
utopian visions and dare to challenge the dominant culture even in the face of pos-
sible discredit—in essence, those who reconstruct music learning spaces—open
access for freer expression and artistry. In solidarity with Lil Nas X, we heed the
call for liberation—to dismantle the hegemonic and proleptic trappings of music
education so that all may be supported in an inclusive journey of becoming,

NOTES

[1]Susan Conkling, "Utopian Thinking, Compliance, and Visions of Wonderful
Transformation," in Susan Conkling, ed., *Envisioning Music Teacher Education*, (Mahwah,
NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 181–195.

[2]Conkling, "Utopian Thinking, Compliance, and Visions of Wonderful Transfor-
mation," 181.

[3]José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* (New York:
NYU Press, 2009).

[4]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

[5]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

[6]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

[7]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

[8]Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz. "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,"
Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 19 (July 2009): 279.

[9]Duggan and Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," 281

[10]Duggan and Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," 3.

[11]Ingrid LaFleur, TEDx Fort Greene Salon in Brooklyn, New York. September
25, 2011.

[12]Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*
(Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

[13]Sun Ra, *Space is the Place*, performed by Sun Ra (recorded October 19 and 20,
1972), Blue Thumb Records, LP.

[14]Jimi Hendrix, *Electric Ladyland*, performed by The Jimi Hendrix Experience
(released October, 16, 1968, New York City, Reprise), LP.

[15]Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," *Socialism
and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 41–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300600950236, 59.

[16]Just as bell hooks wrote about the experience of Black women in this society, Kimberlé
Crenshaw theorized intersectionality in reaction to the specific experience of being Black
and being a woman and how those identities converge in regard to power and the law.

[17]Elias Leight, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' Was a Country Hit: Then Country Changed Its Mind," *Rolling Stone*, March 26, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/music /music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/.

[18]Billboard quietly removed the song from the country category because the compositional style veered too far from other forms of country music. Elias Leight, writing for Rolling Stone magazine, observes: "Expelling Lil Nas X's single from Hot Country Songs points to a complicated racial dynamic. The music industry still relies heavily on old-fashioned definitions of genre, which have always mapped on race. . . . no genre wrestles with its identity as openly as country, which is why country singers are constantly recording songs asserting their own country-ness."

[19]Lil Nas X, "Montero (Call Me by Your Name) (Official Video)," YouTube video, 3:09, Mar 26, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k.

[20]Sa'iyda Shabazz, "Lil Nas X Doesn't Owe You (Or Your Kids) Anything," *Scary Mommy*, March 30, 2021, https://www.scarymommy.com/lil-nas-x-video-christians-angry/.

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