
Ebony & Ivory: Lyrics of Anti-Harmony

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Produced in Adele Richardson's Spring 2018 ENC 1102

*I see no changes all I see is racist faces
Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races
We under I wonder what it takes to make this One better place,
let's erase the wasted
Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right 'Cause both black and white is
smokin' crack tonight And only time we chill is when we kill each other
It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other And although it seems heaven sent
We ain't ready, to see a black President, uhh It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact
The penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks But some things will never change.*
2Pac "Changes"

Introduction

Throughout history, a communion of song, lyrics, melody, and emotion allowed for a place of self-release. Researchers van Blommestein and Hope contend, "No matter what the intention of the composer or the performer, it is incontrovertible that music is an emotional medium" (59), with songwriting at the base of self-expression. Researchers have conducted many studies on the songwriting process and its therapeutic benefits as well as its ability to communicate messages, experiences, thoughts and emotions in the form of lyrics and song (Baker and Krout; Baker, "Working with Impairments"; Beech; Carless and Douglass; Howell and Callahan; Riley). According to Baker, there are several stages of the songwriting process, which include selecting a topic for further exploration and brainstorming ideas related to that topic. Then, a songwriter identifies the principle idea, thought, emotion, or concept of the topic and constructs the outline of the main themes within that topic. Then, they construct the lyrics for the songs (Baker, "Working with Impairments" 138-145). The songwriter takes those lyrics, accompanies them with melody and tempo, and makes small changes to make the song "catchy" and "increase the overall musical result" (Baker, "Working with Impairments" 145).

The rhetorical content of lyrics can depend on many factors, such as relaying personal situations like obstacles or emotional issues. Baker and Krout maintain, "Songwriting provides a way to re-organize our experiences and express our feelings" (142). There are various themes for lyrical content such as connecting, communicating, making a difference, and mainly songs about inspiring values like "aspirations for a better society, such as reduced violence" (Beech 193). Songs and lyrics are often used to understand social science and relay public issues. As we listen to songs that deliver powerful messages and provide commentary, on popular culture, we can construct "opinions on social issues" (Howell and Callahan 80). Because songs increase attention as well as trigger personal reflection and local knowledge, they allow alternative ways of thinking to become possible (Carless and Douglass 449; Carless and Karina 444, 452).

These researchers have done a great job explaining the songwriting process and its keen way of communicating to the public. There have been many studies conducted to explain various

lyrical content of social issues. When it comes to songwriting, researchers maintain that lyrics “carry significance because the words in lyrics carry shared meaning for a particular group of people” (Messner et al. 515), which explains why people connect with some songs more than others or why people like or don’t like certain songs. Felicity Baker even describes race as one of the sociocultural factors of songwriting, defining the term “sociocultural” as evolving over time and “encompass[ing] the diversity of all types of peoples” (“An Investigation” 123). There has also been research conducted about racism, racial minorities, the significance of race, and racial biases, such as the limited “hopes for ‘positive’ depictions of blackness” (Towns 476). However, I would like to add to this conversation by connecting songwriting and race with my own findings of trends of racial issues in song lyrics. My research focuses on the evidence of anti-racial harmony and discrimination displayed in lyrics about racial issues, experiences, and the thoughts and emotions they invoke.

Methodology

As a songwriter for more than five years, I am quite familiar with the songwriting process and its disciplines as well as the factors associated with writing lyrics. I’ve also been aware of today’s ongoing racial issues. I wanted to combine my knowledge of songwriting with my interest in this serious public problem, so I developed the following research question: Are there trends in lyrics about racial issues and, if so, what are these trends?

The songwriting process allows us to express emotions, experiences, thoughts, opinions, and communicate to the public using one or a combination of the various genres of music, which include, but are not limited to, rap, pop, soul, or country. By taking my own experience and knowledge of songwriting and combining it with research conducted about the factors and themes associated with songwriting, in addition to research I’ve conducted about racism, racial injustice, and news articles of various racial issues connected with the songs, I hoped to answer my question about the racial song rhetoric I was analyzing.

