

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

Reading song lyrics: an interdisciplinary and multimodal approach

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I confirm that in the thesis the chapter 'I'm (not) your man', and the books *Writing Song Lyrics*, *Viva Hate*, and *Reading Eminem* have been published in advance of its submissions and appropriately referenced in the text.

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UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The arguments presented in this thesis draw upon a selection of my own published texts between the years 2017 and 2022 and extend the existing critical discourse of popular music studies by foregrounding song lyrics as the object of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary study. Since Goldstein's 1969 text *Poetry of Rock*, identified by Mosher (1989: 144) as the first 'respectable' book on the subject of popular music studies, research has tended to focus on the separate components found within song, for example language (Ricks, 2004; Eckstein, 2010; Bradley & DuBois, 2010), sociology (Frith, 1996; Longhurst, 2007; Street, 2013), psychology (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001; Frisicks-Warren, 2006; Levitin, 2008), musicology (Bicknell, 2009; Powell, 2010) or media and cultural studies (Barthes, 1977; Devereux, Dillane and Power, 2011; Railton & Watson, 2011; Arnold et al, 2017), or, in the case of collected texts such as *Popular Music Studies* (Hesmondhalgh & Negus., eds, 2002) used a multidisciplinary approach to draw on knowledge from different disciplines. In my own work I demonstrate how we can draw upon existing methods of popular music analysis individually, but then also bring them together in an *interdisciplinary* approach to analysing popular song, synthesising links between different disciplines that I argue are essential to a coordinated and coherent reading. To do this, I suggest that lyrics can be 'read' by drawing on film, literary and dramatic critical theories to produce close internal readings, but instead of analysis beginning and ending with the text, I stress the importance of looking to the elements 'outside' the song. This thesis, therefore, is composed of the three main sections: critical context and methodological underpinnings; a focus on 'inside' the text; and a focus 'outside' the text. The notion of staying 'inside' the song involves using only the lyrics and music for analysis, and this includes explorations around listener interpretation, the use of rhetorical devices, and storytelling. Moving 'outside' the song involves discussions of cultural and political significance, the songwriter's biography, and a multimodal approach to analysis where the importance of music video and album artwork are discussed.

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List of accompanying material

Discussion 1:

Fosbraey, G. (2017). 'I'm (not) your man' (pp. 57-69). In: Billingham, P. (ed) *Spirituality and Desire in Leonard Cohen's Song and Poems*. Cambridge Scholars Press.

Fosbraey, G. (2019). 'Looking at and looking Beyond' (pp. 59-66). In: Fosbraey, G., & Melrose, A. (2019). *Writing Song Lyrics: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Fosbraey, G. (2022). 'A Very British Kind of Protest' (pp. 45-57). In: Fosbraey, G. (2022). *Viva Hate: exploring hatred in popular music*. Cambridge Scholars Press.

Fosbraey, G. (2022). 'Eminem and Story' (pp. 27-78). In: Fosbraey, G. (2022). *Reading Eminem*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Discussion 2:

Fosbraey, G. (2019). 'Author, Intention, Biography' (pp. 9-17). In: 'Fosbraey, G., & Melrose, A. (2019). *Writing Song Lyrics: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Fosbraey, G. (2019). 'Looking at and looking Beyond' (pp. 66-70). In: Fosbraey, G., & Melrose, A. (2019). *Writing Song Lyrics: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Fosbraey, G. (2022). 'Eminem and Voice' (pp. 83- 116). In: Fosbraey, G. (2022). *Reading Eminem*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Fosbraey, G. (2022). 'Fuck Tha' Police: Hate in the Golden Age of Hip-Hop' (pp. 58-67). In: Fosbraey, G. (2022). *Viva Hate: exploring hatred in popular music*. Cambridge Scholars Press.

Preface

The five texts I'm submitting for the degree of PhD by published works are comprised of two monographs, one co-written book (I will only be referencing my work in these pages, and on page xiii it is made clear which is my own work and which is my co-author's), and one chapter, but I also refer in passing to a number of other chapters and journal articles I have authored.

1. Methodological beginnings

1.1 Discussing Popular Music Studies as an academic discipline

The primary aim of my work has been to recognise popular music as a multimodal form, and an academic field worthy of the same considerations historically afforded to literature, film, or drama. To allow for analysis of all of song's components, my research has required an interdisciplinary approach, where I have drawn upon (for example) new criticism, narratology, gender studies, sociological theory, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, feminist theory, historicism, and a range of theories related to the fields of film and media studies in order to properly analyse the visual materials that often accompany song. The earliest of my works submitted for this project is the chapter 'I'm (not) your man: Reading Leonard Cohen's Lyrics without Leonard Cohen', where I conclude by saying that if ever song lyrics are to be appreciated in an academic environment the way that other subjects are, then they need to be analysed using similar rigorous critical theories. I have used this as a further objective within my career to date, and it is central to all the work in this submission, and, indeed, will be central to the work I will undertake in the future. In my research, however far away from the song itself I appear to move, I maintain a link back to the lyrics, keeping them front and centre in all discussions and observing to what extent the multimodal and external factors such as author biography, album art, music video, and social media engagement impact how we might react to them. And while each of my submissions to this project discuss the *sound* of songs, I do so in a way which, once again, focuses on the lyrics, using the vocal melodies, harmonies (including counter-melodies), instrumentation, and production as another way of showing how our reaction to the lyrics can be influenced by factors outside the words themselves. Any theory-heavy musicological analysis is therefore absent from my work as it presents itself as a closed system which is resistant to any outside discussion (including lyrics), and my writing demonstrates that, if we are to legitimise popular song as an area of academic study and scholarship, it needs also to be accessible to those from other disciplines.

With regard to song lyrics specifically, although a group of scholars have succeeded in drawing attention to them as a serious artform worthy of academic consideration, their work has also brought with it a set of problems. The title of Eckstein's 2010 *Reading Song Lyrics* suggests it might be an entire full-length text which critically analyses popular music lyrics, as does his assertion toward the beginning that 'lyrics are not poetry, and their study therefore requires a different set of analytical tools from that which is conventionally applied to poetry' (Eckstein, 2010: 23). But although he does point to the importance of 'mediality of language [...] style and musical context [...], social embeddedness and cultural value, and [...] an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between (embodied) verbal input and performance ideology' (Eckstein, 2010: 38), Eckstein does not apply these 'tools' to *modern* popular music, instead concerning himself with 16th – 18th century ballads, including more than eighty pages exploring different versions of 'Scarborough Fair'. Other texts have included additional elements alongside lyrical analysis, including, as Powell (2010) does in *How Music Works* looking at popular music studies from a musicological perspective. But, as is often the case where musicology is introduced, although Powell (2010) aims to 'keep the style conversational' and demonstrate that 'music can be understood on a very fundamental level' (Powell, 2010: 4), *How Music Works* consistently deploys language and terminology that can only be understood by musicologists (for example, using a diagram of relative string length versus relative

frequency on the Harp to discuss ‘leading’ and ‘closest relative’ notes within ‘the original pentatonic set’ in a conversation about emotion). Bicknell’s attempts to explain emotional connection with popular music in her book *Why Music Moves Us* are equally inaccessible to the non-musicologist, speaking of ‘a specific association between trance states and a certain tonal pattern – the Phrygian mode’ (Bicknell, 2009: 63). What I have done in my own work is to combine detailed lyrical analysis which makes clear the ‘tools’ I am using, but to also expand the discussion into the fields of sociology, psychoanalysis, and visual media.

In their 2002 edited collection *Popular Music Studies*, Hesmondhalgh & Negus classified the area of popular music studies as ‘uniquely interdisciplinary’ which draws upon ‘significant contributions from writers within a number of academic fields, including musicology, media and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, ethnomusicology, folklorists, psychology, social history and cultural geography.’ (Hesmondhalgh & Negus, 2002: 1) Although this is helpful in demonstrating the breadth of work that the area encompasses, what they are actually describing is *multidisciplinary* rather than *interdisciplinary*, and it has, perhaps, been this multi-faceted nature of analysis that has created problems with popular music studies to date (and in particular the analysis of popular music lyrics), with critics trying to position their works within existing fields instead of treating popular music as a field worthy of its own set of considerations.

With regard to song lyrics, although a group of scholars have succeeded in drawing attention to them as a serious artform worthy of academic consideration, their work has also brought with it a set of problems and flawed arguments. The title of Eckstein’s 2010 *Reading Song Lyrics* suggests it might be an entire full-length text which critically analyses popular music lyrics, as does his assertion toward the beginning that ‘lyrics are not poetry, and their study therefore requires a different set of analytical tools from that which is conventionally applied to poetry’ (Eckstein, 2010: 23). But although he does point to the importance of ‘mediality of language [...] style and musical context [...], social embeddedness and cultural value, and [...] an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between (embodied) verbal input and performance ideology’ (Eckstein, 2010: 38), Eckstein does not apply these ‘tools’ to *modern* popular music, instead concerning himself with 16th – 18th century ballads, including more than eighty pages exploring different versions of ‘Scarborough Fair’. So, although it is undoubtedly an important contribution to understanding popular song of 16-18th centuries, the book doesn’t offer too much in terms of what I seek to explore in my own work, which focuses on reading 20th and 21st Century song.

