

## **Chris Thile, Kendrick Lamar, and the problem of the white rap cover**

By

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper, I examine a performance that the bluegrass musician Chris Thile gave of “Alright” by Kendrick Lamar, a song with strong themes of police brutality that is associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. While Thile approached the song with respectful intentions, the performance nevertheless received strongly negative reactions. In this paper, I examine the performance and its reception. I ask whether Thile should be accused of cultural appropriation, and whether or how any white person could perform such a song without facing a similar accusation. Finally, I explore this debate’s ramifications for music educators who wish to engage hip-hop, where issues of race and identity are immediate practical concerns. I examine how we might reconcile the performance traditions of school music with the norms and values of hip-hop culture, specifically, the requirement that performers “keep it real,” only speaking to their own truths and identities.*

**Keywords:** Hip-hop; cultural appropriation; covers; Kendrick Lamar; Chris Thile

## Introduction

On the February 6, 2016 broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the mandolinist Chris Thile performed a cover of “Alright” by Kendrick Lamar (2015). It was an improbable song selection for that artist and that audience. “Alright” addresses themes of police brutality, and has become associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Thile is best known as a bluegrass musician with a side passion for classical music, and the *Prairie Home Companion* audience is almost uniformly white. While listeners responded positively in the moment, reaction from rap fans was broadly negative. Stereogum included the performance on their “worst playlist of 2016” (Lapatine, 2016). A student of mine described the performance as “skin-crawling,” and my wife, upon hearing “Alright” for the first time, asked, “Why would a white person think to cover this?” My own reaction was much the same.

Thile himself acknowledged that “Alright” was a problematic song choice, telling the New York Times, “I would readily admit that my love of the song kind of blinded me... I think it was a bad call” (quoted in Streep, 2016, n.p.). Nevertheless, some people have pushed back on the idea that Thile transgressed a boundary by performing Lamar’s song. Certainly, Thile intended no disrespect; in the spoken introduction to his performance, he voiced sincere admiration for both Lamar and the song. On the “purely musical” merits, Thile’s performance could be judged a success. To understand why it nevertheless fostered such a negative reaction, we must consider the song’s social and political contexts, and the broader racial history of popular music.

Thile’s performance has potentially profound implications for music education as the field begins to engage with hip-hop. While rap songs are vanishingly unusual in the repertoire of school performing ensembles, it is only a matter of time before this changes. We as a profession

need to ask whether it is acceptable for white musicians to perform songs that speak directly and exclusively to the personal experience of black artists. As I will discuss below, Thile changed many lyrics in “Alright” to make them “cleaner” and more acceptable. When rap songs use problematic language, as they often do, should music educators follow suit? Is every white rap cover automatically an act of cultural appropriation? If so, should white performers ever perform “black” music? Who determines whether a given song is off-limits to a given performer, and on what basis do they make that determination? Finally, how do we reconcile the performance traditions of school music with the norms and values of hip-hop culture?

In this paper, I examine Thile’s performance and the issues it raises through several lenses. First, I conduct a close listen both to Lamar’s original recording and to Thile’s cover, and I use autoethnography to examine my own reactions to both. This lens is relevant, because, while my musical background broadly overlaps with Thile’s, I have also devoted significant research to the formal and sociocultural aspects of hip-hop. I also examine other listeners’ reactions via online ethnography and other small-scale qualitative observations conducted during discussions of the performance. I use critical theory and critical race theory to examine the debate around cultural appropriation in school music, and how such concerns might be addressed. Finally, I make a practical recommendation for music educators looking to engage hip-hop: that they follow the example of rap artists themselves and opt to have students write original songs rather than performing existing ones.

### **About Kendrick Lamar and “Alright”**

Kendrick Lamar is one of the most popular and well-respected rap artists of the past decade, known for his intellectually ambitious writing and verbal agility (Barker, 2017). “Alright” is the fourth single from Lamar’s third official studio album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*

(2015). Both the single and album were commercial and critical successes, winning multiple Grammy awards and topping the Billboard charts. “Alright” was written by Lamar, Mark “Sounwave” Spears, Pharrell Williams, and Kawan KP Prather. Spears and Williams produced the track, and Williams wrote the chorus: “Nigga, we gon’ be alright” (lyrics sourced from Genius, n.d.). The track was originally created for another rapper, Fabolous, but his version was never released (Cuchna, 2016). Lamar wrote the lyrics in response to Williams’ chorus.

