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Potent Pedagogy for Critical Engagement: Music Videos as Texts in Secondary English Classrooms

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This article explores the pedagogical potential of music videos as both tools and rich texts for analysis in the secondary English classroom. Music videos, as a hybrid genre combining visual, auditory, and narrative elements that are deeply rooted in both online and offline spaces, offer unique opportunities for student-centered critical engagement and complex meaning-making. While current English education research (i.e., Grater & Johnson, 2013) framed music videos in the context of student cultural relevance and as a form of popular culture, the authors suggest deeper potential for intentionally incorporating music videos into the classrooms as digitally networked, interdisciplinary texts and tools for analysis. The work, grounded in critical literacy theories and a commitment to culturally sustaining pedagogies, asked the question, “What are the affordances of music videos as multimodal, digital texts in the secondary ELA classroom?” Through engagement in reflective practice on the authors’ work with students, teachers, and teacher educators, they analyzed how music videos can serve as critical digital tools for students and teachers.

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The projector hum builds with the murmur of conversation as ninth graders spill into their seats, shuffling bags to take graphic organizers on their desk. The room is slightly stale and more than a little warm, as is typical for late September in central North Carolina, but despite the heat, the excitement building is more than Caitlin would expect for a unit on academic paragraph writing. She times it perfectly with the bell, and the beats of Bomba Estéreo's *Soy Yo* fill the room; students laugh at the young girl's audacity (in the video, she's flaunting her recorder skills for some judgmental peers), while they jot notes on their assigned text feature. The color, the frames, the lyrics, the narrative — what starts as a simple music video becomes a complex text to read, question, and interpret with their peers in the pursuit of unpacking a text's theme and understanding how the author's choices impact the reader.

"It means 'I'm me,'" one of Caitlin's Spanish-speaking students explains to her elbow partner as they fill out the organizer. Most students in this class are monolingual English speakers, but with text she is the expert, using her knowledge of language to add information into their collaborative inquiry. "Like the title of the other song *Todo Cambió*, meant, 'everything changed.' That will probably be useful for our paragraph." As the class transitions into other music videos, students tie their understanding of YouTube stars like Todrick Hall, while some draw on their knowledge of classic rock and what they know of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* to aid in constructing their arguments.

Traditional English language arts (ELA) instruction has prioritized Western canonical literature and the mastery of standard English conventions as the foundation of literacy and rigor in the English classroom. Moreover, many studies have documented the challenges that secondary English teachers face when integrating culturally relevant texts (e.g., Christ & Sharma, 2018; Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009; Husband, 2018; Short & Kaufmann, 2004). Yet the pedagogical strategies taken up with diverse, multimodal, and digital texts can help bridge the gap between diverse students' lived experiences and the broader curriculum, making learning more relevant and engaging while helping students better understand, read, and critique their own worlds.

On the other hand, integrating diverse and digital classroom texts is complicated by traditional perspectives, censorship efforts, and hegemonic or dominant canonical norms. This complication is evident in a recent report published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE; Chae & Ginsberg, 2025) on the state of literature use, which revealed that English curricula remain dominated by canonical texts that do not reflect the diverse experiences of students. These findings highlight the persistent gap between calls for inclusive, justice-oriented education and the curricular realities teachers face, suggesting that English teachers need support, models, and guidance to consistently and effectively incorporate diverse, multimodal, and digital texts into the curriculum. Our work responds to this ongoing need.

Forming a community of practice, we gathered as three English teachers, two turned teacher-educators, who started their careers in North Carolina public schools deeply committed to multimodal texts and educational equity. We reconnected to examine how we might deepen students' criticality and strengthen their ELA skills through multimodal texts. Building on our shared history of reimagining curriculum for engagement and rigor, we turned our attention to music videos as powerful cultural texts with great critical potential.

Through collaborative inquiry, we sought to understand how this multimodal text could help students analyze language, visuals, and cultural norms to cultivate sharper critical literacy and academic writing skills. We were eager to collaborate and tie research to practice as we reflected and asked, "What are the affordances of music videos as multimodal, digital texts in the secondary ELA classroom?"

In this article, we describe our exploration of the pedagogical potential of music videos as rich texts and tools for analysis in the secondary English classroom. Music videos, as a hybrid genre combining visual, auditory, and narrative elements that are deeply rooted in both online and offline spaces, offer unique opportunities for student-centered critical engagement and complex meaning-making. On the surface, music videos allow English teachers to frame digital and traditional literacy in ways that resonate with students' everyday experiences, thereby making learning more relevant and engaging, while bridging "digital dichotomies" of in-school and out-of-school literacies (Low & Rapp, 2021).

While students spend time at home and on their phones engaging with a variety of texts, the essential texts in an ELA classroom remain the more traditional types of literature, like novels or poetry. As reflective practitioners, we wondered how our practice with music videos could push both students and colleagues to see music videos as more than *only* fun, quick, and accessible texts used for student engagement.

These short digital texts are often dismissed during teacher meetings as frivolous or simple compared to the more traditional English classroom fare of novels and poetry. Yet, musical videos are rich sites of cultural nuance and effective tools for helping students learn to critique discourse, deconstruct oppression (Mills, 2016) and better understand the power structure behind the messages they encounter every day (Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes, 2021). Drawing on adaptations of critical visual thinking strategies (Donovan, 2023; Gardner, 2017), we encourage our students to empower their voices and critique systems, structures, and agendas (Lee et al., 2022) as they examine, analyze, and write for a more just world.