1.2. Approaching Song Lyrics as Poetry - The importance and limitations of this approach

Although the critic Christopher Ricks refers to Bob Dylan as a ‘poet’ as far back as 1974 in his book *Keats and Embarrassment*, it is via his 2004 book *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* that he solidifies this assertion, where he constantly refers to Bob Dylan’s lyrics as ‘poetry’ and compares his work with other poets. Ricks does concede that ‘songs are different from poems’ but then focuses on their main difference being songs’ performative elements before returning to what seems to be his main aim of the book when he asks ‘is Dylan a poet?’ and conducting a compare and contrast exercise between the lyrics of ‘Highway 61 Revisited’ and Philip Larkin’s ‘Love Songs In Age’. In his chapter ‘Songs, Poems, Rhymes’ Ricks spends 37 pages discussing the performativity of songs (including the effect of re-performance), cadences, voicing, and what he calls ‘rhythmical draping’, and accepts that song is a mixed-media artform, but significantly, fails to determine what he thinks the differences are between *spoken word* poetry and song, both of which share performative elements. To compare lyrics, which, by definition are ‘words sung to a tune’ (Collins Dictionary) and ‘whose full effect depends upon music’ (Rooksby, 2006: 96) to written poems which appear without a performed element in books or pamphlets seems forced and unhelpful, like comparing a photograph to a film. In his paper ‘The Poetry of Bob Dylan’ at The University of Richmond in 2011, Ricks does attempt to identify the difference between poetry and song (once again, though, *written* poetry), saying that ‘the key differentiation [...] is that song can use melisma’ which he defines as ‘the flowering of one note into several syllables’ (Ricks, 2011). Certainly, melisma is a component of song, but to cite it as the *key* difference between the two forms is to ignore a number of crucial components. It ignores, for example, how the instrumentation and arrangement can impact upon what we take from the lyrics in terms of meaning, context, or subtext (Rojek, 2011: 183) (see The Baseballs’ version of ‘Umbrella’ then compare to Rihanna’s), or how the melody affects our emotional connection to the lyrics (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001) (see Devo’s version of ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction then compare to The Rolling Stones’). I discuss this in my book *Reading Eminem*, suggesting that ‘the similarities between hip hop lyrics and poetry shouldn’t be ignored and rhythm and rhyme, use of simile and metaphor, and use of storytelling are certainly vital to both forms [...] but] in the case of Eminem, to focus only on his lyrics [...] glosses over the importance of the melodic hook in his songs, or the use of sampling, and production’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 3). To do so is to analyse only ‘one half of a work’ (Gottlieb and Kimbal, 2000: xxiv) or, as Jarvis Cocker puts it ‘like watching the TV with the sound turned down; you’re only really getting half the story’ (Cocker, 2011: 2).

In his paper ‘Music of Poetry and Poetry of Song: Expressivity and Grammar in Vocal Performance’ Tyler Bickford analyses Dylan’s song ‘Down the Highway’ as a song, identifying the linguistic and grammatical elements of the lyrics but also focusing on his ‘idiosyncratic’ singing style, which ‘highlights the pronunciation and inflection of words and phrases [...], places irregular stress on words [...] and] often sees him pronounce [...] lyrics in unexpected ways [...] with short vowels and plosive stops’ (Bickford 2007: 446-451). ‘An analysis that does not account for the containment of music and poetry within the domain of the voice’ Bickford notes, ‘misses a remarkably clear example of a distinctly musico-poetic progression that builds large formal structures out of tiny musical and poetic elements’ (Bickford 2007: 462-463). The tendency to divorce the lyrics from their musical setting is not a process used solely by Ricks, however, and is perhaps taken to its extreme with lyric collections such as *Nick Cave: The Complete Lyrics, 1978-2013*; *Paul Simon: Lyrics 1964-2011* (2008); *Bob Dylan: 1962-2001 Lyrics* (2016); *Bruce Springsteen Like a Killer in the Sun: Selected Lyrics 1972-2017*; and *Paul McCartney: The Lyrics 1956 – the present* (2021). Simkin observes that ‘both Dylan and Springsteen have had their lyrics published more than once each as collections akin to books of poetry, even though both have questioned in interview the value of divorcing the words from their music.’ (Simkin, 2020:15). Such processes, however, are nothing new. In his 2007 book *Pop Music and Society*, Longhurst observed that ‘early attempts to study pop music [...] often considered the

lyrics as a form of poetry, suggesting that certain pop writers could be seen as poets' (Longhurst, B, 2007: 158). Goldstein's *Poetry of Rock* began this trend, comparing songs to other media in an attempt to give them 'high culture legitimacy' (Astor, 2010: 143). With questions like, 'Is John Lennon's wordplay truly Joycean?' and 'Is Bob Dylan the Walt Whitman of the jukebox?', as well as comparing 'The Silhouettes' 'Get a Job', with concrete poetry and The Jaynetts' 'Sally, Go Round the Roses' with *Waiting for Godot* (Astor, 2010: 143), Goldstein is concerned more with placing song alongside literature, poetry, and drama than he is with actually seeing it as a unique artform and analysing it accordingly.

In a 2023 newspaper article, 'world expert on William Shakespeare' Sir Jonathan Bate situates himself as a latter-day Ricks with his assertion that 'lyricists are poets', comparing Taylor Swift to 'some of history's greatest writers – including the Bard himself' and describing her as a 'real poet' (Harrison, 2023) not 'just' a pop music lyricist. Beyond this clickbait-esque statement, the main thrust of Bate's article is the rather obvious observation that there are parallels between Swift's 2010 song 'Love Story' and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and he goes on to speak of Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Charlotte Bronte, and William Wordsworth in a rather desperate attempt to 'compare her (favourably) to the giants of literature' (Bate, 2023). When it comes to actually looking at the song 'Love Story' rather than at its influences, inspirations, or allusions, Bate is only able to offer a rather brief review, rather than critique, saying as he does that 'Love Story, is an 'almost perfect pop song, with its catchy hook, driving rhythm and ingenious use of banjo and mandolin' (Bate, 2023). All the article succeeds in doing is to say that it is comparisons to writers outside the medium of song lyrics that makes Swift 'clever' (and yes, he does use this word). Such analyses ignore the way songwriters can utilise the medium of song to distil complex modern concerns into a few lines, all while attaching the words to simple, effective, and memorable vocal melodies (in Swift's case, see 'You need to calm down'), endear themselves to their fans by referring to their own life experiences to show vulnerability and self-deprecation (in Swift's case, see pretty much any song from 1989), or take on the personae of various characters to create a range of narrative threads (with regard to Swift, see the albums *Folklore* and *Evermore*). As Levitin says: 'the shape of lyrics is influenced by different things than the shape of poetry – the melody and rhythms of music provide an extrinsic framework, whereas poetry's structure is intrinsic' (Levitin, 2008: 23). Comparing the two, therefore, is not the compliment Bate intends it to be. As Leith notes, it does not elevate lyrics to call them poetry 'any more than it elevates an apple to call it an orange; nor does it give you a useful way of thinking about it academically' (Leith, 2007).

1.3. Defining the 'text'

If we are to analyse popular song seriously, we must define which components we consider to be the 'text'. Shuker says that 'to study popular music is to study popular culture. While this would appear to be a self-evident claim, much writing on popular music tends to treat it in isolation from the literature in the general field within which it is situated' (Shuker, 1997: 1). Although this is helpful in underlining the importance of drawing on a breadth of information to conduct a considered analysis of popular music, it is somewhat problematic in that it is offering the critic an excuse to look, as Hopps (2009: 9) says, 'through' rather than 'at' the songs themselves. Although the process of viewing lyrics as poetry is problematic as it isolates the words from the rest of the song and therefore gives us only a partial picture of the complete text, it is useful, at least, in making critics pay attention to the song's contents.

One way through this impasse is suggested by carefully defining what it is that is signalled by the

'text'. The section I wrote on critical approaches in *Writing Song Lyrics: Creative and Critical approaches* outlines the need to expand and explicitly define what we see as the 'text' when discussing and analysing popular music. 'In a novel', I suggest, 'we can see what the text is: whatever appears within the pages, perhaps including the front and back covers, blurb and author biography if applicable, but the text is defined as the words of the novel itself. Everything is contained in the words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters and so on that make up the pages of the novel. The same is true for a poem' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 3). With a song, however, there are other factors to consider. The song is a combination of music and lyric, both of which can be read as well as heard; and then there is the accompanying material that surrounds the delivery. Although we could certainly make the argument that visual elements can also have a significant impact on our reading of other formats (for example, the jackets of novels), album covers and the music contained within 'can be linked so intensely that it is hard to decide where one begins and the other ends' (Draper, 2008: 13). So, when we are defining the 'text', should the 'text' include cover art, information found inside the sleeve or booklet, including lyric transcriptions (for hard copy) or website (for download/streaming)? Should 'text' include music video? And to what extent should we allow these factors to influence our readings of the songs?' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 3). I decided that the minimum the 'text' could be is what comes 'out of speakers or headphones, without any other factors interfering with the experience' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 3).