The instrumental backing to “Alright” begins with chromatic chords played back on Williams’ sampled voice. Other elements of the dense soundscape include a drum machine beat and sampled drum fills, quiet speech samples, atmospheric sampled guitar and electric piano, and spiraling jazz alto saxophone improvisation by Terrace Martin. For a detailed transcription of the vocal and key background parts, see Olivas (2018). The song’s opening line, “Alls my life I had to fight,” is a quote from the character Sophia in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982). Lamar then compares his native Compton to Nazareth, “which is a byword for obscurity and unimportance in the New Testament” (Linder, 2017, p. 110). Many of Lamar’s lyrics have Christian themes, and “Alright” appears to offer an affirmation of both his and his community’s dignity and worth in the face of adversity.

“Alright” became linked with the Black Lives Matter movement when protesters began spontaneously chanting its chorus. A notable example is the 2015 Movement for Black Lives conference at Cleveland State University, the first formal gathering of Black Lives Matter activists (King, 2016). As the conference wrapped up, hundreds of attendees gathered outside the venue to board buses and say their goodbyes. They saw a 14-year-old black boy being questioned by police for allegedly carrying an open container of alcohol, and they quickly gathered to confront the officers. During the altercation that followed, police pepper sprayed the

protesters. Once the boy was released into his mother's custody, the protesters chanted, "We gon' be alright" (Piffin, 2015).

### **About Chris Thile**

Chris Thile is a virtuoso mandolinist, arguably the most accomplished living player of the instrument. He attained both critical respect and commercial success at a young age with his bluegrass band, Nickel Creek (Routh & Brightwell, 1999). Since then, he has also received acclaim for his performances and recordings of classical music, most notably his 2013 album of Bach violin sonatas and partitas (Manheim, 2013). Thile received the MacArthur Fellowship (nicknamed the "genius grant") in 2012. He made regular guest appearances on *A Prairie Home Companion*, and when host Garrison Keillor wanted to retire, he chose Thile as his successor.

### **Positionality and methodology**

The issue of the white rap cover has autobiographical significance for me. I am a socioeconomically privileged white person who has dedicated his musical life to African-American genres: blues, funk, R&B, jazz, and hip-hop. Like Thile, I have played both bluegrass and Bach on the mandolin, though unlike him, I am no virtuoso. I have never met Thile, but he and I have a friend and musical collaborator in common. And I have performed a few ill-advised rap covers, for example, Ice Cube's "Down For Whatever" (1993) to a small audience in a Brooklyn bar.

In American popular music, intersectional issues of class, race and gender are immediate practical considerations as much as chords and scales or technology. For a white musician like myself, all engagement with African-American music (which comprises most American popular music generally) entails cultural study. For an American studying American popular music, "there is no formal beginning or end to our research; our participant observation (i.e.,

experiencing popular music within the context of American society) covers roughly our entire lives, as do the relationships that we rely on to situate ourselves socially” (Schloss, 2013, p. 8). The autoethnographic approach is a valuable strategic response to gaps in understanding left by other methods:

Because creative inclinations and practices often issue from the interior zones of social actors’ minds and bodies, and are thus inaccessible to (non-participant) researchers, a participatory autoethnographic perspective can be especially illuminating. Through *thick participation*—that is, the embodied experience of learning how to perform a specific act or skill—an ethnographer can better grasp the transient, yet deeply meaningful forms of cultural activity that surround music creation (Harrison, 2014, p. 4).

Because I have a foot in both Thile’s and Lamar’s musical worlds, I was naturally drawn to the unexpected overlap between them represented by Thile’s cover. Furthermore, as a white music educator, I have a personal stake in the issues that the cover raises.

I approach the racial politics of popular music from an activist stance informed by critical theory—its emancipatory imperative, social justice motivation, and interest in uncovering hidden power relationships (Freire, 2000). Critical researchers aim to influence their subjects, to help them improve their conditions, and to rectify power imbalances. My intended readers are music educators who plan to incorporate hip-hop into their curricula or repertoire, with the hope that they will consider the complexities of racial politics and cultural appropriation as they do so. Many music educators are committed to diversity and cultural relevance, but they are broadly apolitical and reluctant to address contentious issues head-on. My goal, then, is to provoke debate and reflection among would-be hip-hop educators.