Literature Review

Since digital and visual media continue to shape the ways students interact with texts, educators must consider how classroom practices can reflect and build upon students' existing literacy practices (Alvermann, 2008; Morrell, 2005; Trier, 2006). Over the past several years, NCTE has called attention to the need to integrate diverse, digital, and multimodal texts in the English classroom. This message is communicated through various

position statements including the NCTE (2018) *Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom*, *Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age* (NCTE, 2019), *Critical Media Literacy and Popular Culture in ELA Classrooms* (NCTE, 2021), and *Media Education in English Language Arts* (NCTE, 2022). Across these documents, the NCTE positioned digital texts and media as valid, dynamic texts that teachers can implement to deepen and expand core skills in the ELA classroom.

Due to their ubiquity in student lives, multimodal texts are no longer peripheral in the ELA curriculum, but important texts in their own right. Furthermore, as these multimodal texts are digitally mediated and constructed, NCTE has suggested that English teachers incorporate critical skills of interrogation and critical media literacy when engaging with multimodal artifacts to support their students in analyzing representation, power, and access in these digitally mediated texts.

While the use of multimodal texts is a growing body of scholarship in English education, research has largely focused on students' digital composition practices and multimodal text production (e.g., Boateng et al., 2023; Higgs & Kim, 2022; Kendrick & Early, 2024; Pandya et al., 2018). Other studies examined the influence of a new literacies approach on teacher practices and student outcomes (e.g., Bailey, 2009). However, few studies examined the use of music videos as a specific form of digital text in the English classroom, despite their prevalence in youth culture and their potential for fostering digital, multimodal, and critical media literacies.

In this section, we review literature examining the ways music videos have functioned in the secondary English classroom. These studies build a foundation for understanding the ways current research situates music videos as a tool for student-centered inquiry and a medium for developing both traditional and digital literacies in critical and meaningful ways.

Music Videos for Language Learning and Cultural Analysis

The integration of music videos into the secondary English classroom aligns with ongoing discussions in English education regarding student engagement and culturally responsive pedagogies. As classrooms become more diverse and digitally connected, educators must consider how multimodal texts like music videos can serve as meaningful sites for literacy instruction. Grounded in culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000) and sustaining practice (Paris & Alim, 2017), the use of music videos as digital texts invites teachers to draw on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds in curriculum design, making learning more meaningful and affirming. Music videos are one avenue through which teachers can bridge students' everyday literacies with academic literacy practices.

Much of the existing scholarship in English education highlights the linguistic benefits of music videos and their potential for supporting English language learners and multilingual students. Specifically, studies demonstrate that music videos can aid vocabulary development through repeated exposure, rewatching, and multimodal reinforcement (Burke,

2012; Pavia et al., 2019). Additionally, focusing on common phrases and idioms in English communication, Lee (2014) and Marone (2018) found that the multilayered modes and meanings in music videos (e.g., image, sound, and text) can increase students' linguistic and cultural competence, particularly when students are not familiar with cultural references or movements.

Lems (2018) similarly argued that pop songs and music videos are effective for language learning because they feature high-frequency words, conversational syntax, and emotionally charged narratives that invite personal connection and repeated listening. Together, these studies illustrate how music videos can simultaneously foster linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness.

In addition to linguistic benefits, music videos as digital texts also promote cultural analysis and intercultural competence. In an international context, Volkmann (2019) noted that music videos can be used to their full benefit “both as a means to increase a self-reflexive kind of media competence and as a means to (at least) negotiate the significance of cultural images, specifically in the context of intercultural learning” (p. 36). Other studies have emphasized the role of music videos for teaching American culture, such as through hip-hop (Im, 2020; Uca et al. 2022) with connections to critical hip-hop pedagogy.

For example, Im (2020) examined the use of music videos to learn about hip hop and African American culture in Korea. The use of these digital texts enabled students to learn about American culture from an African American perspective and explore common themes portrayed in African American authored media. Similarly, Uca et al. (2022) highlighted the ways music videos, when chosen intentionally, can be used to highlight the complexities of race, nationalism, and power dynamics, in their case in both American and German contexts. Their comparison of Eko Fresh's “Aber” and Joyner Lucas's “I'm Not Racist” showed how college-level students engaged in social-justice oriented literacy practices driven by music videos. Together, these studies show how music videos are being used in the English classroom locally and globally, which showcases their pedagogical potential as teaching tools.

Music Videos for Literacy and Literary Learning

Although there is a dearth of literature examining the use of music videos as curriculum in the secondary English classroom (e.g., Goldstein & Wallowitz, 2015; Lems, 2018; Rainey & Storm, 2017; Rodesiler, 2009), research in English education has called for the use of digital and multimodal texts as a way to define, or redefine, what is valued and perceived as literacy (Beach, 2012; McClain, 2016; Piotrowski & Garcia, 2024). Prior research has demonstrated that students are more engaged when they use digital texts and tools to communicate for social purposes in authentic ways (Beach, 2012). While traditional English curricula have historically prioritized print-based texts, research increasingly supports the intentional incorporation of popular culture as a means of fostering student engagement and critical literacy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Morrell, 2005).

The brevity, variety, and cost-effective accessibility (Marone, 2018) of music videos have made them a particularly potent tool for teachers seeking to connect traditional ELA literacy practices with modern and critical forms of textual analysis. Rodesiler (2009) argued, “When selected carefully, music videos can be used effectively in various capacities in the classroom: to study literary terms, explore social commentary, or prompt student writing” (p. 45).

