

Code-Meshing in the Music History Classroom: Connecting Repertoire, Writing, and Assessment

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There is no denying the impact of white supremacy on collegiate music curricula in the United States; today's music students and faculty must now grapple with its legacy. Writings by authors like Philip Ewell and Loren Kajikawa help to identify the present whiteness of the music academy in clear, unmistakable terms, and several recent conversations show that musicology as a field is currently exploring how to do better with regard to race and the music history classroom. Among them are: the “What Constitutes ‘Core’ in the Conservatory Curriculum?” panel at the 2020 conference of the American Musicological Society; the White Supremacy and Anti-Racism in the Music Academy speaker series hosted virtually by the Binghamton University Music Department during the 2020–2021 academic year; the “Beyond Tokenism” teach-ins at the 2022 Teaching Music History Conference; and the 2020 special issue of the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* on decolonization in music history and world music curricula.¹ The heightened attention to race and curriculum that has emerged since the 2020 murder of George Floyd is certainly not unprecedented, as efforts to diversify music history curricula are now decades old. The present social, political, and educational atmosphere of the Black Lives Matter era has motivated many instructors to reform—sometimes radically—traditional music courses with antiracist interventions, reigniting momentum for even broader changes.

Each new edition of a popular anthology of music history that adds in a few more composers of color and women or non-binary musicians helps additional students see people like themselves represented in music history courses. But

1. Philip A. Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020), doi: 10.30535/mto.26.2.4; Loren Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music,” in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019): 155–74; Special Issue: Decolonization, *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 10, no. 1 (2020), <http://ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/issue/view/27>.

more substantial interventions like, for example, Travis Stimeling and Kayla Tokar's instructional unit on the 1740 Negro Code in South Carolina demonstrate even larger ways in which the content of music history courses can be altered not only to better reflect diverse musical practices but also to call attention to the history and impact of systemic racism on what is heard and what is silenced.² As instructors continue to work toward representing and valuing diverse musical voices in class, another way to address historical inequalities and access barriers for students is to reconsider approaches to writing pedagogy and assessment in what are often the most writing-intensive courses in music degree programs.³

In this article, I argue that individual musical works that draw on musical practices from multiple cultures can be used to teach students not just about music and its racialized contexts but also about how their own choices as writers can cross or conform to existing linguistic boundaries. Examining works like the stylistically hybrid jazz-classical ballet *The River* by composer Duke Ellington and choreographer Alvin Ailey and its mixed, racially coded reception encourages students to think critically about how the language they use to express themselves leverages, upholds, or challenges established power structures in the academy and the broader world in which they live.⁴ To give students the opportunity to investigate and experiment with the modes of written expression they choose to employ, I also advocate for the adoption of antiracist assessment strategies developed by writing instructors, in which grades reflect the degree of completion of work rather than the quality of work, the usual (and

2. Travis Stimeling and Kayla Tokar, "Narratives of Musical Resilience and the Perpetuation of Whiteness in the Music History Classroom," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 10, no. 1 (2020): 20–38.

3. Much recent scholarship in music history pedagogy already proposes a variety of alternatives to traditional research papers or essays as a way to elevate student motivation and spark creativity. See, for example, Esther M. Morgan-Ellis and Kristen Strandberg, "Practical and Engaging Alternatives to the Music History Research Paper," *Musicology Now*, June 14, 2019, <https://musicologynow.org/practical-and-engaging-alternatives-to-the-music-history-research-paper/>; Erinn E. Knyt, "Rethinking the Music History Research Paper Assignment," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 4, no. 1 (2013): 23–37; Sara Haefeli, "Using Blogs for Better Student Writing Outcomes," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 4, no. 1 (2013): 39–70; Alexander Stefaniak, "Remaking the Canon in their Own Images: Creative-Writing Projects in the Music History Classroom," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 9, no. 2 (2019): 195–214.

4. Many musical traditions, and certainly jazz, draw on practices from multiple cultures; in this way, jazz in general could be considered a music rooted in code-meshing of African, European, and Caribbean vernacular and classical musics. In the case of *The River*, I describe the jazz as one distinct tradition blended with a second style, Western classical music, due to widespread recognition of jazz as an independent genre by the time of the work's composition in 1970. In addition, while jazz has long been a global music with contributors of many races, ethnicities, and nationalities, I primarily discuss jazz as a form of Black American music and the lessons associated with it, as Ellington, Ailey, and the contemporary reviewers of *The River* discuss jazz primarily in relationship to African American culture.

ultimately subjective) criterion employed to assess academic writing. In what follows, I first introduce the concept of “code-meshing.” Delineated by speech and communication scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young, code-meshing is the practice of mixing African American communicative idioms with European-derived forms to speak across cultural boundaries without code switching. Then, I offer a brief analysis of musical and choreographic “code-meshing” in Ellington and Ailey’s *The River* to show how the work and its reception fit with Young’s ideas about race, culture, communication, and power, along with details of my approach to teaching this work through the lens of code-meshing.⁵ Finally, I offer a summary of recent work by musicologists on alternative writing assignments coupled with ideas on assessment from writing instructors in other disciplines to offer a model for promoting diverse modes of expression in student music history writing.