This paper emerged in large part from online discussions, using techniques of online ethnography (Hine, 2000). It originated in a series of casual Twitter posts, which became the basis for a longer blog post (Hein, 2018). I then shared the post on the Facebook Music Educators' group and the Hip-Hop Educators' group, as well as on Twitter. I often use blog posts for working ideas out informally, for collecting pertinent links and references, and for prompting debate with friends, colleagues, and strangers alike. The internet presents researchers with unprecedented opportunities to conduct real-time "conversational scholarship" (Gregg, 2006, pp. 147–148) that includes not just our peers, but the general public as well.

Online ethnographers also enjoy the benefit of having our interactions take the form of written texts, which are "available outside the immediate circumstances in which they are produced" (Hine, 2000, p. 53). Responses to my post have been a rich source of such texts. Responding to the comments and rebuttals helped me to refine the arguments I present here. My interlocutors also supplied valuable references and ideas. For example, a response on the Facebook Music Educators group pointed me to the Gray (2017) article, and a blog commenter shared the Mary Halsey video (Downtown Media, 2018), both of which I discuss below.

The most in-depth response to my post came from the music journalist Kira Grunenber (2018). She is an outspoken fan of Chris Thile, and she believes that his cover was perfectly appropriate. She argued that if we restrict artists to only performing "their own" music out of a concern for protecting marginalized groups, we will choke off cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

How can anyone justify approaching any music that stems from a place of autobiographical experiences if those experiences move to recount anything more serious than a teenage breakup or desire to party in the summer?... If the experiences of

Kendrick Lamar's life are so grave, so intense, and so uniquely connected with his identity as a black man, then how are we not to apply the same blockade of exclusion around any songs written that strike a similarly vulnerable, personal, and experientially singular chord (n.p.)?

In a similar vein, Burns (2018) responded to me on Twitter: "I often ask how someone like Thile progresses artistically without embracing musical influences that challenge him. And what avenue does he have to explore this without imitation? I think in this case he is trying to challenge his audience as much as he is himself" (n.p.). I address these valid questions in the discussion of cultural appropriation below.

### **Thile's performance of "Alright"**

Minnesota Public Radio has removed its archived recordings of *A Prairie Home Companion* from the internet in the wake of allegations of sexual misconduct by Garrison Keillor (Sepic, 2018). Nevertheless, unsanctioned recordings of Thile's performance are in circulation, and I was able to find a copy from a Google search. I used Ableton Live to tempo-align Lamar's and Thile's performances, which enabled me to do real-time comparisons between the two, and to listen to them simultaneously. Live's affordances support a particular kind of close and analytic listening. For example, it is easy to create seamless loops of song sections, slow them down, and visualize the audio waveforms. I also looped both versions of "Alright" in their entirety and listened to them for several hours each while researching and writing this paper.

Considered solely on its technical aspects, Thile's performance is a remarkable achievement. "Alright" is a difficult song to play and sing, and Thile does it capably, demonstrating his characteristic passion and verve. He abstracts the densely layered instrumental track down to strummed chords on the mandolin, and he plays them with propulsive funk. He



stumbles on a few words early on, but after that he handles the lyrics admirably well, particularly in Lamar's second verse, which includes a long unbroken stream of sixteenth notes with syncopated accents: "*I can see the evil, I can tell it, I know it's illegal, I don't think about it, I deposit every other zero, thinking of my partner, put the candy, paint it on the Regal, digging in my pocket, ain't a profit big enough to feed you, every day my logic get another dollar just to keep you in the presence of your chico, uh!*" While my initial reaction to Thile's cover was dismay, repeated listens have also impressed upon me the seriousness and commitment it must have required.

"Alright" has a tempo of precisely 110 beats per minute, with the metronomic steadiness typical of digital hip-hop production. Thile's tempo is more varied, but it averages about 120 beats per minute. While Lamar's performance feels unhurried, Thile's faster tempo makes the listener more aware of how many syllables are packed into each measure. Thile mostly follows Lamar's and Williams' pitch contours, but there are some exceptions. Lamar's interjections of "uhh" and Williams' "huh" are at the same pitch as the surrounding vocals, while Thile pitches them far up, as a kind of falsetto squawk. Also, Thile's voice tends to rise in pitch in advance of the interjections in a way that suggests either mounting intensity or anxiety. At the beginning of each prechorus ("Wouldn't you know, we been hurt, been down before..."), Thile brings his pitch and volume down dramatically, to suggest a conspiratorial whisper. Then, over the course of the section, he gradually climbs in pitch and intensity until he is shouting in falsetto going into the chorus. This is in contrast to Lamar's comparatively steady and deadpan delivery.