Building on this knowledge, scholars like Burke (2012) have illustrated how music videos function as dynamic texts that invite students to practice multiple forms of reading and interpretation across multiple modes, thereby fostering deeper engagement. She observed that the use of music videos in the secondary English classroom encourages multiple viewings, with a focused reading of each of the modalities involved, while engaging students who might disengage from print-based content.

Pedagogical applications for incorporating music videos in secondary ELA include positioning these digital texts as (a) prompts for reflective and analytical writing, (b) as digital narratives for examining literary elements like tone, parody, and structure, and (c) as anchor texts for teaching literary concepts like allusion and genre (Burke, 2012; Goldstein & Wallowitz, 2015; Rodesiler, 2009). For example, Goldstein and Wallowitz found that pairing contemporary songs and music videos with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* allowed students to analyze themes of love and conflict through multiple modalities, fostering textual connections and critical discussion. The participating teacher used songs to introduce concepts as students previewed lyrics and discussed tone, mood, and themes.

These practices illustrate how music videos extend traditional literary study by offering students multimodal entry points into traditional English literacy practices. Thus, there are many opportunities for the effective use of music videos in the secondary English classroom that support traditional practices of writing and literary analysis, while also supporting student engagement and social commentary.

In addition to supporting content and disciplinary learning, music videos provide opportunities for students to engage in critical cultural analysis and commentary. Rainey and Storm (2017) described a routine called “#LitAnalysis4Life” (p. 204), in which students brought digital texts and artifacts including music videos, Saturday Night Live skits, and text messages to class to interpret and analyze with their classmates. Through guided discussion, students examined diction, syntax, and visual composition while drawing on feminist, Marxist, queer, and critical race theories to interpret texts from multiple perspectives.

This work demonstrates how popular culture texts can deepen students’ critical engagement and bridge academic and everyday literacies. This research suggests that music videos move beyond their usefulness as simply a multimodal text or avenue for student engagement, and constitute an effective, efficient method for developing student literacy skills and critical conceptualization.

Music Videos for Cultural Identity Development

While much attention has been paid to the importance of student representation in ELA texts as a whole and students' digital composition, fewer studies have examined how students' identities shape, and are shaped by, their engagement with digital and popular culture texts (see Kendrick & Early, 2024; Pandya et al., 2018). Attention to intersectionality is significant because it emphasizes how students read, interpret, and make meaning through the lens of multiple, overlapping identities. In their examination of African immigrant middle and high school students' digital collages, Boateng et al. (2023) found that music served as a central mode for expressing and extending students' cultural identities. Students embedded music in their digital collages in the form of lyrics, music videos (YouTube links), photosheet music, and dance choreography.

Music videos as digital texts helped students to express themselves and make connections to the messages and themes that represented their lives; their selection and analysis of music was influenced by their multiple, intersecting identities. Boateng et al. (2018) explained, "Youth's naming of songs that reflect their experiences underscores complex connections and transnational identities simultaneously to youth's home countries and the U.S." (p. 134).

This focus on intersectionality and identity aligns with broader conversations in English education around critical, culturally responsive, and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017), and the expansion of literacy practices to include multimodal and digital texts (Alvermann, 2008; Vasquez et al., 2019). Studies in popular culture and literacy education (Morrell, 2005; Grater & Johnson, 2013; Vasquez et al., 2019) have demonstrated that, when students engage with media texts that reflect their lived realities, they are more likely to take up literacy practices as tools for self-expression, critique, and transformation. However, few studies have explicitly investigated the ways music videos function as both analytical texts and creative spaces for identity negotiation beyond their role as tools for engagement, writing prompts, or vocabulary building for multilingual learners.

As Volkmann (2019) stated,

If one jettisons the traditional concept of teaching literature, let alone teaching great literature, and professes instead to be teaching the cultural 'text,' there is no more reason to be the least apologetic about using music video clips in classroom teaching. (p. 37)

This scholarship positions music videos as rich sites for exploring how students' cultural, linguistic, and social identities inform their meaning-making practices. Integrating music videos into secondary ELA instruction extends and aligns with research on culturally responsive teaching by affirming students' lived experiences and promoting critical awareness of how identity, ideology, and media intersect in contemporary literacy and media environments.

Theoretical Framework

Our work is grounded in critical literacy theories (Bishop, 2014; Luke, 2014; Vasquez et al., 2019) and a commitment to culturally sustaining pedagogies. These frameworks are overlapping and complementary, seeking to affirm students' cultural and linguistic ways of being and knowing while equipping them to interrogate how texts and the world are shaped by power.

Critical literacy is both a theoretical and practical framework to critique texts, ideas, objects, and meaning to guide students and teachers in examining the role of structures and power underlying the texts we read (Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes, 2021). It offers both teachers and their students a framework through which they can interrogate and understand the diverse texts they encounter in their classrooms (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

Critical literacy views our reading and writing practices as an effective tool in the development of critical consciousness, which is a desired outcome of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), as it encourages writers to speak the truth of their lived experiences and empower their writing toward authentic action (Lee et al., 2022). When teachers prompt their students to ask questions of a text, like, "Who was the text written for?" "What is the text trying to do to me?" "Whose perspectives and narratives are omitted or silenced by this text?" (Haddix & Rojas, 2013), they are providing a framework for students to understand the role that texts play in their lives.