From this starting point of defining the parameters we are working within when it comes to analysing popular song, it became possible to identify a relatively simple but highly suggestive dual framework of analysis, grounded in the experience of listening. In the *Writing Song Lyrics* book, I labelled these frameworks 'staying inside the song' and anything beyond this (including album art, music video, artist biography, and interviews) 'going *outside* the song'. This approach has enabled me to combine the two approaches to form a more detailed, thorough analysis of single songs, with the 'inside' technique allowing for different reading practices to be acknowledged, employed, and discussed, and the 'outside' technique allowing us to observe the impact external factors such as society, politics, and accompanying visual materials have on how we interpret the songs. In doing so, I bring together what have previously been two discrete approaches to analysis to formulate a new interdisciplinary and multimodal approach to the field. The following outlines how I have developed and refined these approaches in my published output.

2. Staying inside the song

2.1 The role of the listener

Although the process of viewing lyrics as poetry is problematic as it isolates the words from the rest of the song and therefore gives us only a partial picture of the complete text, it is useful, at least, in making critics pay attention to the song's contents. Hopps says that 'it is naïve to think that we can treat art as a sort of stethoscope [...] and read unproblematically backwards from text to the 'heart and soul' of the author' (Hopps, 2009: 85), and numerous critics do seem to get preoccupied with linking the songwriter and the lyrics as Hopps suggests. We see such methods of analysis in, to cite but a few examples, Timothy Taylor's chapter on the song 'Johnny B. Goode', where he focuses on the 'meanings' of the lyrics, and frequently debates which lyrics have an 'autobiographical nature' (Taylor, 2000: 167); in William Echard's book *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* where he links Young's portrayal of 'masculine-coded properties' in his lyrics back to his personal life (Echard, 2005: 19); and in Keith Clifton's chapter 'Queer hearing and the Madonna Queen' where he attaches the lyrics to 'Papa Don't Preach' to the singer's relationship with her father. Some artists (and/ or their

marketing teams) also push this 'lyrics as confession' idea when promoting their albums, obviously noting the benefits in allowing their fans to gain insight into their personal lives. Recently, for example, Rita Ora's social media content for her 2023 album *You and I* saw her enthusiastically describing the 'honesty' of her lyrics, which, she says function as 'a diary of the last few years' and detail her 'journey' (Mylrea, 2023). Although this would certainly fit with Wayne Booth's observation that 'true artists, we have been told again and again, take no thought of their readers. They write for themselves ... and let the reader be damned' (Booth 1961: 89), I argue in *Writing Song Lyrics* that 'never has this been less the case with an artist who knows their music is going to be heard by millions. Of course they are writing with the reader in mind, even if they're doing so subconsciously.' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 76) It is unlikely, then, that Rita Ora's assertions are accurate, and I believe anyway that any efforts in trying to figure out what is fact and what is fiction in song lyrics is time misspent.

What is more important, I suggest in *Writing Song Lyrics*, is to demonstrate that we can explore the notion of 'meaning' beyond what can be traced back to the author. As Levitin points out, 'because the meaning is not perfectly defined [anyway], each of us as listeners becomes a participant in the ongoing process of understanding the song.' (Levitin 2008: 31–32) This process allows for an in-depth study of the actual words of the songs, and the settings, characters, and plots they created, meaning that, like with my work on Leonard Cohen's 'Suzanne', any significance or meaning that we find comes from *inside* the song rather than *outside* it. This aligns with Roland Barthes' 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977: 142) where he draws the power of interpretation away from the producer of the text and gives it to the receiver and, later, Collini, who observes that 'a text, once it is separated from its utterer (as well as its utterer's intention) and from the concrete circumstances of its utterance (and by consequence from its intended referent) floats (so to speak) in the vacuum of a [...] range of possible interpretations' (Collini, 1992: 41).

As Hopps goes on to say (albeit only in relation to the lyrics of Morrissey), 'if Morrissey is a 'serious artist', and if a major element of that art is linguistic, we might reasonably expect his lyrics to repay this kind of attention' (Hopps, 2009: xii). In my own work, I expanded this to include *every* lyric, however banal or simple it may seem, or even if the artist was not considered 'serious'. Here, I repurpose existing theory from the academic study of English Literature, including (but not limited to) New Criticism, Structuralism, and Close Reading to yield further insight. Importantly, though, to avoid the issues I mentioned with regard to Ricks and his resituating of song lyrics as poetry, I use these techniques in order to draw meaning from the lyrics as *songs*, meaning that it is necessary to reinterpret and reformat the existing theory so that it applies to this format. In terms of Close Reading, McCaw's definition as 'the detailed and specific interpretation of a text through its language, considering the prevalent images, symbols, metaphors, and patterns it incorporates' (McCaw, 2008: 43) can be applied to song without any alterations, and I note in *Writing Song Lyrics* that we may benefit from such a technique when analysing songs with the defined character, story, and structure we may find in prose or poetry. In *Writing Song Lyrics* I focused on the Elvis Costello song 'Kinder Murder' as a case study for close reading analysis, using it as an example of what we may discover from a song using only what we find 'inside it'. These include, I suggest, the title, the significance of the opening line, perspective, use of tenses, idioms, slang, ambiguity and confusion, characters, setting, and the relationship between the lyrics and the sound of the song (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 60-66).

A song like 'Kinder Murder' provides rich analytical possibility, and we can see that just from looking at the song title and the opening line we are presented with a number of possibilities and questions, designed to entice us as a listener, pique our interest, and draw us into the song. In *Writing Song*

Lyrics, I draw upon a quote from Childs which discusses ‘whether the title is primarily denotative (as in descriptive) or connotative (that is, suggestive and allusive)’ while also considering ‘the range of meanings that a title could have because there may be more than one’ (Childs 2008: 107).

As I write in *Writing Song Lyrics*:

‘The title of ‘Kinder Murder’ could be described as connotative because it offers a play on words, with three possible, separate interpretations of the word kinder, none of which are definitive:

1. Kinder: showing the quality of benevolence. ‘Kinder Murder’ taken literally would suggest killing someone in order to be generous or merciful. The word kinder also suggests we need something to compare it to; it begs the question ‘Kinder than what?’ and needs us to fill in the blank in the sentence ‘This murder is kinder than . . .’ The phrase is a very odd juxtaposition between two dissimilar images.
2. Kinder: phonetically the same as kinda as in ‘sort of’ or ‘type of’ (this interpretation only really applies if we’re just listening to the song without seeing its title or lyrical transcript, as it’s [sic] clearly not written that way. This interpretation would suggest that the events in the song’s narrative all amount to a kind of murder, perhaps referring to the characters themselves or the decline of society.
3. Kinder: German for ‘children’. This interpretation, with the song title now being ‘Children Murder’, would fit the line ‘The child went missing and the photo fit his face’, but its pronunciation involves a different vowel sound on the ‘i’ sound to what Costello sings.

A title like this creates intrigue in a listener and gets us interested before we’ve [sic] even heard a single note’ (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 60-61) meaning that we have formed a relationship with the song (whatever that may be) in a similar way we might react to the title of a book or poem.

I then go on to explore the significance of the opening line, again using a quote from Childs to frame the discussion, where he states that the ‘first line or sentence . . . serves as a prelude to the rest of the text’ (Childs 2008: 108) and suggests that we ask ourselves: ‘Does it orient you by giving information? Does it throw you into the narrative as though you had entered a story in the middle?’ (Childs 2008: 108).

I write that:

‘Our first line in ‘Kinder Murder’ is ‘Here in the bar, the boys like to have fun’. The use of the word here gives us a location to inhabit and places us directly in the action, allowing us to be there in the bar, watching ‘the boys’. Depending on how we read the song, this opening line either starts the linear narrative of the story or serves as a present-day narrative from which we branch off into flashback, turning it into the final action in the song’s timeline as it is the only event in the present, meaning it is the most recent. The use of the word bar in the same sentence as boys means we can not apply the most common meaning (‘young males’) and must therefore look upon it as a group of young men. So, the title and the first line are very allusive and ask more questions than they answer (what is a ‘kinder murder?’; ‘where’s the bar?’ ‘who are the boys?’), serving as ‘lyrical hooks’ for the listener and mirroring the opening of the first page of a novel, whose job it is to draw the reader in to the rest of the work’ (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 61-62). In this way, the songwriter is using their craft to have as much impact as possible on the listener. In the next section, I will look at this in more

detail, explaining how we can use rhetorical analysis to explore how songwriters can use their lyrics to inspire, persuade, motivate, and achieve an emotional connection with their listeners.