I had considered transcribing "Alright" into standard notation for the purposes of analysis until I found Olivas' (2018) transcription. It is significant that Olivas denotes the rap sections using rhythm notation only, neglecting its pitch content. This neglect is typical for musicological

analyses of rap. Ohriner (2019) believes that, because musicologists lack the tools to transcribe or analyze rap's pitch contours, they choose (consciously or not) to downplay its significance instead. In so doing, Ohriner argues that such analyses miss a core aspect of rap's expressiveness. Thile's cover is a case in point. When he takes liberties with Lamar's pitch contours, he changes the emotional valence of the lyrics. There is not yet any accepted formal method for explaining how pitch functions in rap; the present discussion highlights the need for such a method.

Aside from the timbral and pitch differences, Thile's main departure from Lamar's original is in the lyrics. He substitutes all of the profane and vulgar words with public-radio-friendly alternatives. These substitutions range from innocuous to troublesome. I list them here, omitting any lyrical changes that were clear mishearings or slips of the tongue.

- “Alls my life I has to fight, nigga” [brother]
- “Nazareth, I'm fucked up” [messed up]
- “Homie, you fucked up” [messed up]
- “Nigga [Brother], we gon' be alright”
- “Where pretty pussy [women] and Benjamin is the highlight”
- “I'm a motherfucking [everlovin'] gangster in silence for the record”
- “Nigga [Calvin], when our pride was low”
- “Nigga [Calvin], and we hate po-po”
- “Nigga [Calvin], I'm at the preacher's door”
- “Motherfucker [Little buddy], you can live at the mall”

Finally, Thile omits the entire sung outro (“I keep my head up high...”) and the spoken poem that follows it. Thile's most striking lyrical substitution is “Calvin” for “nigga.” Calvin is the

name of Thile's infant son. During his introduction to the song, Thile explains to the audience that he has been singing "Alright" to soothe Calvin, and that "it calms him down, he seems to really enjoy it."

Given how many lyrics Thile alters, it is all the more striking that he chooses to leave this one intact: "We hate po-po, they want to kill us dead in the street fo' sho'." ("Po-po" is an African-American slang term for "police".) I do not know how Thile personally feels about the police, but they certainly do not want to kill him or his son dead in the street. This line is the most uncomfortable moment for me as a listener. My discomfort is magnified by the fact that the audience laughs each time Thile says "Calvin," and the laughter happens to carry over the "po-po" line. I recognize they are only laughing because they are unexpectedly hearing a baby's name inserted into an edgy rap song, but hearing a white audience laugh while a white performer says "we hate po-po" puts a laser focus on the broader disconnect between Thile and Lamar's cultural identities and contexts.

### **Other white rap covers**

It is enlightening to compare Thile's performance with other rap covers by white musicians. I will use Mosser's (2008) categorization scheme for cover songs. *Reduplication* is an attempt to exactly copy a song, record, or performance, as is typically done by tribute bands. A *minor interpretation* maintains the general feel, instrumentation, and other stylistic markers of the base song, and usually functions as an homage. A *major interpretation* fundamentally changes aspects of the song, including the tempo, melody, instrumentation, or lyrics, so while the base song should still be recognizable, the cover functions almost as a new song. I would categorize Chris Thile's cover of "Alright" as a major interpretation.

Mosser's final category is the *sendup cover*, which remakes the song as extensively as a major interpretation, but in a spirit of irreverence or irony rather than homage. As an example of a sendup cover, Mosser cites The Gourds' country interpretation of Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice" (2001). He believes that a sendup cover can have significance greater than its comedy value, because it can provide "a subversive context that can reveal layers of substance and even unsuspected meaning" (p. 7). Finally, Mosser argues that a particularly inept or inappropriate major interpretation may become an unintentional sendup cover. A detractor of Chris Thile might argue that his cover is such a de facto sendup, with the audience's laughter at "Calvin" as confirmation.