These classroom practices encourage teachers and their students to question what they consider "normal," recognize power dynamics in schools and the world, and consider multiple perspectives (Donovan, 2024). As noted by Ladson-Billings & Dixson (2022), critical literacy practices are a way to address the "theoretical and conceptual gap that regularly occurs in educational practices regarding implementing culturally relevant, responsive, or sustaining pedagogies" (p. 126). Because critical literacy practices honor a variety of texts and a critique of both classic and popular media, it is a relevant, effective framework for exploring how students engage with digitally connected, multimodal texts.

Research Question

In thinking of the current research and our own practice, we considered the question, "What are the affordances of music videos as multimodal, digital texts in the secondary ELA classroom?" Digging into this question allowed us to analyze how we as English educators and English teacher educators have used music videos as interdisciplinary tools for analysis and explore novel ways for current practitioners to use music videos to empower a critical pedagogy.

Methods

We used reflective practice (Farrell, 2019) in the service of continuous reflexivity as we sought to systematically collect data about our critical

literacy teaching practice, dialogue with each other, and inform our pedagogical decisions within and outside of the classroom (Farrell, 2016). Reflection as a research method brings “humanness to the inquiry process” (Franks, 2016, p. 50). This cyclical and systematic process supports teachers in analyzing their practice to improve their teaching (Farrell, 2016).

An essential element of critical reflective practice is found in researcher and teacher reflexivity (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016; Finlay, 2012), or the process of reflection, in which educators examine how their own upbringing, background, beliefs, and biases impact their thoughts and, therefore, the actions and outcomes of their work. This reflexive process is a critical process of self- and contextual awareness that continues throughout the research process. This reflexive practice allowed us to focus on collective enactment, which Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes (2021) noted is not possible without strong understanding of and commitment to critical literacy practices.

As a part of the reflective and reflexive process, it is important to clarify our teacher positionality (Misawa, 2010), or how our social identities inform the ways we engage in and approach different contexts. While we shared some common experiences, such as all having experience as English teachers in North Carolina public schools, and theoretical dispositions, such as valuing instruction with multimodal texts and a critical literacy lens, our individual school contexts and experiences informed how we approached our pedagogy.

Caitlin and Janell approached this work as former Grades 6-12 ELA teachers, now working in critical teacher education, and focused on secondary English methods. We met during our graduate studies and bonded over the potential for critical English teacher education. Although in different cities, both Caitlin and Janell worked for nearly 10 years as ELA teachers in urban Title 1 public schools that predominantly served Black and Brown students.

Caitlin, a queer white woman, continues to care about popular culture’s authentic integration into classroom methods for rigor and criticality, with an expanded focus on memes as digital texts. Janell, a Black mother, emphasizes critical media and multimodal literacies and meaningful integration of technology and digital texts in the ELA classroom.

Still a practicing teacher, Hannah, noted,

I approached this research as an educator for 10 years in the North Carolina public school system and 2 years in the California public school system. Throughout each school year, I reflect not only on my own practices but on the insight from students I teach. I believe their voices, especially when it comes to the environment of my classroom, matter.

Hannah’s classrooms have ranged in demographics; she was Caitlin’s colleague and taught in the same school for 4 years, while also teaching in a military family serving school in a coastal NC county and a more affluent school in California. Across all contexts, we incorporated intentionally

selected music videos and other multimodal texts as avenues for critical engagement.

Authors Caitlin and Hannah, in our commitment to critical pedagogy, acknowledge the role our positions as white women in education have played in our instruction and strive to engage in critical self-reflection to interrogate and deconstruct whiteness in our curriculum. We strive for the texts we read and the writings we produce with our students to honor their voices and challenge, rather than reinforce, inequities in the world. Our reflective practice and our music video unit are well melded to this methodology. Janell approaches this work as a teacher educator of color concerned with fostering learning environments where students' lived experiences are valued and where critical engagement with texts becomes a pathway to equity. Our backgrounds as ELA teachers, diversity of teaching contexts, and shared commitment to critical literacy practices provided a rich and nuanced context for our community of reflective practice, grounding our analysis of our work.

Data Sources

To guide our methods and inform our reflection, we drew data from 50 artifacts from our prior and current teaching, as well as current pedagogical dialogues. Lesson plans and unit maps of the curriculum within our program were effective data sources for analysis, and they showed how we individually and our professional learning communities (PLCs) structured the units. Figure 1 shows an excerpt of one of the planning artifacts used, a student-facing calendar for a unit on textual analysis and academic paragraph writing centered on music videos.

Figure 1

Calendar Artifact of Music Video Focused Unit Analyzed Through Reflective Practice