Meshing vs. Switching

In presenting his case against teaching students to code switch in order to write with conventional academic style and tone, Young offers a term for the blending of diverse linguistic elements: “code-meshing.” Young advocates for code-meshing as a strategy for writers whose native dialect may not be so-called “standard English,” arguing that the model of encouraging code switching—the practice of using separate dialects for different circumstances—reinscribes racial segregation and white supremacist cultural norms. He writes,

The prevailing definition [of code switching], the one most educators accept, and the one I’m against, advocates language substitution, the linguistic translation of Spanglish or AAE [African American English] into standard English. This unfortunate definition of code switching is not about accommodating two language varieties in one speech act. It’s not about the practice of language blending. Rather it characterizes the teaching of language conversion.⁶

In discussing the ways in which the prevailing technique of teaching requires students raised with diverse English dialects to code switch by, for example, speaking Black Vernacular English at home and a “standard English” based in white middle- and upper-class norms at school, Young points out how language segregation mirrors other forms of racial segregation, writing:

5. Vershawn Ashanti Young, “Nah, We Straight’: An Argument Against Code Switching,” *JAC* 29, no. 1/2 (2009): 49–76.

6. Young, “Nah, We Straight,” 50.

In truth, to teach students that the two language varieties cannot mix and must remain apart belies the claim of linguistic equality and replicates the same phony logic behind Jim Crow legislation—which held that the law recognized the equality of the races yet demanded their separation. Indeed, the arguments used to support code switching are startlingly and undeniably similar to those that were used to support racial separation.⁷

In short, saying that Black Vernacular English or another dialect is great so long as it remains in the home or on the street and not at work or school is ultimately another way of saying that white linguistic habits are superior and should continue to dominate the most prestigious spaces in our culture. Young writes that code switching, rather than exemplifying some kind of positive form of separate but equal, is “a strategy to negotiate, side-step and ultimately accommodate bias against the working-class, women, and the ongoing racism against the language habits of blacks and other non-white peoples.”⁸ Insisting on a separation between modes of communication ultimately belies claims that those modes of communication are granted equal worth.

Young describes code-meshing as a technique that “meshes versions of English together in a way that’s more in line with how people actually speak and write.”⁹ He explains and demonstrates this practice through reflections on his own experiences as an academically oriented Black boy growing up in a community that categorized the “standard English” he often spoke as white and/or feminine and the Black Vernacular English that he also used as Black and/or masculine. His story offers a good reminder that language use is always intersectional, and no one dialect maps exactly or neatly onto one particular demographic group.¹⁰ Because many people draw on different versions of

7. Young, 53.

8. Young, 51.

9. Vershawn Ashanti Young, *Your Average Nigga* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 7.

10. In capitalizing Black but not white when using these terms to refer to groups of people, I follow the current standards of the Associated Press and many music scholars working on topics related to African American music. In their explanation of this style choice, the AP writes that they capitalize Black when used “in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense, conveying an essential and shared sense of history, identity, and community among people who identify as Black.” Meanwhile, “White people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color . . . and there is considerable disagreement, ambiguity, and confusion about whom the term includes in much of the world” (“Explaining AP Style on Black and white,” *AP News*, July 20, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>). Significantly, some groups who choose to capitalize white do so explicitly to advance white nationalist and white supremacist ideology, so my choice to use lowercase is also informed by my intention to avoid replicating linguistic style designed to oppress others. For a substantial consideration of whiteness and its representation in jazz and American music, see Kelsey Klotz, *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

English that are linked to various aspects of their identities and experiences, encouraging code-meshing can benefit all students. Put directly, it is neither a strategy meant to target or single out Black students, nor is it built on the false assumption that all Black students speak Black Vernacular English as their primary dialect.

Young advocates teaching code-meshing through a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach. He and co-author Aja Martinez explain that a prescriptive approach to teaching standardized English suggests, “These are the rules; learn how to follow them!” while descriptive approaches to code-meshing tell students, “These are rules from various language systems; learn to combine them effectively.”¹¹ They “envision code-meshing as a way to promote the linguistic democracy of English and to increase the acquisition and egalitarian effective use of English in school, in government, in public, and at home.”¹² While Young’s work is rooted in his specific experience as a Black man growing up in Chicago housing projects before pursuing a PhD and working as an academic, code-meshing is not conceived as a method to benefit one specific group; instead, it’s a flexible approach designed to meet all students where they are with their use of English (or multiple Englishes) as a means of expression. Young and Martinez put forth the following resolution to English teachers to explain and codify their approach:

Let it be resolved that every native speaker of English and English language learner, whether an immigrant to the United States from Indonesia, the queen of England, a native resident of Sudan, bus driver, university undergraduate, or first grader; whether she or he is writing professionally, giving a speech, transacting business, or composing an essay for a standardized test in high school, has a right to code-mesh—to blend accents, dialects, and varieties of English with school-based, academic, professional, and public Englishes, in any and all formal and informal contexts. English speakers’ right to code-mesh includes the use of home languages, dialects, and accents beyond conversations with friends and family. It further includes freedom to explore and to be taught in school how to exploit and combine the best rhetorical strategies, syntactical possibilities, and forms of usage from the various grammars, including standardized English, that they have learned, are learning, have used, or are using in their various familial, social, technological, professional, or academic networks.¹³

In other words, code-meshing as pedagogy embraces multiple Englishes in a non-hierarchical way, allowing both instruction and expression to take multiple and flexible forms. Code-meshing instruction encourages students to use what

11. Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y. Martinez, *Code-Meshing as World English* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011), xxi.