Not all major interpretations of rap songs are comical. Emily Wells' (2009) melancholy pop version of "Juicy" by Notorious B.I.G. (1994) remakes every aspect of the song aside from the lyrics, radically departing from the genre, tempo, melody and instrumentation. The effect is not so much irreverent as it is surreal and dreamlike, due to the contradiction between Biggie's braggadocio and Wells' introverted gloominess. Another interesting comparison can be found in Artie Figgis' (2011) acoustic guitar interpretation of the Wu-Tang Clan's "Shame on a Nigga." Figgis' deadpan presentation makes it difficult to tell whether his cover is a sincere major interpretation or a sendup—it may, of course, be both. Like Thile, Figgis demonstrates close attention to his source material, and is particularly effective in his guitar translation of the song's Thelonious Monk samples. Unlike Thile, Figgis leaves all of the lyrics intact, including many uses of "nigga." He subsequently posted a video (Figgis, 2018) explaining why he has stopped using the word in his rap covers: while he strives for accuracy in his interpretations, both in instrumental parts and lyrics, he does not want to convey the impression that he uses the word in everyday life, or that he feels he is "entitled" to say it.

Rap aficionados are broadly hostile to covers by white artists, because they too frequently fall into the sendup category, with ugly and hostile undertones. Bassil (2014) bluntly asks: “Why is watching white people cover rap songs using acoustic guitars so nauseating?” He lists a series of YouTube videos as examples, and explains that he finds them “distressing” because “you can see in their pained expressions that these waspy kids think they're releasing some kind of hidden beauty that you couldn't already find in the originals” (n.p.). One of Bassil’s examples is Tiarnan McGarrity’s (2013) acoustic “ballad” treatment of NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton” (1988), which includes ironically “passionate” screaming. Bassil also lists Hugo’s country version of Jay-Z’s “99 Problems” (2003), in which the singer replaces the word “bitch” with “dirty bitch” at one point, and finishes by mocking the song’s misogyny (x1039phoenix, 2011). That prompts me to wonder, if Hugo finds the language so offensive, why he is performing the song in the first place. Both of these performances are intensely distasteful to me. While Thile shows sincere commitment to the musical details of his source material, and The Gourds demonstrate good humor about themselves, McGarrity and Hugo’s performances mostly express condescension.

My final item of comparison is Mary Halsey’s karaoke performance of Missy Elliott’s “Work It” (2002) (Downtown Media, 2018). Halsey is white, middle-aged, and unglamorous. Nevertheless, her performance evokes Elliott’s own spirit of cheerful bawdiness and insolence. Online response to Halsey was widely positive, including an enthusiastic endorsement by Elliott herself (2018). I certainly find it to be less uncomfortable than Thile’s performance, but it is not obvious why this should be so. One possibility is simply that the subject matter and tone of “Work It” are not as serious as those of “Alright.” The karaoke context also makes a difference; Halsey is rapping over a stylistically appropriate instrumental in a spirit of clear homage. Finally, the song’s good-naturedly explicit lyrics are plausible in Halsey’s mouth. Twitter user crime

personified [sic] suggests: “I think the cringe factor in a lot of these covers derives from twee-ness. Mary Halsey’s lacks that” (2018, n.p.). Halsey is not trying to “elevate” or transform the song; she is simply inhabiting it temporarily.

### **The cultural appropriation debate**

In the wake of Aretha Franklin’s death, Halley (2018) reported hearing progressive white pastors expressing hopes that her style of musical devotion might find its way into their churches. Halley urged them to reconsider.

One of the fears of black folks rests in the reality that what is “ours” is only “ours” until white people want it. The history of American music is literally the story of white people appropriating what black people created... Sometimes it's okay to look at something and appreciate, even enjoy it, without seeking to possess it and participate in it. To assume that whiteness would benefit from a selective infusion of blackness is white privilege (Halley, 2018, n.p.).

Few of us would fault Chris Thile for appreciating Kendrick Lamar. Does his participation in “Alright” constitute an attempt to possess it? Thile “makes the song his own” by changing its instrumental setting and altering the lyrics. In doing so, does he harm Lamar, or hip-hop culture more broadly, or African-Americans across the board?