To answer my question, I selected songs about racial issues from various periods to determine any trends and any similarities or differences. I analyzed 45 songs from different periods as well as the corresponding news articles from the same period of the song, or, if available, articles about the song as it relates to racial issues. These songs derive from different genres of music that include rap, hip-hop, country, rhythm and blues, soul, and pop. These songs were written by different writers or groups.

Some songwriters wrote more than one song about racial issues. I searched for the lyrics to popular songs known to display messages of racial inequality, recorded trends into a notebook, and divided the trends into categories based on the content topic or message. These categories are slavery, discrimination, segregation, racial abuse, and racial biases.

I examined my data for instances of trends amongst the lyrics. I considered my personal knowledge of songwriting as well as the factors playing a role in these lyrics, including the time they were written and the racial issues of that time. To do this, I also had to research news articles from the period these songs were written to see what political or social issues were present during that time. I also searched to see similarities of the political and social issues of the past in comparison to today as it directly relates to trends of lyrics of the past to today with racial issues.

The limitations of my research may include that I may not have collected enough primary data, specifically song lyrics from the past, as in the times of slavery, to accurately compare trends of the past to today. Also, it was difficult for me to find songs written by female songwriters

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compared to the seemingly endless stream of songs written by male writers. Further, it seemed to be much easier to find songs leaning towards the rap or hip-hop genre and less of other genres such as country. This may be because of factors such as the variances of the country music genre and its history compared to the history behind the rap genre. So, I am using the data I was able to gather to make my conclusions.

Results and Discussion

My first finding was that songs about racism, although all are about the topic of race and racism, had varying rhetorical context, song substance (spiritual, inspirational, calls to action for change, etc.), and thematic content. According to Beech, song thematic content can include: connection (connecting with listeners, emotions and other people), communication (sending a message, expressing feelings), and making a difference (making the world a better place, learning about the impact of a song). Beech's research study shows that fifty percent of content studied were dedicated to songs about inspiring values like "aspirations for a better society, such as reduced violence" (193).

In addition to content, I contend that the writing styles of the songs varied on factors like if the song was written by a male or female. I found that most of the songs included in my research were written by males rather than females. Another factor could be the race of the writer(s). I realized many of the songs analyzed for my research were written by minorities, with a majority being written by black males. Additionally, the genre of music played a factor as many of the songs I found were from recent times, especially of the rap or hip-hop genre. Lastly, another factor could be the period the song was written in such as slave songs, songs from the civil rights movement era, to songs of the mid-80's, 90's, 2000's to today.

Songs of the Past

Through my research, I noticed songs written during times of slavery and the civil rights movement were more tamed in manner by using words that conveyed their emotions or experiences carefully and in a more poetic style as if they were telling a story, with minimal cursing found. This may be because of the more traditional and conservative views of people during these times or their fears of backlash if they chose to be direct in language with their songs. I've also noted many trends of nonviolent lyrics, calling to action hopes of equality and liberty, marching and freedom songs "arising a feeling of hope and possibility" (van Blommestein and Hope 66). These nonviolent trends would continue through times of slavery and then on to the Civil Rights movement era.

There were several themes in song lyrics from the past, especially of times of slavery. Although slave songs were considered by early observers as "strange" or "barbaric," slave songs had a huge impact on the slave community (Ramey 11-12), as a means of communication, emotional release, and prayer while inspiring such people as Frederick Douglass, a known leader and abolitionist of the time. Some researchers viewed the slave songs as offering a "conscious critique of the slave system and the material and psychological oppression that resulted from it" (Messmer 9-10). Oftentimes, the rhetoric was spiritual. Lyrics consistently utilized context about the Church: praying for hope, strength, forgiveness of sins, and change, while often referencing biblical figures and spirit guides. Spiritual slave music itself is a topic for discussion about racism as researchers argue whether slave songs can be considered poetry. Some argue slave songs were not unique, but were rather "simply primitive, derivative versions of white European Protestant Hymns" (Ramey 98). According to Ramey's research, although some researchers were opposed to considering slave songs as original poetry, there are several arguments in support of viewing slave songs in this way. A hint of racial discrimination and bias can be perceived with this alone due to several arguments supporting slave songs as poetry (Ramey). This includes the varying

characteristics of slave songs that differed from that of traditional white church music of that time, including differences in phrasing, diction, body movement (swaying and rhythm), direct address of ancestors, maintaining relationships, and stress on importance of community for every person (Ramey 12-13). Slave spirituals and bodily movement would be brought up continuously throughout time when associated with race, even in the form of lyrics.