Weekly Schedule				
Essential Question				
How do authors, directors, and producers intentionally craft a text/image/artwork/etc. to draw out a specific reader response?				
How do different parts of a text interact with each other to add to and develop a whole meaning?				
How does choosing the best evidence to support an assertion/claim make an author more believable and/or persuasive?				
In English class I can... 9th Grade 9			Vocabulary	
1. Write strong paragraphs and narratives guided by a clear main idea and supported by textual evidence (using the A-C-E-S strategy as a guide) (W.1).			Unit 2 (Keep reviewing Unit 1!)	
2-3. Determine the theme of and summarize a complex text (RL.2)			Assertion, Formalism, Paraphrase, Citation,	
7. Develop and sustain a thesis-driven argument using tools of rhetoric (W.1)			Figurative Language: Simile, Metaphor, Imagery,	
			Allusion, Verbal Irony, Idiom, Hyperbole	
Quarter 1, Week 6				
Monday 9/30	Tuesday 10/1	Wednesday 10/2	Thursday 10/3	Friday 10/4
Vocab 2.1-2.5	Soy yo- Bomba Estereo	The Wall- Pink Floyd	LWYMD+ Calm Down	This is America- Gambino
Todo Cambio	Close Reading	Fig. Lang. Review	Thesis Statements	ACES Paragraphs
Quarter 1, Week 7				
Monday 10/7	Tuesday 10/8	Wednesday 10/9	Thursday 10/10	Friday 10/11
Vocab 2.6-2.10	ACES Paragraphs	No School!	How to Cite Sources	Big Quiz- ACES, Theme,
Ordinary Day- Todrick Hall	Transition Words	~Yom Kippur~	Citations/Explanations	& Figurative Language
Quarter 1, Week 8				
Monday 10/14	Tuesday 10/15	Wednesday 10/16	Thursday 10/17	Friday 10/18
Vocab 2.11-2.15	The Writing Process	The Writing Process	Art WorkTime	Song Analysis-
Sum It Up- End a Paragraph	Song Analysis- Choice	Song Analysis- Drafting	Song Analysis- Drafting	Complete Draft Due

In total, we examined 10 instructional years of content that spanned three practitioners in four different schools between two states, North Carolina and California. Across these years, music videos were key texts in nine units. We defined a music video as a key text if students “read” it more than once, read over the course of more than one instructional period, or had a dedicated graphic organizer to support reading and writing associated with it. These units included textual pairings with 30 distinct music videos, whether in a dedicated unit, such as Academic Writing (ACES Paragraphs) and Music Videos, or in pairings with other more canonical texts, as demonstrated in Table 1, which illustrates how we used music videos to critically engage with texts in a more traditional ninth-grade curriculum.

Table 1
Incorporating Music Videos With Required Canonical Texts

Canonical Text	<i>The Odyssey</i>	<i>Of Mice and Men & A Lesson Before Dying</i>
Essential Question	What is a hero? Who gets to be a hero? How and why do expectations of heroism differ for different people?	What is the “American Dream”? Who gets it?
Music Videos	“Pray for me” (2018) by Kendrick Lamar & The Weekend “Girl in a Country Song” (2015) by Maddie and Tae, “Respect” (1967) Aretha Franklin (Black Music Archive Video)	“This is America” (2018) by Childish Gambino & “Ordinary Day” (2018) by Todrick Hall
Supplemental Text(s)	Excerpts from <i>Circe</i> (2018) by Madeline Miller	<i>Epic of America</i> by James Truslow Adams (1931) & “Let America Be America Again” (1935) Langston Hughes

These curriculum maps deepened our analysis and facilitated a clearer understanding of not only how we were doing this work, but the implications it had for teacher education. Other specific documents that provided insight into the ways we were using music videos included close reading guided notes and graphic organizers for writing a literary analysis paragraph. Figure 2 shows how Caitlin and Hannah used graphic organizers to structure literary analysis and academic writing that centered music videos as texts.

Additionally, we were able to locate former unit maps and student handouts, as well as old PLC meeting minutes and prior text message conversation to further verify and inform our reflections, grounding them in both prior and current practice to better triangulate our analysis. Finally, we reviewed documents that emphasized student choice in music videos, such as in Caitlin’s culminating music video analysis project (Figure 3).

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more complex than the codes from the earlier stages. We then welcomed Janell to the team to help with the next stage, reviewing and developing the themes. The three of us returned to the artifacts and moved between them and the codes to verify that the themes were well supported by the artifacts. Then, we collaboratively refined and expanded upon the themes, which is how we settled on developing traditional skills in a novel way, setting the stage for asking and answering critical cultural questions, and more than fun/thinking like a reader out of English class. Analyzing these data sources, through several rounds of reflective discussion and thematic analysis allowed us to generate findings that were rigorously based in our experiences and artifacts.

Findings

Our findings highlight the pedagogical potential of music videos as critical, digital, and multimodal texts that support students' engagement in a wide range of literacy practices. Through our reflective analysis, we identified three key affordances of integrating music videos into the secondary English classroom: (a) They support the development of traditionally valued ELA skills, (b) they cultivate critical inquiry by enabling students to interrogate form, content, cultural narratives, and multiple perspectives, and (c) they function as meaningful curricular resources for secondary ELA teachers, supporting standards alignment, unit and lesson planning, and culturally sustaining practice.

In the remainder of this section, we illustrate each of these affordances, drawing from instructional artifacts, planning calendars, student-facing materials and reflective memos that shaped our analysis. First, we illustrate how intentionally selecting digital texts like music videos can provide an accessible and engaging access point for foundational ELA practices. Next, we discuss how music videos work in our classroom to encourage students' critical inquiry via complex themes, identities, and cultural contexts. Finally, we describe how music videos serve as flexible curricular tools that help teachers frame discussion, scaffold analysis, and bridge students' everyday digital literacies with their academic learning and experiences.

Our findings align with work that positions music videos as culturally responsive texts that function as a bridge between home and school literacies (Low & Rapp, 2021). Specifically, our work illustrates how close reading and multimodal analysis can help students see the interconnectedness of their multiple literacy skills.