2.2. Lyrics and the art of persuasion

In his 2015 autobiography *Unfaithful Music and Disappearing Ink*, Elvis Costello asks the rhetorical question: ‘can a mere song change people’s minds? I doubt that it is so, but a song can infiltrate your heart and the heart may change your mind’ (Costello, 2015: 393).

I write in my monograph *Viva Hate* that ‘although originally envisioned by Aristotle to analyse political speech, rhetoric has been a key way of analysing the written word ever since and can be applied to any form of oration, be that via the spoken word, written word, or sung word. The rhetoric of song lyrics can therefore be analysed in the same way we might analyse a political speech, or a piece of print media’ (Fosbraey, 2022a: 45). Leith notes that ‘Rhetoric is, as simply defined as possible, the art of persuasion: the attempt by one human being to influence another in words’ (Leith 2012: 1), and as songs have been used to persuade the listener of various things over the years – not least persuading them to buy, download, or stream the track in the first place – they deserve to be analysed in this way, and in detail. My own work on the subject has examined the ways in which a variety of songwriters working in a variety of eras have used rhetoric as a way to express their viewpoints on a series of important and controversial topics from Billie Holiday’s 1939 version of ‘Strange Fruit’ whose lyrics were ‘designed to instil horror and disgust in the listener [...and urged] them to act’ (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 87) through to Eminem’s 2020 track ‘Darkness’ which is a ‘quest to prevent gun crime in America’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 38).

I write in *Viva Hate* that ‘as a tool of communication, pop music is one of the best there is, and artists have been capitalising on it for decades (and will for decades to come, no doubt). This is something that ‘rulers have understood throughout history and across cultures’ (Dillane et al., 2018: ix), with music being used at political rallies, or election campaigns (see New Labour’s ‘Things Can Only Get Better’), and, of course, to protest.’ (Fosbraey, 2022a: 47). Song also has the benefit of immediacy (or, at least, near-immediacy) in getting across its message, meaning it has the opportunity to respond to current affairs while they are still current, for example Neil Young’s ‘Ohio’, a ‘shocked response to the shooting of four student protestors at Kent State University’ which was ‘recorded and rush-released within a month’ after the event (Inglis, 2003: 31 & 92). Song also has the potential to reach enormous audiences with its messages, and in *Viva Hate*, I point to Taylor Swift’s 2019 music video for ‘You Need to Calm Down’, a song which protested homophobia and sexism, and garnered tens of millions of hits in the days after its release (with the current number standing at over 308 million) as well as actively encouraging viewers to sign a change.org petition in support of The Equality Act. It is hard to imagine any other artistic format being able to create such action, and at such speed. In *Viva Hate*, I reflect on the importance of rhetoric when it comes to analysing song lyrics by dedicating 40 pages to rhetorical analysis, beginning with an exploration of how songs in the Thatcher era of British politics persuaded us to dislike a person or group of people, and then moving on to ‘hate in the golden age of hip-hop’ where I discuss how groups like NWA and Public Enemy rallied against police brutality and racism and attempted to persuade the listeners of their viewpoints. As Horner and Swiss note, these two acts owed a lot of their success to this, as it ‘resonated with people worldwide [...with] the music [becoming] a vehicle through which the oppressed recognize[d] each other and become more aware of their subordination’. (Horner & Swiss, 1999: 61) In *Reading Eminem*, I apply rhetorical analysis to Eminem’s lyrics via the sub-

sections ‘authenticity and identity’; ‘getting a reaction’; ‘emotions’; ‘the protest song’; and ‘humour’, where I explore how Eminem’s lyrics work within the ‘deliberative, forensic, and epideictic divisions of oratory’ (Aristotle 1995: 2159) as well as the three fundamental modes of persuasion: pathos, ethos, and logos. I also apply the six parts of a speech in classical rhetoric that McCloskey et al. identify as: ‘The Exordium (an appeal to ethos, that is the character worthy of belief), the Narration (presenting the facts of the case), the Division (presenting what is to be proven), the Proof (the argument...), the Refutation (dealing with objection...), and the swelling crescendo of the Peroration (McCloskey et al. 1994: xv).

Between pages 150 and 154 of *Reading Eminem* I demonstrate how these six parts can provide some useful information about Eminem’s writing technique in the song ‘White America’. Among other things, I discuss how Eminem uses his introduction to establish the exordium, using the word ‘we’ during the first line, a pronoun ‘notorious for being vague yet grouping people in ways suitable to message producers’ (Way, 2017: 20) to suggest that whatever comes next is a collective concern, not just his alone, and using the word ‘broke’ instead of ‘broken’ in the line ‘The women and men who have broke their necks for the freedom of speech’. This may seem like a small thing, but, I note, ‘with this simple grammatical error, saying ‘broke’ instead of the correct ‘broken’ situates Eminem as someone who is just an ordinary man, a man that speaks in a common language’. (Fosbraey, 2022b: 151) In the two words ‘we’ and ‘broke, Eminem establishes himself as an everyman we can relate to, and someone who is speaking *for* us, both of which are crucial to us forming a relationship with him. Once Eminem has us on side, we are more likely to be persuaded by what he has to say during the rest of the song, however controversial its content. Reading songs in this way allows us to attach importance to the language of the lyrics and is a natural extension of the close reading technique used earlier.

Remaining ‘inside’ the song, this next section will discuss how my work has addressed narrative techniques within lyrics.

2.3. Storytelling

In his paper ‘Narrative, Interpretation, and the Popular Song’ Keith Negus observes that ‘the popular song - one of the most pervasive narrative forms that people encounter in their daily lives - has been almost entirely ignored in the vast literature on narrative [...with] theories of narrative [...] rarely been foregrounded in the study of popular songs’ (Negus, 2012: 368). Concerning hip-hop, Edwards says that ‘most stories in [...the genre] follow a pattern similar to traditional stories in books, movies, and TV series [...with] characters, settings, and a structured plot - a beginning, a middle, and an end’ (Edwards, 2009: 35), and this is particularly evident in Eminem’s body of work, where he employs a variety of different characters, settings, and narrative scenarios. Eminem even draws upon the epistolary format in the song ‘Stan’ which ‘stretches the narrative possibilities of rap’ (Taylor, 2019) via a series of letters and recordings from the titular character, then creates a sequel for it 13 years later via ‘Bad Guy’, described by Spin Magazine as ‘a seven-minute Charlie Kaufman movie’ (Weingarten, 2013). Both of these songs also embellish the narrative by adding a series of sound effects (like the sounds of thunder, scratching pencils, screeching tyres, tape being unravelled), techniques used frequently in radio to set the scene and describe something succinctly and quickly, ‘using airtime economically because it can release precious seconds for something else’. (Starkey, 2004: 192)

With my analysis of Eminem's songs in *Reading Eminem* I acknowledge the importance of storytelling to his output by dedicating an entire section to it, applying the 'theories of narrative' Negus says are often overlooked in the analysis of popular songs and exploring the different ways he uses narrative. I begin the 'Eminem and Story' section by looking at how song lyrics differ from other media when it comes to narrative and story (other than the obvious, musical elements). Levitin observes that one characteristic 'compared to ordinary speech or writing, is compression of meaning. Meaning tends to be densely packed, conveyed in fewer words that we would normally use in conversation or prose (Levitin, 2008: 26). I write that to compress in such a way 'requires an editing of material to make it fit into a digestible timeframe and recognisable structure (particularly if it is being aimed at a mass audience), and the art of brevity, the boiling down of complex themes and arguments into the three-minute pop song is a test of skill' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 27) which, as Webb says, makes good lyricists 'the Swiss watchmakers of music and literature'. (Webb, 1998: 38) The brevity of the lyrical format means that lyricists employ a number of 'shortcuts' in order to make the most of the words they *do* have available to them, and in Eminem's case, he often employs what I define as 'familiar signs', which I identify as generic settings; reference to pop culture figures (both real and fictional); historical and cultural events; and references to his own previous work. As I write: 'Each of these techniques allows quicker access to the settings, narratives, backdrops, and characters Eminem is putting forward. We don't need (and don't have time) to gradually enter the text of a song like we might with a novel or a film: interaction must be instant, and all surplus material cut. Even rhymes function as 'familiar signs' here, working 'by establishing a habit of expectation in listeners' minds, conditioning them to identify patterns of sound, to connect words the mind instantly recognizes as related yet distinct' (Bradley, 2009: 49) and like most hip-hop songs, Eminem uses a multitude of rhyme types and sequences in every song' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 28).

The section then moves to explore the different formats in which Eminem tells his stories, a few of which I will discuss as part of this submission.