The vernacular of the slaves during this time was simpler as many slaves did not have a formal education. For example, there are many “em’s” instead of “them,” or “de” instead of “the.” A song titled, “Graveyard,” appearing in the book *Slave Songs of the United States*, displays the vernacular:

My mudder reel and-a toss wid de fever I have a grandmudder in de
graveyard
O where d’yea tink I find ‘em?
I find ‘em, Lord, in de graveyard (Allen et al. 7-10)

During times of enslavement, which predate the printed versions going back to the 19th century (Ramey 11), many slaves’ songs were regarded as “heartbreakingly sad or upliftingly cheerful” (Ramey 13). By listening to slave songs about the experiences of slaves during this time, abolitionists, leaders and slaves alike were made aware of the trials and tribulations of the time.

Even during the times of the Civil Rights Movement, race played a major role in music. As far as songs written by white writers from the past, I found consistent trends in songs where racist views were clearly found, referencing blacks as “negros,” “darkies,” or “niggers.” Lyrics often downplayed their African roots, color, and bodies. Black people were also mentioned as “Africans” or “monkeys” and were associated with a bad smell. Woodie Guthrie, a white songwriter who would later become an activist for racial equality, wrote in his earlier years about his experience with black people in his song, “Clippings from the Personal Diary of a Full-Fledged Son of the Beach”:

We could dimly hear their chants And we thought the blacks by chance,
Were doing a cannibal dance
This we could dimly see. (qtd. in Jackson, *Prophet Singer* 137)

In Guthrie’s lyrics, black slave spirituals were brought up even after times of slavery, referring to the traditional sways and bodily movements of black slave music, which whites considered as primitive and inexcusable for church music (Ramey 98). Guthrie would later write songs about anti-lynching. During this time, “Members of the black community who did not follow or were perceived to move beyond these legally or socially prescribed forms of behavior would often suffer severe penalties” (Jackson, “Dark Memory” 666). Several songs I’ve analyzed mentioned abuse on blacks such as lynching, running away from abuse, mistreatment, discrimination, and segregation. Although slavery had ended by the time of the Civil Rights Movement, racist views were still brought up in song lyrics well into the 1930s and on to the 50s and 60s, where racial segregation and discrimination were often part of daily lives for colored people, especially in times of the Deep South.

The Blues genre—with “bluesmen” considered as the “carriers of race-wide pain” (Gussow 86)—expressed the hurt and discrimination while linking to slave roots. Blacks expressed these experiences in lyrics just like in Blues artist Sam Cooke’s song, “A Change Is Gonna Come”: “I was born by the river, in a little tent, and just like the river I been runnin’ ever since.” Blues can arguably be “a sort of collective black feeling of suffering, of beleaguerment, in the face of white racist violence and exploitation” (Gussow 83), especially in the Deep South during the Civil Rights Movement. As the Blues genre linked the color blue with negative emotions like anger, anxiety, and loneliness (Gussow 94-96), it was a recurring site to see expressions of oppression in Blues music and lyrics.

Songs from these times sought to communicate to the masses. These songs, especially those written by black writers from this time, were considered a form of political activism because of their ability to “challenge the racial status quo and thus participate in the creation of modern

discourse” (Schroeder 139). These songs about racism provided the “opportunity to reverse the stereotypes constructed by white men in blackface” (Schroeder 143). By putting their experiences and concerns in the form of song, black writers connected to the white audiences that listened to their music and sparked social activism, especially during the racially charged era of the Civil Rights Movement, where maybe the best way to get their voices heard was through song.

Songs of Today

Songs written recently, especially in the rap and hip-hop genres, are direct in substance and rhetoric- experiences communicated with first-hand knowledge and everyday life. There is little to no sugarcoating of emotions or opinions. Songs of today also have more vulgar terms with curse words written as if part of the vernacular.