Music Videos as Effective Sites for Traditional ELA Literacy and Skills Development

Music videos function as powerful dual-purpose texts in the English classroom, supporting the development of traditionally valued literacy skills and affirming students interests and identities. These digital texts provide students with opportunities to practice core English skills such as close reading, analytical writing, and argumentation across genres while engaging with texts that are relevant to them. We found that music videos extend traditionally valued ELA skills, including close reading of texts,

rhetorical and perspective-based analyses, and analytical and argument writing. One primary data source informing this finding was our unit planning calendars. Figure 4 shows Hannah's most recent "Memoir and Identity" unit calendar, which covers music videos in a range of genres, languages, and topics in a ninth-grade classroom.

Figure 4

A Sample Instructional Calendar Centering Music Videos in the Secondary English Classroom

Unit 1: Memoir and Identity				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 Close Reading How-To and Graphic Organizer	2 Soy Yo (Bomba Estéreo) and Todo Cambio (Becky G)	3 Todo Cambio (Becky G) Fig. Language Rw.	4 Look What You Made Me Do (Swift) and allusions introduction	5 Karma (Swift) and Goodbye Yellow Brick Road (John)
8 Ordinary Day (Hall)	9 This is America (Gambino)	10 Compare and Contrast This is America and Ordinary Day	11 Girl in a Country Song (Maddie & Tae)	12 Gee (SNSD (소녀시대))
15 Big Yellow Taxi (Counting Crows)	16 The Wall (Pink Floyd) vs. Indian Education (Alexie) assertion	17 Skullcrusher Mountain (Coulton)	18 Music Video Inquiry Lab- Part 1 and 2	19 Music Video Inquiry Lab- Part 3

The unit calendar reflects intentional pairings designed to foreground literacy devices, thematic development, and multimodal storytelling. *Soy Yo* and *Todo Cambio* are both Spanish language songs whose videos move through a narrative that each centers a Latina protagonist, while *Ordinary Day* and *This is America* both center a Black American experience and political imagery to support critical figurative interpretation. These pairings offered students opportunities to analyze narrative structure, symbolism, character, and tone in ways that mirror students' work with traditional texts like short stories or novels.

We explored the context behind and reasoning for this unit and its structure in one of our reflective sessions; Hannah described the unit's purpose:

In a mini unit, the learning pace is chunked for students to focus on a set of skills and standards to provide more time for students to master those standards prior to synthesizing further in a larger context. Figure 5 shows an example of a three-week mini unit exploring close reading skills with the use of music videos in varying genres. Each day focuses on music videos in varying genres to highlight differing student interest and musical tastes, as well as cultural storytelling. Within this mini-unit, while critical inquiry within close reading through observations are the primary target, students are also introduced to an extended number of literary devices, as well as writing structures in paragraph writing, assertion through observations, and compare and contrast.

Figure 5 illustrates how Hannah scaffolded teaching music videos as nuanced texts that required multiple "readings" or viewings to understand in a close reading protocol that might be familiar to many English teachers

and educators. Through this protocol, students transitioned from literal observation to inferential interpretation and evidence-based claims. This process aligns with the disciplinary thinking emphasized in ELA and provides students with scaffolds for analytical writing.

Figure 5

A Sample Instructional Resource Handout Provided to Students to Define Close Reading With Descriptions of Each Step (as Defined by ascd.org)

Close Reading- What is it?

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and **examining meaning thoroughly and methodically**, encouraging students to **read and reread deliberately**. Directing student **attention on the text itself** empowers students to **understand the central ideas and key supporting details**. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to **arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole**.

A significant body of research links the close reading of complex text—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced—to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness. (*Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2011, p. 7*)

Steps to Close Reading		
Step 1- Read the text THREE TIMES. I mean it! • First Read- Main Idea and Happenings • Second Read- Details and Fine Points • Third Read- Evidence to support your Assertion	Step 2- Ask yourself questions as you read. You should be able to ask yourself questions to pull out PATTERNS in the text. • What is the author <i>telling me here?</i> • Are there any hard or important words? • What does the author want me to <i>understand?</i> • How does the author play with <i>language</i> to add to meaning?	Step 3- Focus on Observing and Analyzing to Draw Conclusions • Can you recount details from the passage? It is important to be accurate, precise, and clear. • Once you have the big picture, analyze the fine points of the text. You might ask yourself questions like: ◦ Who seems to be the main audience? (To whom is the narrator speaking?) ◦ What is the first thing that jumps out at me? Why? ◦ What's the next thing I notice? Are these two things connected? How? Are they saying different things? ◦ What seems important here? Why? ◦ What does the author mean by _____? What exact words lead me to this meaning? ◦ Is the author trying to convince me of something? What? How do I know? ◦ Is there something missing from this passage that I expected to find? Why might the author have left this out? ◦ Is there anything that could have been explained more thoroughly for greater clarity? ◦ Is there a message or main idea? What in the text led me to this conclusion? ◦ How does this sentence/passage fit into the text as a whole?

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec12/vol70/num04/Closing-in-on-Close-Reading.aspx>

Music Videos as Cultivators of Critical Inquiry

In addition to traditional literacy skills, music videos offer rich sources of critical inquiry into cultural narratives, identities, and sociopolitical themes, particularly when intentionally paired or foiled, prompting students to interrogate issues of representation and discourse embedded in the media they consume frequently. What is more, these digital texts provide students with multiple modes of entry as they interrogate how meaning is constructed through multimodal choices (e.g., camera angles, sound, movement, color, and juxtaposition) in addition to lyrics and narrative.