To answer these troubling questions, I will use a framing proposed by Gray (2017). She distinguishes two separate harmful aspects of cultural appropriation: *cultural exploitation*, and *cultural disrespect*. To determine whether these two things are taking place, Gray poses a series of questions:

- *Is there a historic record of exploitation between the appropriator and the originating group?* In this case, the answer is a clear yes. It is worth noting that, while Thile's own musical idiom of bluegrass is generally considered to be a "white" genre, its origins lie in the blues as much as in Scots-Irish fiddle tunes (Cantwell, 2003).
- *Are the originating group and its culture being respected or degraded?* Thile makes clear that he admires Lamar. However, he does not give any context for "Alright" beyond noting that Lamar won several Grammys for it. He neither mentions Black Lives Matter, nor explains how he is altering the song's lyrics. These are grave omissions, given that most audience members were probably unfamiliar with the song, and with Lamar's broader place in black culture.
- *Is the appropriator claiming to be the owner or originator?* Thile identifies Lamar as the creator of the song. However, again, he does not inform the audience that he has substituted many of Lamar's lyrics.
- *Is the appropriation generating economic or political value for the appropriator that is not available to the originators?* This question is complex. Presumably, Lamar's publisher collected the customary license fee for the performance, so the literal monetary benefit accrued only to him. More generally, however, Thile could have expected to benefit in other ways. "Alright" was a daring and provocative song choice, one certain to be commented on, possibly lending Thile a new veneer of cool. Immediately before beginning the song, Thile tells the audience, "Seeing as Kendrick is doing so well, you know, I'm going to ride his coattails a little bit." He

says this extremely quietly and close to the microphone, as if he is sharing a confidence. It is unclear whether or not he is joking.

Even if we could parse out all of Thile's motivations, it is still difficult to assess whether he is appropriating, and if so, how harmful that is. After all, how do we determine who owns a given cultural artifact or practice? How can a group give or deny permission for others to use their culture? "It's not as if each ethnic group has a council or bureaucratic agency that processes requests for cultural exchange like ASCAP licenses music" (Gray, 2017, n.p.). While Missy Elliott gave Mary Halsey her direct approval, Lamar has not spoken on Thile's cover. There is no official representative of hip-hop generally. Several responses to my online posts challenged my right to be offended on Lamar's behalf.

Grunenberg (2018) argues that if all cultural appropriation were to halt, so too would cultural innovation. Lipsitz (1994, p. 63) defines *strategic anti-essentialism* as identification with a group to which you do not belong, in order to express or become who you are. Young people around the world have identified themselves with hip-hop in contexts very far removed from the Bronx in the 1970s. Hip-hop itself has appropriated other subcultures endlessly, literally in the form of sampling and figuratively in its hybridizing absorption of everything it encounters. That said, not all appropriation is equal. Black and white artists are not approaching each others' cultural "property" from equal levels of power and privilege. It is the power dynamic that makes appropriation problematic, not the cross-cultural exchange itself.

### **Keeping it real**

Whenever a white musician performs black music, it raises questions of authenticity and appropriation. Hip-hop raises some additional and unique issues, because it has specific norms around moral ownership of music. In hip-hop, "keeping it real" is a core value. "Singing another



person's song void of its contexts would not be keeping it real. Nor would creating music that does not connect in anyway to one's individual local experiences" (Kruse, 2016, p. 54). One corollary of realness is a strong expectation that rappers write their own material. Consider how different this is from previous black vernacular musics. In rock, Jimi Hendrix is revered for his recording of Bob Dylan's "All Along The Watchtower." In R&B, Aretha Franklin's best known song is her interpretation of "Respect" by Otis Redding. In jazz, while Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald are universally admired, Holiday wrote few original songs, and Fitzgerald did not write any. In the blues, many songs have no specific author at all. By contrast, hip-hop "foregrounds identity with an explicitness well-nigh unprecedented even in the ethnically and gender-loaded world of popular musics" (Krim, 2000, p. 9). Rappers must only perform lyrics that are truthful to themselves, or at least to a version of themselves. While some rappers do employ ghostwriters, this practice is regarded as a shameful one.

The strength of the "no-covers" rule in rap is so strong that it is hardly ever spoken. It is not so much that rappers have to be forbidden from doing covers; it is more that it does not occur to them to do so in the first place. Music educator Marco Petrilli writes:

Not a single student of mine, black or white, ever considers covering a rap. My understanding of their view is that a rap must be uniquely personal (at least in word play and rhythmic invention). Has any popular artist, black or white, ever successfully covered a rap? Is it possible that popular American music, heavily weighted with white appropriation of black forms, has finally broken free from the tradition of covers? If so, doesn't this evolution support the general trend of music's dissociation of time and place, as well as race (blog comment on Hein, 2018)?