Recent songs I’ve analyzed that were written by Caucasians rather than minorities seemed to depict a sense of pity, compassion, and sympathy for minorities and what they are going through. A great example of this is a song I discovered titled, “Accidental Racist,” written by white country music artist, Brad Paisley, and featuring black rap artist, LL Cool J:

I’m just a white man comin’ to you from the southland
Tryin’ to understand what it’s like not to be
I’m proud of where I’m from but not everything we’ve done
And it ain’t like you and me can re-write history

The lyrics expressed hopes of peace and coming together rather than hatred because of people’s skin or stereotypes. Research implies that “whites, seeking to promote harmony, often emphasize similarities and downplay racial dynamics while people of color, seeking to ensure respect, may take the opposite approach” (Godsil and Richardson 2246). For this reason, we are seeing variances in lyrics between races.

This does not mean that people of color were only writing lyrics of hatred and oppression. There are songs from today where people of color search for peace and unity and find ways to communicate to ways of needing change to racist views. In the same song, “Accidental Racist,” LL Cool J and Brad Paisley were able to connect two races and two genres of country and rap in hopes of unifying different groups of people:

I’m proud of where I’m from
(If you don’t judge my gold chains)
But not everything we’ve done
(I’ll forget the iron chains)

By using call-and-response type of songwriting technique, they were able to connect their individual experiences as black and white men to call for peace while trying to move forward from the past, which was also a way of connecting racial issues of the past to today.

The trend in many of the songs on racial issues deriving from the rap and hip-hop community was a surprising find. Research contends that hip-hop is a racialized medium because its non-white artists discuss racial concerns (Jacobson 834). As an avid listener of rap and hip-hop, I knew before conducting my research that rap and hip-hop are very explicit genres, known for sending direct and sometimes vulgar messages to listeners and to people who in general may listen to lyrics. However, I was surprised by the amount of racial content in rap and hip-hop that I discovered in my analysis. I was surprised to see how much content in rap and hip-hop had more than one reference to race (“black man” or “nigga”), racial biases (gold chains, baggy pants, drug dealing), and profanity. Black rappers were especially using the word “nigga” more openly. White rappers on the topic of racism were more careful with their wording, but I did find some of the songs still downplayed black people, either as the ones who are racist or references to black women as only wanting white men’s money. This alone could lead to a discussion of its own.

It surprised me to find that songs written by minorities often included anti-racial references. Lyrics were often more vulgar and spewed hatred, war, and injustice. Conversely, songs

written by Caucasians were generally more positive and searched for peace by trying to move on from the past. It may be up for discussion if there is a double standard with Caucasians complaining of racial injustices, biases, and discrimination. Researchers suggest “racial anxiety,” associated with “concerns that often arise both before and during interracial interactions” (Godsil and Richardson 2235). With racial anxiety in white people, they may experience it when they wonder if they will be perceived as racist (Godsil and Richardson 2235). It could be that white songwriters in today’s social media watchdog society are afraid of the notion of being called racist and the backlash that comes with it, thus avoiding writing content such as racial slurs, racism against white people, and stereotypical content.

Connecting the Past and Present

Many times, the lyrics and news from the past were similar in context to that of recent times. For example, the song “Strange Fruit” performed by Billie Holiday in 1939 references lynching of black people at this time:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root Black bodies swinging in the
 southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

The popular song about racism came up again in recent news. This time, it was of controversy for then-President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony. According to an article from CBS News in 2017, when UK’s *X Factor* runner up Rebecca Ferguson was asked to perform for the ceremony, she responded that she’d only perform if she could sing “Strange Fruit” (Imam). This song still has relative meaning amidst recent social and political issues dealing with race and discrimination.

Another example of a trend linking lyrics of racism of the past to today is found in Kendrick Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry,” which truly connects the vernacular of the past to relay historical racial issues arising today:

I said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black Woi, we feel a whole heap of
 pain, cah' we black
 And man a say they put me inna chains, cah' we black Imagine now, big gold
 chains full of rocks (53-57)

Lamar’s song was just one example from my research where a writer used the vernacular from times of enslavement to convey their messages of social injustice in racism.