Unlike print-based text, music videos as digital texts incorporate sound, visual composition, editing, movement, and spatial design to construct meaning. This combination of digital elements requires students to interpret how different modes not only operate independently, but also how they interact to inform meaning and interpretation. During our reflections, we discussed how instructional pairings of music videos as texts prompted students to examine representation, cultural storytelling, and the relationship between form and content. Hannah reflected that students were often quicker to notice the multimodal contrasts in the same

text and their effects, as entirely textual distinctions. For example, both *Ordinary Day* and *Skullcrusher Mountain* have pleasant, eerily positive musicality and visuals, which contrast with both the lyrics of the song and the video that plays. Analyzing this contrast provided a clear example for the class as they moved into analyzing more traditional texts later in the year.

Figure 6 demonstrates how Hannah engaged with the multimodal elements and shows how the close reading strategies as defined in Figure 5 are neatly adapted to observations made with music video visuals, sound, and lyrics. Each of these items is treated seriously and not only gets its own “read,” but also requires annotation for specific analysis later in the lesson and to prepare for potential writing.

Figure 6

A Graphic Organizer for Students to Complete Their Own Music Video

Close Reading Practice

Step #1: Make Observations

- These observations may include dialogue, images, symbolism, points of interest, elements with which you agree or disagree, comments on film elements, or anything else that is or might be significant.
- Your observations are **ANNOTATIONS** on the text- They should be thorough enough to help your understanding.

#1 Text Title:

Text Year:

Text Author:

First Watch- What do you SEE?	Second Watch- What do you HEAR?	Third Watch- What do you READ
What images stick out to you? Are there interesting choices in color? Are there any allusions or references?	What is the genre? Are there any sound effects? Are there any stops/breaks in the music?	What words/phrases are repeated? Where do the lyrics match? Differ? What fig. Lang. is used in the text?

Step #2: Find Patterns- Ask yourself questions about your observations and the text!

- Further annotate your observations by putting them into categories and labeling those categories

1-	2-	3-

Step #3- Draw Conclusions

- Use your annotations on the patterns, supported by the evidence, to draw a conclusion about the text.
- This conclusion is an **ASSERTION**, a claim you make to answer a question or to comment on a text.

The multimodal elements of music videos amplified students' opportunities to analyze complex themes such as race, culture, identity, and nationalism, which is consistent with critical literacy and culturally responsive frameworks. In the unit calendar in Figure 1, *The Wall* music video is paired with the Sherman Alexie short story, “Indian Education,” which suggests a highly critical analysis of the system of school. Furthermore, this unit ends with an inquiry lab, in which students can perform their own inquiry into a text of their choosing. Having students bring in their own songs for analysis, students are exposed to visual stories and lyrics from artists of diverse backgrounds who integrate their culture

into their music videos, providing opportunities for empathy and diverse perspectives.

Music Videos as Meaningful Curricular Resources

Finally, our reflective analysis revealed that music videos function as flexible curricular tools that support unit design, standards alignment, scaffolding of multimodal and digital literacies, and integration of students' home literacies and knowledge.

While many students do not see themselves represented in the texts they consume, incorporating music videos into core course instruction is a great way to legitimize student interests and represent students who feel left out of core texts. As Hannah reflected, "Music videos speak to students on a personal level that many traditional texts cannot, and over the years, students have vocalized a need for lessons to be more connected to what they care about."

In addition to building engagement, music videos provide students with an opportunity to incorporate their personal passions into the curriculum of the course, deconstructing the false "home-school" literacy dichotomy (Low & Rapp, 2021). We reflected that by bringing music videos into formal English classroom instruction, we validated students' cultural knowledge and analytical instincts, allowing them to draw on familiar interpretive strategies, such as close reading, while developing more sophisticated ways of understanding multimodal texts they consume outside of the school environment.

Traditional English curricula often privilege print-based, canonical texts, positioning digital, multimodal, and popular culture texts as secondary or nonacademic (Alvermann, 2008; Morrell, 2005). Our experiences, however, illustrate that music videos are the perfect text to model ways the literacies students engage with outside of school and the critical analytical skills emphasized in English classrooms are deeply interrelated. These understandings guide us as we question the supposed separation of in-school from out-of-school contexts (Alvermann & Moore, 2011).

Incorporating music videos into the ELA curriculum critically deconstructs false dichotomies of "home" and "school" literacies to build an engaging, student-centered curriculum—one of the key elements of a culturally sustaining classroom that honors all students. By legitimizing students' media practices and integrating culturally relevant texts, music videos help bridge students' everyday digital lives and school-based literacy work, supporting the creation of a rigorous and responsive ELA curriculum.

Discussion

Engaging with music videos enables students to develop a deeper understanding of complex meaning-making practices, simultaneously updating and reinforcing traditional secondary English literacy outcomes

and engaging in critical action. Music videos can serve not only as prompts for writing and skill development, but also as critical tools for cultural critique. Analyzing music videos as digital literary texts and cultural artifacts, students are both engaging critically and developing traditionally valued skills in the English classroom, such as close reading, argumentation, rhetoric, and perspective. Our instructional examples that highlight our approaches to using music videos in the classroom illustrate how practicing teachers and teacher educators can use music videos as not supplementary, but central texts in restructuring their pedagogy surrounding textual analysis or academic writing for critical engagement.