The only well-regarded example of a rap cover I am aware of is Snoop Dogg's "Lodi Dodi" (1993), a cover of "La Di Da Di" by Slick Rick and Doug E Fresh (1985). However, from its title onwards, Snoop Dogg's cover is more of a broad remake than a cover; this is an exception that proves the rule.

Note that while realness is connected to originality, they are not coextensive. Hip-hop may stigmatize "biting" (stealing) from another artist (Söderman & Folkestad, 2004, p. 323), but artists frequently use existing beats and instrumentals, and sampling and interpolation are ubiquitous. It is common to rap new lyrics over another artist's instrumental; such tracks have been mixtape staples for decades. There would appear to be a contradiction between hip-hop culture's aversion to covers and its embrace of sampling, remixing and quotation. But sampling and the rest are ultimately tools for self-expression, for speaking with one's own voice. While it is difficult to imagine a circumstance in which a white performer covering "Alright" could keep it real, it is perfectly possible for white rappers to be real with their own material. Eminem and the Beastie Boys are well-respected in hip-hop circles in large part because their songs speak to their identities and experiences.

The lens of realness clarifies the problem with Chris Thile's cover. While we can reasonably debate whether or not he is committing cultural appropriation, Thile's rapping the line "we hate the po-po" is most certainly not keeping it real. His choice not to be real in his performance of "Alright" is consistent with the values of his own subcultural context. While bluegrass musicians are deeply concerned with authenticity, they do not place any particular value on autobiographical truthfulness. Thile is from California, not Appalachia. Murder ballads are ubiquitous in bluegrass repertoire, but no one imagines the singers to be speaking from personal experience. If Thile feels free to adopt the musical persona of Bill Monroe or Lester

Flatt, it is not such a stretch to be comfortable adopting the persona of Kendrick Lamar. But what is appropriate in bluegrass is not appropriate in hip-hop.

### **Whiteness in music education**

Music teachers are more likely to be white than the US adult population (Elpus, 2015). They are also more likely than their students to be white, and to come from suburban, low-poverty areas (Doyle, 2014). White teachers avoid engaging the racial politics of music for fear of being accused of being “political” (Bradley, 2012, p. 189). For example, the South African freedom song “Siyahamba” is commonly found in “world music” repertoire, but it is rare for teachers to mention the antiapartheid movement in connection with it. This reluctance to address controversial issues may stem from a desire to be apolitical, but the effect is de facto endorsement of the status quo.

While few music educators harbor outspoken racial bias, they frequently demonstrate colorblindness and powerblindness, manifested in the supposed virtue of niceness. Nice people reframe potentially disruptive or uncomfortable things in ways that are more soothing, pleasant, and comfortable. “This avoidance and reframing are done with the best intentions, and having good intentions is a critical component of niceness. In fact, as long as one means well, the actual impact of one’s behavior, discourse, or action is often meaningless” (Castagno, 2014, p. 9). There are strong social incentives for white educators to favor niceness over engagement with racial politics, not least because we have the freedom to ignore them. Members of dominant social groups enjoy the “luxury of ignorance” (Howard, 2006, pp. 14-15). Confronting racial issues is optional for white musicians and educators, whereas black educators and students must confront them continually. If white educators wish to be culturally relevant, however, then we must engage with hip-hop, and then ignorance will no longer be a viable option.

When I began doing Google searches for Chris Thile, one of the most prominent results was a video produced by the Wall Street Journal (2013). It is a fascinating document, because it is almost entirely concerned with the racial politics of music without ever saying so explicitly. Thile bookends the video with two different performances of “Rebecca” by Herschel Sizemore, first in “Baroque” style, then in “bluegrass” style. Baroque style is flowing and linear, with straight eighth notes and slight rubato in the timing. “Bluegrass” style has a metronomic beat, with swinging eighth notes, lightly funky phrasing, an implicit backbeat, and improvised blues embellishments. In other words, bluegrass style includes several musical signifiers of the African diaspora. This is no accident, since bluegrass is a fusion of Scotch/Irish traditional music with blues and jazz (Cantwell, 2003). Elsewhere in the video, Thile contrasts his own animated body language as a performer with the reserve shown by classical concert audiences. The suppression of bodily affect is a key signifier of whiteness (Gustafson, 2008), one that many white music teachers work hard to impart on their students. Failing to name these black and white signifiers for what they are is a form of colorblindness. We will not be able to challenge the status quo in music education’s racial politics unless we can at least talk about the issues directly.