Lyrics written by white writers on race from the past were considerably more racist than lyrics written by white writers of today. Lyrics from the past by white writers clearly displayed their opinions of blacks as still slaves or as “Africans,” and downplayed their racial integrity. In today’s music, white writers seem to call for peace and overcoming the past, but this does not mean there were no signs of racism in white lyrics. I’ve found significant examples of “hate music,” in different genres, but mostly country music, which can be maintained as one of the origins of American rock music (Messner et al. 513-14). Researchers contend that the Hate Music category reflects “an attempt to influence political and civic life directly through the attention generated by the music” (Messner et al. 517). Just as there are songs to call for peace and unity, there are songs that aim to separate and

belittle races not of the writers’ own and to incite hate and segregation of races. This was significant, especially in songs of the past, but it is still seen arising today.

Lyrics and music, along with being a form of art, allow us to communicate social and political issues such as racism, which they have been doing since times of slavery.

It is clear that although these songs were written in different time periods or derive from different genres of music, racial issues were expressed based on the experiences of the writers or of the political and social issues of their time. Because of its means to create and communicate collective identity, music has and continues to be of importance in social activism (van Blommestein and Hope 60). Lyrics clearly displayed messages of racial abuse, bias, segregation, discrimination, and the inability to overcome stereotypes. Blacks and songwriters of other minorities can also experience racial anxiety when “they worry they will be subject to discriminatory treatment” (Godsil and Richardson 2235), just as Notorious B.I.G. acknowledges in his song, “Juicy”: “Stereotypes of a black male misunderstood and it’s still all good.” They communicate these experiences through song as a way to bring knowledge of racial issues to the public.

These songs about racism and anti-harmony are a viable way of communicating social issues. As a form of media, songs of racial injustice consider the cultural politics of racialization: police brutality, mass incarceration, and the afterlives of slavery” (Towns 476). According to researchers, “these songs, and the concerns they raise, have been largely overlooked by philosophers (especially analytic philosophers), who have tended to concentrate on art music and to treat art as divorced from social and political factors” (Bicknell 174). Although considered an art, music can be widely used to persuade or inform, especially on issues of racism by using rhythm, catchy melodies, and instruments to catch our attention. It can be said that songwriters use popular musical settings to appeal to audiences even as they sing about serious societal arguments and concerns (Howell and Callahan 81, 87). By connecting the power of songs with the personal goals and messages of the writers, social issues such as racism can be challenged before the public.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to answer my question: Are there trends in lyrics about racial issues and, if so, what are these trends?

Because of my research, I’ve concluded that there are several trends in lyrics about racial issues from the past that still exist today. Lyrics and music, along with being a form of art, allow us to communicate social and political issues such as racism, which they have been doing since times of slavery. Race has been and still is of continuing significance, especially with the continuation of racism against minorities, biases, and new racism (Morrissey and Sims 96; Sellers and Shelton 1080; Towns 476). Through song, we are bringing to light these issues, messages about racial inequality, and calls to action for change, which are all much more effective through song than through words alone (Carless and Douglass 451).

My research connects the songwriting processes and lyrics of the past to today to communicate political and social issues such as racism. According to researchers, “[A]rguments surrounding public issues are not always expressed in writing; they often take visual and auditory forms” (Howell and Callahan 86). Although it’s been hundreds of years since the times of slavery, we are still experiencing racial inequality and anti-harmony today, which is clear through song and lyrics. This information is important in showing how songs can be just as impactful as words alone. Songs and lyrics can help spark change and enlightenment in its listeners’ minds and help them to construct their own opinions on social issues (Howell and Callahan 80).

Variances in the songwriting process throughout time are clear in song structure, performance, rhetoric and discourse, even though all of the songs’ main ideas are on the topic of race. Other factors like genre, gender, and race played a role on these variances, which could be a topic for exploration. Continued studies should be conducted with a wider range of data. Analysis of songs and news sources such as articles or books from different periods can further this discussion. These findings, along with the continuation of songwriting as a medium of self-expression, can encourage sending messages to the masses that may ignite change in the public and hopefully end

the issue of racism one song at a time.

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