Allen observes that 'meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations' (Allen, 2000: 1), and although this was written in reference to Intertextuality in literature, it is a useful way of highlighting how Eminem links different narratives together to form a larger story. One of the ways in which he does this is via the album format, and although in his 2015 book *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*, Fernando Orejuela says that modern music fans 'question the rationale behind purchasing an entire album as opposed to just a couple of singles that are standouts or hits', to reject the format means they miss 'the holistic intention of the artist, the comprehensive story of a particular time and place... It's as if we crop the singular image of the creation of Adam to represent the whole narrative of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco panels: iconic representation, perhaps, but not enough' (Orejuela, 2015: xii). This is, perhaps, most relevant when considering the concept album, and although Eminem has never made an album which would technically be classified as one, his 2009 release *Relapse* is at least conceptual in that it deals with the theme of addiction throughout. As such, I analyse the album as a single entity, looking at the songs as if they were scenes in a film fitting together to form an overarching narrative. And it *does* work as a single story, even if that story is an 'antiplot' narrative which 'skips helter-skelter through time or so blurs temporal continuity that an audience cannot sort out what happens before and after what is told in nonlinear time,' (McKee, 1999: 45) and uses Inconsistent Realities which 'mix modes of interaction so that the story's episodes jump inconsistently from one "reality" to another to create a sense of absurdity' (McKee, 1999: 54). But this technique fits well with the subject matter and mirrors Eminem's mental state in the lyrics as he lurches from one bizarre drug-fuelled scenario to another.

I also observe that Eminem uses skits to weave together continued narrative threads, in particular the ones involving the fictionalised versions of Steve Berman (real-life CEO of Interscope records) and Mathers himself, which run from 1999's *The Slim Shady LP* all the way to 2018's *Kamikaze*, skipping *Recovery* and *Revival* along the way' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 30). Producer Prince Paul observes that one of the benefits of skits are to give the listener 'more of a sense of [...the artist's] personality and feel a little closer to them' (Rubin & Aaron, 1999: 95), and Eminem tends to use the majority of his skits in this way, 'allowing the listener the experience of almost eavesdropping in on various episodes and getting fly on the wall/ behind the scenes access to his life' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 30). I note that Eminem's skits also often function as comic interludes, frequently sandwiched between two tracks with dark and/ or violent content, and can be analysed as individual tracks in isolation as we would any other song. I examine 'Steve Berman' on *The Eminem Show*, which 'even as a 33 second audio clip, [...] carries with it a complete narrative [...and what] Booker would define as an 'Overcoming the Monster' story (Booker, 2004: 21-29), with Eminem cast in the role of underdog hero to Berman's Corporate Monster' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 36). The skit also satisfies what McKee defines as a 'Classical Design' structure (McKee, 1999: 45), with 'Causality' arising from Berman's words leading Eminem to shoot him; a 'Closed Ending' with Berman shot and presumably dying; told in 'Linear Time' (the 33 second episode moves linearly from beginning to end without any jumps); with an 'External Conflict' (Eminem vs Berman); 'Single Protagonist' (Eminem); 'Consistent Reality' (it all happens in the reality of the story); and an 'Active Protagonist' (Eminem)' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 36).

Finally, I take Allen's 'textual relations' theory as far as possible, to put forward a theory that we are able to view Eminem's entire career lyrical output in terms of one single narrative, 'ranging from him being a couple of months old in 'Cleanin' out my Closet' to him in the present day via *Music to be Murdered by Side B*, [...where he details] how he's dealing with Covid 19'. (Fosbraey, 2022b: 31) In order to analyse how the different events in his lyrical output form a linear storyline, I draw upon a classic three act structure of story, as defined by Yorke (2014) to demonstrate a visible shift from Inciting Incident (which I suggest is Mathers wanting to escape poverty and provide a better life for his daughter), through to Resolution (where Eminem overcomes the addiction he faced during the Crisis phase of the story but remains an addict in recovery).

As well as Eminem deploying definable narrative structures, he also uses a number of narrative techniques in his lyrics, including what McQuillan identifies as 'dialogic narrative: a polyphonic narrative composed of the interaction of several voices none of which is superior to, or privileged above, any other (in the song 'Guilty Conscience'); hypodiegetic narrative: a narrative embedded within another narrative (in the song 'Bad Guy'), and satellite: A minor plot event not logically essential to the narrative action' (in the D12 song 'My Band') (McQuillan, 2000: 315- 328).

Eminem also uses the choruses in his songs as a way to bring in different voices and perspectives from guest artists in *dialogic* narratives where 'the voice of the narrator [Eminem's] is not taken as the single point of authority in the narrative but as one contribution to knowledge among others'. (McQuillan, 2000: 317) In songs like 'Love the Way You Lie', for example, the guest artist's voice (Rihanna's in this case) offers up their own opinion within the narrative and functions independently as a genuinely different perspective to the events Eminem details through his narration. In most choruses, however, Eminem inhabits the voices of his guest artists, getting them to speak *for* him. I observe on page 48 that, in 'an inaccurate review of the song 'Headlights', Johnson of the *NME* says that 'In the final verse, he [Eminem] discusses mortality, saying that should the plane crash he was OK. "I am not afraid to die," he raps'. (Johnson 2013) Eminem does not rap this, Nate Reuss

sings it, but, unintentionally, the reviewer does get to the nub of the matter, for even though the words are not coming out of his mouth, this *is* still Eminem's voice: he is just using Reuss to say the words for him. We can see the set-up for this in the final verse, where Eminem raps 'I wrote this on the jet', and in the final chorus, Nate Reuss sings 'If the plane goes down' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 48).

3. Going outside

So far I have discussed the benefits of focussing our attentions only on what is contained within the text, and while such analysis is vital to my suggested way of reading popular song, there is also much to be gained from continuing our research to some elements beyond this. Indeed, some songs, which perhaps are not as narrative or language-driven, require such an approach in order to show us anything meaningful. This section will discuss how my work has looked at what songs can offer us in terms of cultural significance, the difference between real events and their lyrical representations, how the format we listen to music in influences our readings, and to what extent visual materials impact upon our relationships with songs.

3.1. Cultural significance

With regard to Nicki Minaj's 2013 song 'Anaconda', I write in *Writing Song Lyrics* that 'more significance comes when we begin to look outside the lyrics and consider their place in the wider world of pop music' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 68). Stephen Greenblatt (1994: 226) suggests a series of questions be asked in order to look at the types of cultural commentary present in texts, and with my suggestion that *song* be considered as a text, provides a useful exercise in demonstrating how 'Anaconda' benefits from applying such cultural analysis. Greenblatt asks us to consider:

1. What kinds of behaviour, what models of practice [...] this work seem to enforce
2. Why might readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling
3. [Whether there are...] differences between my values and the values implicit in the work I am reading
4. Upon what social understandings [...] the work depend[s]
5. Whose freedom of thought or movement might be constrained implicitly or explicitly by this work
6. What [...] the larger social structures with which these particular acts of praise or blame [...] might be connected?' (Greenblatt, 1994: 226)

Staying 'inside' the song when answering these questions functions only in offering 'a fairly basic first-person narrative from a narrator [...] who speaks about past relationships, drug taking, money, and violence' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 66), but when moving outside, we are presented with important information that would not be accessible were we to stay inside. We are able to, for example, observe that large sections of the song are sampled from Sir Mix-a-lot's 'Baby Got Back', discuss the subsequent implications of a female artist using such samples, or 'consider the video's impact on the lyrics – a video which is, arguably, more famous/infamous than the song itself.'

(Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 68) The sample and the video allow us to form an analysis that the song functions as a feminist statement about the historic objectification (and vilification) of black women's body shapes and that the female body can be used as its owner sees fit, without the validation of the male gaze, a reading that certainly is not possible when considering just the music and lyrics of the song. Moving outside the song in this way opens up the discussion (and, indeed, analysis) to these wider themes, and I expand upon this in my chapter 'Girl Power?' in *Viva Hate* where I suggest that our appearance-obsessed culture extends to music. This results in a situation where, as McCallum and Dzidic suggest '...an artist's image and body seem to be more important commodities than the music they write and perform' (McCallum and Dzidic, 2019: 405). Pointing to Andrea Dworkin's 1974 quote that: 'In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered [...] from head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body is subject to modification, alteration' (Dworkin, 1974: 112). I observe that nearly 50 years later, things have only become more extreme, with Nicki Minaj herself feeling the need to undergo body augmentation surgery due to feeling 'insecure' because of comments made by label boss Lil Wayne. (Sanders, 2022). I note that this then has a knock-on effect upon women in general via the following cycle:

'1. Minaj is coerced into getting body augmentation by a man.

2. In turn, she feeds this male idea of 'ideal' body shape into her lyrics, e.g. in ASAP Ferg's 'Plain Jane (remix)' where she raps: 'My body shaped like Jeannie, booty dreamy, waist is teeny', or in 'I'm Out', 'Flawless', 'Anaconda', 'Throw some mo', 'Fefe', or 'Monster' where she similarly describes her big bum, small waist and large boobs body type, going as far as rubbishing other women who haven't got the same.