A corollary of niceness is anxiety around being offensive. White educators should, of course, be cautious of being insensitive or thoughtless in their treatment of the musics of marginalized groups. However, an excess of caution can be as harmful as the lack of it.

Each year, I meet students in my classes who express their fear that if they cannot teach a genre of music, or even a single song, authentically, they will cause offense. The fear of cultural faux pas is so strong that it paralyzes many in their attempts to learn other musics, and for some, the fear of inauthenticity serves as a (colorblind) excuse to stay within the musical status quo (Bradley, 2015, p. 200).

In criticizing Thile for covering “Alright,” I am not arguing that white musicians and educators should “stay in their lane” and never explore black musics. There is a balance to be struck between appropriating black culture and neglecting it, and we have a responsibility to seek that balance out. In the case of hip-hop, I believe that balance can best be found within the constraints of keeping it real.

### **Rap in school**

For generations, school music programs in the United States have structured themselves around the paradigm of the director-led performing ensemble. This paradigm presumes that performing notated works is a skeleton key capable of unlocking students’ understanding of any kind of music. Progressive educators are working to diversify ensemble repertoire, but the underlying paradigm of obtaining musical knowledge through performance/possession remains largely unchallenged. “As we include more people and groups in music education, we do not change the core body of the discipline. When we work, for example, to “diversify our ensembles and do so successfully, music education is not somehow less white” (Hess, 2017, p. 24). If music educators are to take hip-hop seriously, we must recognize that it is more than a music genre. It is “a distinct worldview with related sensibilities and epistemologies that can inform teaching and learning” (Petchauer, 2011, p. 1412). The value of realness is at odds with the value that music educators place on performance of repertoire from far outside students’ own culture and experience. It is disrespectful to teach and perform the formal musical content of rap without adhering to its value system.

According to traditional Western musicology, music consists of context-free objects called *works* (Elliott & Silverman, 2015, p. 66). The “work-concept” of music locates value and meaning within the formal aspects of the composition: melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre and so

on. By the work-concept of music, “Alright” is simply notes and words on a page, the same as a Bach sonata, available to be interpreted by whoever sees fit. The creed of the Western art music tradition rests on the idea of “art that is created out of a purely aesthetic, hence disinterested, impulse... All social demands on the artist—whether made by church, state, or paying public—and all social or commercial mediation are inimical to the authenticity of the creative product” (Taruskin, 2010, p. 339). Any approach to hip-hop that remains disinterested in social or commercial mediation will necessarily fail to understand it.

It is more in keeping with hip-hop values to approach the music from a praxial perspective, in which music is not a *thing*, but rather an embodied, enactive and enculturated *practice* (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Rather than asking what a piece of music *is*, praxialism argues that we must also ask what it *does*. The study of rap can not begin and end with works, but rather must examine “the broader creative practices, spaces, and lives that make up hip-hop” (Petchauer, 2012, p. 3). If educators are to embrace hip-hop values, then they should recognize that performing existing songs is not an appropriate approach to the music. Instead, it would be better to have students create their own songs that speak to their own perspectives and identities.

## **Conclusion**

bell hooks (1994) reminds us that “contemporary commodification of Black culture by Whites in no way challenges White supremacy when it takes the form of making Blackness the ‘spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.’” Livening up music classrooms with appropriations of black music misses the point of that music. In a parable from the Shurangama Sutra (Hsüan, 1977, 2:61), the Buddha makes an analogy between teaching the Dharma and pointing at the moon. If you look at the finger (the verbal teachings), you miss the moon (the true Dharma). White musicians have long been enamored with black music for its

soulfulness and invention, and rightly so. However, it is all too common for white musicians to try to access the power of black music by imitating it directly—I spent a good part of my youth doing that very thing. I see Chris Thile’s cover of “Alright” as a study of Kendrick Lamar’s metaphorical finger.

Thile is right to find “Alright” inspiring. However, he would have demonstrated more respect for hip-hop by writing his own song. It could be informed by Lamar’s stylistic innovations; it could address the Black Lives Matter movement from Thile’s own perspective; it could even sample or interpolate “Alright.” The important thing is that Thile speak his own musical truths, whether or not those can be meaningfully informed by Lamar’s ideas. It is my hope that my fellow white educators use a similar approach with our students. When we teach hip-hop, let us make it our goal to use it as a tool for fostering authentic student self-expression.

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