Understanding music videos in a critical literacy framework allows teachers and their students to read the word and the world around them and turns these texts into culturally sustaining tools that create a curriculum that affirms students' identities while exposing them to diverse perspectives. We further show how music videos are a flexible and adaptive teaching tool that can be updated each year to provide resonance with contemporary events, issues, and interests based on school context and student interest. In Hannah's English 9 course, and in many throughout the nation, the curriculum is anchored in an overarching study of genres. This anchor gives the teacher autonomy in their choices of texts students will analyze and allows for a seamless integration of music videos into the curriculum, while remaining flexible to school needs.

When selecting music videos within a culturally sustaining framework, ELA teachers must consider how texts reflect, affirm, and complicate students' cultural, linguistic, and social identities, while also ensuring opportunities to interrogate power, representation, and ideology. In our practice, this meant selecting videos based on their capacity to function as mirrors or windows for critical inquiry (Bishop, 1990) that allowed us to better or more deeply engage with texts and themes within the standards. In this way, teachers must consider individually, and with students, whose stories are centered, whose perspectives are marginalized, and how meaning is constructed across modes.

More work is needed among English educators to teach preservice teachers ways to intentionally incorporate music videos with a critical lens. While music videos are often used as engagement tools in secondary English classrooms or as the seeds of writing prompts, there is a gap in teacher preparation programs when it comes to equipping future educators with strategies for critical consideration and conceptualization.

Gardner's (2017) adaptation of critical Visual Thinking Strategies could be a useful tool for analyzing the visual messages and narrative of the text, emphasizing the role of the artist, what is presented, and what is not presented. Donovan's (2023) work on participatory culture might serve as an organizer to help students question and unpack potentially fraught elements of the dominant narratives music videos reinforce. Examining how power works in the music videos will give students more insight into the beliefs and ideology behind the messages that the music videos convey through their lyrics. Integrating critical frameworks for multimodal analysis into teacher education coursework and in-service teacher professional development would prepare teachers to incorporate music videos effectively and support a use grounded in critical literacy practices rather than in student entertainment.

Implications

Using music videos in the classroom has the potential to continue to expand textual analysis in English classrooms and English education. For English teachers, integrating music videos into the curriculum with a critical lens on power, representation, and context, provides a meaningful way to bridge traditional literary analysis with students' lived experiences and digital literacies. By treating music videos as complex, multimodal texts, teachers can expand students' understanding of narrative structure, symbolism, and argumentation, while also fostering critical media literacy skills. English teachers, however, must be more intentional and critical in their integration of music videos into their content. We must move beyond casual consumption of a fun or engaging text for students to emphasize their nuance and rigor. We must then facilitate discussions on how music videos construct meaning, reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies, and engage with social issues. Approaching music videos with a critical approach moves beyond simply enhancing student engagement and empowers students to critically navigate and inquire into the media-rich world in which they live.

When choosing music videos to include in the class, teachers can consider both student interests and the gaps in the curriculum, then work to have music videos fill those gaps. Teachers should intentionally structure this inclusion to align with their goals, as these pairings will direct student learning. For example, *Of Mice and Men* was a required text at Caitlin and Hannah's school; incorporating *Ordinary Day* and *This is America* pushed students to explicitly consider race and the role Blackness plays in achieving the so-called American Dream, while the pairing of MTKO's *American Dream* with Mellencamp's *Jack and Diane* moved that focus more toward generational considerations. Likewise, with *The Odyssey* Hannah and Caitlin chose *Girl in a Country Song* to underscore a feminist critique of Penelope's role in the story, while Hannah's decision to include Lamar's *Pray for Me* dove deeper into expectations for heroism and how that might differ among identities. Teachers must critically interrogate their own practice as they consider the texts they incorporate into the curriculum.

For teacher educators, our reflection highlights the need for English educators to more intentionally prepare preservice and in-service teachers to embrace a critical approach to multimodal texts in their pedagogy. While we felt prepared to approach music videos like any other text, we realized in our initial plan English education programs should provide practical strategies and theoretical frameworks that equip educators to critically engage with music videos as digitally connected, contextual texts, not only for engagement and cultural responsiveness.

Teacher educators should also model reflective practice on how teachers' own cultural perspectives and biases shape their approaches to integrating media into their courses. While music videos are accessible and might be easily swapped in a curriculum, educators must be aware of their own preferences, knowledge, and biases when selecting music videos they think students will like. By supporting teachers in this work, we can help build teachers who are responsive to students with inclusive classrooms that

validate students' lived experiences while fostering critical literacy skills that are essential for our hyperconnected, digital world.

Conclusion

Music videos offer a powerful yet underutilized opportunity for critical literacy, multimodal analysis, and student-centered inquiry in the secondary English classroom. Through the intentional, critical exploration of music videos, students can critically examine societal discourses and power structures, reclaiming agency over their identities and challenging dominant narratives (Lee et al., 2022). By centering student experiences and interests, we have shown that music video analysis not only fosters community and belonging while honoring diverse cultural backgrounds, but also ways students developed their skills of formalist critique and academic writing. As digitally networked, interdisciplinary texts, music videos invite students to engage in complex meaning-making practices that bridge traditional literary skills with contemporary critical media literacy skills students need to navigate the written world.

By positioning music videos as both texts and tools, English teachers can cultivate classrooms that honor students' interests, foster deeper analytical thinking, and support culturally sustaining pedagogies. The integration of music videos, however, requires intentionality to be used to their full potential — teachers must move beyond surface-level engagement to facilitate critical discussions on representation, power, context, and structure. As English education continues to evolve in response to digital and cultural shifts, embracing music videos as pedagogical resources ensures that our curricula remain relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse literacies of today's students.

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