3. This then influences other women, with Bursztynsky noting in 2019 that: 'buttocks augmentations [...] have more than doubled since [2013]' (Bursztynsky, 2019)' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 14-15).

In order to address Greenblatt's assertion that we need to consider what social understandings the work depend upon it is important to examine the genre Minaj is working in, and its history of behavioural expectations. I note in *Writing Song Lyrics* that 'such is the importance attached to the music video of 'Anaconda' that it is almost impossible to find any kind of review/analysis of the song that ignores it' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 68), but the video, functioning as what Railton and Watson define as an 'Art Music Video' which 'operates as a site of creative expression which variously works as an aesthetic complement to the song or vies with it for artistic consideration' (Railton and Watson, 2011: 51-52) does distract us from the fact that Minaj's lyrics align themselves with the subgenre 'gangsta rap', focusing as they do on 'the violence, criminality, sexual deviance, and misogyny synonymous with the 'gangsta life'' (Rose, 2008: 3). So, despite the fact that 'Anaconda' succeeds in 'co-opting a canonized [sic] hip-hop tune concerning the triumph of the male gaze and inverting it into a declaration of femme supremacy' (Time Out editors and Amy Plitt, 2018), it is also working within the limitations of subject matter the genre conventions allow.

I conclude my chapter 'Featuring... Nicki Minaj' by saying that much of Minaj's own work 'appears to endorse misogynistic, objectifying, and often violent utterances' (Fosbraey, 2021: 49-50) but the hip-hop genre itself is saturated with these themes (Oware, 2018: 3) so, the simple fact that she is working within a genre that is so male-dominated is testament to her strength and importance as female artist, adding a level of complexity that goes far beyond lyrical content. Leith notes that 'Rap is... a constant discussion of what the rapper is about to do, his credentials for doing it, 'shout-outs'

to the crew with whom he intends to do it and ‘disses’ to members of enemy crews who propose trying to prevent him’ (Leith, 2012: 86), and this raises two points: 1. The use of male pronouns shows that even critics are helpless to see hip-hop as anything other than male-owned, and 2. If women are to gatecrash this world, they need to act in the same way as the men who occupy it in order to appear ‘authentic’, something Armstrong identifies as being ‘essential for an artist working in the hip-hop genre (Armstrong, 2004: 336) .As I note in *Reading Eminem*, ‘a bona-fide ‘authentic’ hip-hop artist will [also] be self-made and will have been through a number of hardships before arriving at fame and fortune’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 123), and Minaj was quick to establish this soon after arriving on the mainstream scene, detailing her ‘poor childhood’ in an interview with NME in 2012 (NME, 2012).

3.2 Biography

Another artist to detail such hardships in his work was Eminem, starting with 1996 (limited release) debut *Infinite*, then continuing to refer to his poor upbringing throughout his recording career to date. As a white rapper operating in a predominantly black genre, Eminem faced a similar ‘outsider’ situation to Nicki Minaj, who was operating as a female artist in a predominantly male genre. As it was for Minaj, it was important for Eminem, especially early on in his career, to fit in with genre conventions. This included, but was not limited to, the profane language he used, which aligned itself with ‘hip hop’s street language’ (Mesiti, 1993: 219) as well as the ‘attendant violence, criminality, sexual “deviance,” and misogyny’ synonymous with the ‘gangsta life’ (Rose, 2008: 3). What is important to note with Eminem (and any artist for that matter), is that just because they are speaking about a lifestyle in their lyrics that is supposedly representing their true selves, it does not mean they’re living actually living it. Foucault writes ‘everyone knows that, in a novel offered as a narrator’s account, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly to the writer or to the moment in which he writes but, rather, to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work’ (Foucault, 1999: 215) but this distancing of author from narrator does not seem to carry over into song. When teaching, I point to the ‘Becky with the good hair’ controversy to illustrate this point, referring to the 2016 Beyonce song ‘Sorry’ which included the line ‘He only want me when I’m not there/He better call Becky with the good hair’ and led to numerous newspapers, magazines, and websites all running stories that ‘sought to discover the identity of the ‘Becky’ character’ (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 9), seemingly ignoring the fact that she may just be an invented character in a fictional song. Görey suggests that ‘as a first step, we must assume that there is an identifiable distinction between real events and their narrative representations’ (Görey, 2017: 6) but, particularly with regard to song, this is fighting the natural instinct of the listener to form ‘a common associational linkage suggested by the voice [which] sends us towards the person and the biography of the singer’. (Bennett, et al. 2006: 13) ‘The more we carry out such searches for ‘clues’ or ‘evidence’, the more we move away from the content of the lyrics themselves and the characters contained within them, and the more we come to believe that the lyrics are simply straight factual reportage of the real-life events outside them’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 58).

As I note about biographical information in my 2015 journal article ‘Disrupting Status Quo: Pedagogical Approaches to Song Lyrics’, ‘the desire to discover more about an artist is nothing new, of course, with fan clubs and band newsletters having been around for decades, but this kind of instant access to biography, and the ease with which it can be obtained is relatively new . . . [and] knowing what they look like, how they speak, how they interact with their fans, even elements of

their personal lives becomes part of the listening experience (Fosbraey 2015: 59–60). I write in *Writing Song Lyrics* about how I always start my Level 5 lyric writing classes with the Beatles song ‘Yesterday’ to demonstrate how our knowledge of the artists themselves can affect the way we receive a song. Playing, first of all, an instrumental version of ‘Yesterday’ to explore how melody alone can achieve an emotional response (the reaction usually sees the students describing it in variations of the term ‘bittersweet’, mixing ‘sad’ and ‘happy’ emotions), I then play a version of the song where I got a singer friend of mine to use the draft lyrics Paul McCartney initially attached to the melody, with its working title ‘Scrambled Eggs’. This demonstrates how lyrics can influence our reactions to a melody, as many of the students are distracted by the nonsensical words, losing any of their initial reactions to the melody alone. Next, I play the Beatles’ version as it appeared on the *Help* album in the UK, and as a single release in the US. I note in *Writing Song Lyrics* that I put at least part of the success of the song down to ‘the sheer accessibility of the lyrics [...which are] generic enough to be applied to most people’s lives if they’ve experienced any kind of loss, heartbreak, or setback. It doesn’t matter if it’s not the kind of scenario McCartney was thinking of when he wrote it; it’s open to the listener to apply their own experience and thus their own emotion.’ (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 71-72) Finally, I give the class some information about McCartney’s relationship with the lyrics where a number of writers have put forward the theory that the song focuses on the death of his mother. Although McCartney himself has denied doing this consciously, for the purposes of the exercise it is irrelevant, as the idea has now been put into the students’ heads, and ‘this research, uncovering as it does McCartney’s personal experience with loss, make us believe what he’s saying (they’re not just empty words now; they have significance and gravitas), and, as we are now more invested in the singer of the song, our emotional attachment lifts again, as we now feel emotion for McCartney, *and* for ourselves with our own thoughts on loss, heartbreak, or remorse now established’ (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: 72). And, if we are listening to songs by our favourite artists, we are naturally drawn to obtaining the information that connects us with their lyrics in this way.

With Eminem, an artist who keeps his private life from the public glare, shuns social media and does not engage in many interviews with the media, the temptation for fans and critics alike is to use his lyrics as the primary source to get that personal information they seek. Eminem complains about such behaviour as ‘overanalyzing’ (Eminem, 2000), but it is actually a classic case of *underanalysing*, where the work itself is largely ignored, used only as a conduit to the author. This means that a number of critics have busied themselves with trying to figure out an answer to the question: ‘who is Eminem, who is Marshall, who is Slim Shady?’ I respond to this in *Reading Eminem*, suggesting that they are all characters in the same fashion as David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, Halloween Jack and The Think White Duke, but with Eminem, he does his ‘dressing up’ internally through his lyrics, ‘editing himself into different characters and giving them different voices in record, despite them looking the same in his album artwork, publicity shots, and music videos. Less obviously, perhaps, Marshall Mathers the songwriter has also invented Marshall Mathers the character for his lyrics, a character who should be looked upon as fictitious as Slim Shady and Eminem’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 86-87). More interesting to me, and what I explore in some depth in *Reading Eminem*, is ‘what Eminem does with these characters, how he uses them to sit within a narrative, to connect with the listener, and to function in different ways in order to elicit different reactions’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 54-55).

Instead of ignoring those who attach his lyrics to his person, Marshall Mathers (the songwriter, rather than the character in Eminem’s songs) seizes upon it and uses it to play with his audience. He does this primarily through his lyrics, by alternately guessing what they think of him (see ‘Hailey’s

Song’); directly questioning the power an artist is perceived to have over a listener (see ‘Sing for the Moment’); and inviting criticism by flouting his position as a ‘role model’ and telling the listener to act in a certain, irresponsible way (see ‘Role Model’). (Fosbraey, 2015: 21) But Mathers also does it via his *annotations* on his lyrics via the ‘Genius’ website, a platform which ‘celebrates [...] the lyrics, the stories behind the songs, and the creative connections that meaningfully drive culture’ (Genius, 2022), and is usually a space for fans to put forward their own interpretations about what songs ‘mean’. On the site, Mathers writes a comment in response to the ‘Shady XV’ lyric: ‘Pathological liar, oh, why am I such an asshole’ (2014), saying ‘...or am I though?’ (Genius, 2016a), and in a comment in response to ‘Criminal’ and the lyrics: ‘The mother did drugs, hard liquor, cigarettes and speed’ (Eminem, 2000f) he said: ‘I meant that literally. My mom would LITERALLY grind up DVD’s [sic] of the movie “Speed” & snort it’ (Genius, 2016b).

3.3. How we listen

In my research I also stress the importance that *how* we receive music has an impact on us, and, indeed, the additional information this may (or may not) bring. How we listen to music in 2023, for example, can vary significantly from how we could listen back when hard copy formats, live shows, and radio were the only means of receiving songs. I write in *Viva Hate* that ‘those growing up with streams will likely have their own ways of bonding with their music, but, for me, I’m yet to form any true or lasting relationship with an album that I haven’t actually held in my hands.’ (Fosbraey, 2022a: 87) In their book *Music and Emotion*, Juslin and Sloboda suggest such behaviours are firmly linked to nostalgia, saying that music is ‘a very powerful cue in bringing emotional experiences from memory back into awareness’ (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001: 369), and duChemin agrees, saying that ‘nostalgia is powerful, and images that harness that nostalgia are among the most compelling and universal images’ (duChemin, 2009: 120). If we are bringing the weight of nostalgia to our listening experiences, then, we are bringing a subjectivity that may overrule any new impressions of the music our brains are trying to conjure up.

In *Reading Eminem* I argue that ‘the way we buy and digest music today invariably leads to us forming judgments based on the opinions of others before we’ve heard a note of the music’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 9), due firstly to the ease with which we can access reviews from fellow listeners (5,649 ratings and comments for Eminem’s *Revival* album on Amazon, I note, and over 150 individual reviews via a google search), but also to websites’ own ‘product descriptions’ or ratings. I do concede that there was a variation of this when hard copy music reigned supreme, with reviews in the music magazines and newspapers readily accessible, but such reviews were significantly fewer, and, one would hope ‘all conducted having given the album a fair run and (hopefully) a considered and fair assessment’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 9). Some streaming sites also offer an overview of albums when listeners go to play them, with Apple Music offering this above the play button for Eminem’s *Revival*: ‘The divide between Eminem, lyrical savant and god of rap, and Slim Shady, a trigger-happy psychopath, has always been difficult to bridge. It’s harder to hear shock-value sucker punches about domestic violence and disability—least of all because they risk discrediting the genuinely powerful moments that Eminem is so uniquely capable of’ (Apple Music). Listening to the album after digesting this versus going to a shop, buying the hard copy, then going home to listen to the music without any other information will inevitably lead to two very different listening experiences. Sites like Genius Lyrics/ Songfacts go even deeper, not just passing general opinion on albums and songs but offering insights into the ‘meanings’ of individual lyrics. Such sites may not carry any academic weight, but for a music fan who is just browsing for information on the ‘meaning’ behind a

song, they are extremely significant, as they will be something a listener comes across very early in a web search and will likely be the most widely read interpretations. So, whatever interpretation of the song is contained within such sites, it becomes a significant reading for the listener, influencing any opinion of their own, whether consciously or unconsciously.

3.4 Album Art

'Hard copy' music also brings with it an influence beyond the music itself. I observe in *Viva Hate* that 'although an album is essentially a musical medium, it is also a multimodal product' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 58-59), and if we are receiving it in a physical medium, we are exposed to non-music elements such as the album cover artwork, any other artwork (including booklets, back covers, and spines), the lyric transcripts (if included), acknowledgments, credits, record label information, and copyright and publishing details. As we are a visual people, and, as Berger notes, 'Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak' (Berger, 1972: 7) the importance of such factors must not be overlooked when thinking about the overall listening experience.

I write in *Viva Hate* that 'as well as considering what album covers mean to us personally, they can also be analysed in the same way that we might analyse a piece of text, looking for symbols, messages, and meanings.' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 59) Drawing upon Roland Barthes' 'Rhetoric of the Image' which presents us with a strategy on how to 'read' a photograph or picture in order to uncover its 'message' (Barthes, 1977: 36), I conducted a detailed analysis of the artwork in NWA's *Straight Outta Compton*, 'approaching it [...] as if we were walking into a record store in 1988 and picking it up for the first time' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 59). This requires us to pay close attention to whatever is available to us visually 'decode' it, and in the case of *Straight Outta Compton* it means we are able to use the front and back cover images, album title, the group name, song titles, and a 'parental advisory explicit content' label to uncover what Barthes calls the 'three messages', which are 'a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message' (Barthes, 1977: 36). With regard to the linguistic message Barthes says its function is to "'anchor" the spectrum of possible meanings, by selecting some interpretations and securing the intended meaning' (Mocini, 2005: 153) and that 'the linguistic level fixes the floating chain of signifiers in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs'. (Barthes 1964: 37) Berger goes even further in stressing the importance of any words that appear with the images, saying that 'the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words' (Berger, 2013: 66).

In my analysis, as well as the aforementioned album title, group name, song titles, and 'parental advisory explicit content' sticker, we also have visible text 'via Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and MC Ren, who all wear Los Angeles Raiders baseball caps, and DJ Yella, who wears an LA Lakers jacket' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 62). This may seem like a small matter, but actually offers a significant social commentary. As I write: 'The Los Angeles Raiders were based in Oakland at the time, a city which had a 46.9% black population in 1980 and 43.9% in 1990 (compared with Los Angeles itself which showed figures of 17% in 1980 and 14% in 1990). In the LA Raiders, N.W.A. had 'found a kindred spirit' (Alipour, 2010). Says Ice Cube: 'we're the Raiders. We're pirates, which was our attitude [...] They moved to our backyard [...] They moved the baddest team with the baddest attitude into one of the baddest cities in America. It convinced the world that this kind of LA really exists' (Alipour, 2010). They were also 'the team NFL fans loved to hate' (Caldwell, 2021), presenting an underdog, 'us against the world' aesthetic that mirrored that of N.W.A themselves. Just this small linguistic message, then, gives us access to something much broader' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 62).

Overall, ‘the group name, album title, parental advisory sticker, LA Raiders text on the baseball caps, and song titles [...] work with the images to lead us to the following: A group of men from a neighbourhood with a large black population who have been racially discriminated against, possibly for their whole lives, and subjected to ‘racial profiling and police brutality’ (Oware, 2018: 3), decide to fight back at the forces who have abused them. Now in the position of complete power, they subvert the violence and hatred they have faced, and turn it on the perpetrator, becoming the haters, rather than the hated’ (Fosbraey, 2022a: 66). And all of this without reading a single lyric or hearing a single note of music.

Album art can also function as a way to enhance the songs’ storytelling, and in the sub-chapter ‘Album art: the CD booklet and storytelling’ in *Reading Eminem* I explore how on studio albums *The Eminem Show* and *Encore*, and the Greatest Hits collection *Curtain Call*, Eminem uses ‘the CD booklet to tell visual stories, almost like the comics he loved so much as a child’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 62), creating a three-part narrative through image alone. *The Eminem Show*’s artwork ‘sets up a story whereby Eminem feels his every move is scrutinised and his life has become a ‘show’. *Encore* continues this, with Eminem disillusioned so much by this that he kills his audience (and, importantly, shoots straight at the camera killing the gaze of the audience outside the theatre), then kills himself. *Curtain Call* then completes this visual narrative [...with its] front cover [...aping] the cover of [*Encore* with a] besuited Eminem on a stage’, but with the booklet working as a retrospective of the roles the ‘dead’ Eminem has played in his lyrics, showing him alternatively as ‘the ‘ordinary’ person’; ‘the sex symbol’; ‘the victim’, ‘the tortured artist’; and as the ‘dangerous’ (Fosbraey, 2022b: 63).

3.5. Music video

Since the first music video aired on MTV in 1981 with ‘the appropriately themed song’ ‘Video Killed The Radio Star’, the format has been ‘beneficial to developing artists’ careers and promoting their music’ (Hull et.al, 2011: 270), and in 1992 ‘MTV began listing directors with the artist and song credits, reflecting the fact that music videos had increasingly become an artistic medium’ (Eiss, 2013: 329). Music and music video are now so interlinked that it is often hard to imagine one existing without the other, and this was perhaps acknowledged in 2018 when it was announced that Youtube views would count towards the UK singles chart (Official Charts Company, 2018). I note in *Writing Song Lyrics* that ‘there have [even] been numerous instances where a video has either led to the success of a song, or become MORE successful’ (Fosbraey and Melrose, 2018: 69), so I suggest that in instances where a song has a music video attached to it and we have viewed it, the video becomes part of the overall ‘text’, and must therefore be considered when we analyse the song. In their introduction to the book *Music/ Video*, Arnold et. al even contend that music video be ‘considered as either a new genre or addendum to music itself’ (Arnold et. al, 2019: 5). Although Watson and Railton write that ‘all music videos have an avowedly commercial agenda: they are first and foremost a *commercial* for [...] the music track itself’ (Watson & Railton, 2011: 2), they also note that ‘...the visual aspect of music video impacts upon [...] the meanings we can attach to [a song] and by extension how we can analyse and understand it’ (Watson & Railton, 2011: 8).

In *Reading Eminem*, I discuss how, in the case of the song ‘Stan’, the music video changes the way we might read the song as it visually attaches the words of Dido’s sung sections to Stan’s girlfriend, who is played in the video by Dido herself. ‘If we look only at the song, and ignore the music video, the girlfriend is not given a voice at all, and we are more inclined simply to attach Dido’s voice

straight to Stan, who we find out is struggling with mental illness,' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 66), so how we interpret the song depends on whether or not we have seen the music video.

Via an analysis of the Eminem song 'Headlights' I also demonstrate how music videos can intensify or elevate the listener's emotional connection with the lyrics. 'Headlights' achieves this 'by bringing a different viewpoint into the song, literally in this case, because we see most of the footage from the perspective of Eminem's mother, Debbie' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 69). Not only is this alternative viewpoint present in the video, but it also achieves a full narrative arc for Debbie, with a complete set of 'story elements' present:

'The **status quo**, 'the position of the main character at the start of the story' (Willett, 2013: 34), which shows Debbie, our main character in this music video, struggling for money, living alone, constantly reminded of the rich and famous son who disowned her [...]

The **inciting incident**, where Debbie decides to reach out to Eminem but is rejected (to the extent where she can't [sic] even get past the security guards where he lives)

Her **desire** to rekindle her relationship with him, shown through her reminiscing about him as a child via the photo album and the memories that come from it.

The **crisis** where she mistakes a man in the park for Eminem, then returns home, alone, to get drunk and destroys her Christmas tree and decorations in anger and frustration, believing she'll [sic] never be able to repair their relationship.

The **climax** where she manages to see Eminem and they embrace.

and the **resolution** where she receives the lyrics to this song in the post, which see Eminem apologising to her and telling her he loves her. This leads to Debbie being able to find peace, and the video ends with her looking through the photo album again, closing it as the line 'I want a new life' (Eminem, 2013a) plays, suggesting she is now able to move on' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 71-72).

After this analysis, I go on to discuss how some videos introduce a different or additional *concept* into the overall song narrative, and I use the music video for 'When I'm Gone' as example. In this video, 'the first minute is dedicated to setting up a context for the confessional content of the lyrics. In a narrative which is not present in the lyrics, we are shown a small gathering of people, sitting in what appears to be a school gymnasium, listening to a man finish a speech at a lectern [...] The event's organiser then steps up the lectern, inviting someone else to 'share' with the group. Eminem stands, makes his way to the podium, and after introducing himself as 'Marshall' gives a Pinter-sized pause before launching into the song's lyrics. In retrospect, with our subsequent knowledge of Eminem's drug dependency, it does not take much of a stretch to imagine this event as some kind of group therapy meeting' (Fosbraey, 2022b: 72-73), a concept which we do not find within the lyrics themselves.

As well as functioning as ways to enhance the narrative appeal of songs, however, there are drawbacks to the power of the music video format, which I explore in the section 'Girl Power?' of *Viva Hate* where I 'highlight the double standards between how men and women are treated in the industry' (Fosbraey, 2022a: 13), focusing particularly on how women are depicted in music video. Austerlitz writes that 'videos live and die on the presentation of women as ready, luscious, and able, always unclothed, often nubile, and unquestioningly present as objects of male desire' (Austerlitz,

2007: 5). I analyse the music videos output of a range of female performers, noting that not only are the vast majority of these literally operating under the male gaze of a male director, but are also constructed to satisfy what Kristin Lieb says are 'sexual fantasies (and fantasy types)' for heterosexual men (Lieb, 2018: 120). This ranges from the 'erotic magic of high heels' (Jeffreys, 2005: 139) (which, I observe between pages 15 and 17, top female artists are expected to don, both in music videos and on stage) through to the female, female, male 'threesome', which is 'the top male sexual fantasy according to a poll by "sexual wellness experts" Sinful (Glover, 2022). Female performers are 'held to rigid standards of appearance' (Lieb, 2018: 9) that their images 'seem to be more important commodities than the music they write and perform' (McCallum and Dzidic, 2019: 405). This happens to the extent where songs which have no discernible sexual content are subsequently sexualised due to the contents of their accompanying videos, for example. Little Mix's 'Sweet Melody', Dua Lipa and Miley Cyrus's 'Prisoner', or Britney Spears' 'Toxic'.

4. Conclusion

Although it may be the case, as Gans notes, that 'historically, classical music and avant-garde music have been viewed as [the] "high culture" formats' (Gans, 2010: 86 & 172) and that 'many words have been written dismissing the pop song lyric as 'disposable – or worse, as spiritually bankrupt' (Frisicks-Warren 2006: 2), one only needs to conduct a quick Google Images search of 'Song Lyric tattoos' to see how important popular music is to people. I begin the book *Composing Song Lyrics* by noting how, as well as being permanently inked onto people's skin, lyrics have been used to express sentiment and emotion at key points (to express feelings of love and unity at weddings or sadness and loss at funerals, for example), have been cited in suicide notes and court cases, and even, in the case of Tyler The Creator, used as ammunition by a government to deny entry to the UK. I expand upon this in the sub-chapter 'Why not just write instrumentals?' where I draw upon a quote from international speaker and author Yehuda Berg that says 'words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity', observing that 'if we combine the power of words with the power of music, it leads us to a combination that brings meaning, hope, passion, enlightenment, wonder and humour to millions of people every year' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: xiii). 'Instrumental music' I go on to say, 'can entertain us; it can make us feel emotion; it can allow us to reflect; it can even persuade us to physically react by dancing or grimacing or smiling. But though there may be a melody in existence that we can say 'sums up our lives', the addition of words persuades us of a certain viewpoint or makes us re-evaluate our outlook on life; or can make us laugh or feel disgusted or like we're not alone. Lyrics can achieve all of these things and more' (Fosbraey & Melrose, 2019: xiii). I conclude this section of the book by observing how lyrics, although 'tolerant both of banality and repetition [...] of filler syllables[...] of meaninglessness, too' (Leith 2007), can convey complex and important messages that melody alone cannot, citing John Lennon's 'Give peace a chance', Plan B's 'Ill Manors' and Rage Against the Machine's 'Killing in the Name' as examples, discussing as they do, peace, political disquiet, elitism, and police brutality respectively.

Whatever a lyricist's intentions, though, regardless of whether they were trying to be intellectual, sophisticated, or captivating, or simply writing lyrics because that's what the popular music format requires, what must be considered is how their words are received by the public. As Noel Gallagher once said when asked what the lyrics to the Oasis song 'Champagne Supernova' meant: 'I don't fucking know... but are you telling me, when you've got 60,000 people singing it, they don't know what it means? It means something different to every one of them' (Hogan, 2010).

In a variety of forms and approaches, from my artist-focused studies such as *Reading Eminem* to more conceptual projects such as *Viva Hate*, I have explored how lyrics, music video, and album art can work together to form what Duffett defines as ‘transmedia storytelling’, which is ‘the process of telling different parts of the same story through different electronic media’ (Duffett, 2013: 12) and, indeed, the benefits of doing so. Inspired by Hopps’ assertions (after Barthes) that we should move away from relying on the lyricist’s intentions when discerning meaning within a song, my work has also shifted the focus from the lyricist to elements of language, character, and narrative, and in so doing, given popular music the same kind of attention we might afford to literature, poetry, or film.

Overall, it has been my aim to resituate and repurpose existing theoretical techniques to function within the field of popular music analysis while also introducing techniques of my own. In doing this, I feel I have presented a way to examine this ever-changing and ever-influential format in a way that befits its importance. Bill Frisicks-Warren writes that ‘ours is a world in which great numbers of people look to pop music... for guidance that conventional religious observance does not provide’ (Frisicks-Warren, 2006: 228). A touch hyperbolic, perhaps, but to those of us who find that quote resonates, even just a bit, there will always be a desire to keep researching and keep writing about this medium we love so much. In my own small way, I hope I have added to and moved forward the constantly evolving world of popular music criticism.

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