12. Young and Martinez, xx.

13. Young and Martinez, xxi.

they have (without value judgments or shame) while continuing to acquire new rhetorical skills that can supplement rather than replace what they know. It also helps to problematize language habits that construct minority dialects as “unacademic” while standards of quality are built around the dialect of middle-class white speakers that often masquerades a racially unmarked universal language.

Code-meshing embraces variety rather than relying on the false premise that Standard English is neutral in terms of its racial origins and associations. A “colorblind” approach to academic writing that dictates white middle class standards of style as universal measures of quality parallels the “colorblind” centering of classical music in American college and university music programs. Despite the central role of African diasporic musics in the majority of styles heard by the majority of Americans, American academic music schools and departments continue to frame these sounds as peripheral (if not inessential) while training students in what they refer to simply as “music” writ large. As Loren Kajikawa writes, “Although music curricula avoid mentioning race explicitly, they tend to prioritize certain approaches to hearing, performing, and understanding music that reinforce the cultural superiority of classical music. In this way, music—a core component of the liberal arts—supplies the means for a disavowing enactment of race.”¹⁴ Keeping Black music on the margins of the academy demonstrates another arena in which Young’s words on code-meshing ring true: while sounds with African roots dominate popular concerts, radio airwaves, film and television soundtracks, and more, many music programs frame them as implicitly inappropriate in an academic context. Remaking academic music institutions to be more inclusive and equitable will require that we make explicit the places where long-held standards cloaked in a language of colorblindness are obscuring systemic racism. Cultivating an awareness of code-meshing and the engrained resistance to it that characterizes the status quo opens up possibilities for substantive action on inclusion by both individual instructors and music schools and departments.

Reading *The River* in American Culture

When Alvin Ailey and Duke Ellington created *The River*, they engaged in a process that I see and hear as a musical and choreographic parallel to Young’s definition of code-meshing in speech and writing. The commission to create a work for the American Ballet Theatre offered the two creators a number of potential avenues for expression, including code switching, which could have looked and sounded like a demonstration of their understanding of the norms of ballet choreography and Western classical music, reaffirming the ballet stage

14. Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music,” 162.

as a space for work rooted in European formal traditions. Alternately, they could have created a work that asked the ABT dancers and musicians to code switch and demonstrate jazz and Black vernacular dance and musical techniques, displacing ballet traditions with jazz and modern dance. In the end, Ailey and Ellington's work did both and neither of these things. Ellington's score employs both swing and Stravinskian metric play, among other forms of meshing, and Ailey's choreography blends the footwork of ballet with the floorwork of modern dance. In effect, both artists developed a work that suited the abilities of the classically trained performers who would premiere it while also maintaining connections to their practices based in Black American traditions. Mixing jazz and classical elements together, *The River* marks both styles as fair game; neither is dominant nor uniquely appropriate to the setting.

The resulting mixture struck some reviewers as particularly disruptive, for *The River* neither looked nor sounded like Ailey, Ellington, or ABT usually did. Whether critics suggested that *The River* was too Black or not Black enough, the overall tenor of the critical reception pointed to unease around the work's mixture of European-derived and African American elements. Indeed, the many reviews suggesting that both Black and white choreographic and compositional techniques are worthwhile, but that their blending—their musical and choreographic “code-meshing”—could undermine the aesthetic and conceptual merits of the work, evince the kinds of segregationist convictions Young describes. In particular, the discomfort reviewers noted at seeing and hearing movement and music associated with Black traditions, which they considered to be less formal, emanating from bodies, instruments, and spaces linked to the more formal world of ballet, parallels the professional vs. street division described by Young. Studying this work (or others like it) and its reception offers students the opportunity to practice some of the traditional skills employed in music history classes—for example, analyzing rhythm and orchestration and reading primary sources—while exploring how certain linguistic and artistic modes of expression are interpreted in the context of highbrow cultural institutions.

In teaching *The River*, I piece together its story from the work of multiple authors with multiple modes of communication. Ellington is at the center: to learn about his project, students engage with both his words, in the form of interviews in which he discussed his ambitions for concert works and the narrative program he wrote for the ballet, and his music, in the form of score excerpts and recordings by his own jazz orchestra and a symphony orchestra. Ailey's voice as choreographer appears in video excerpts from the ballet, which remains a repertoire staple for the contemporary Ailey company. Finally, the voices of multiple critics writing at different points in Ellington's career,

including reviews of the ballet's premiere found in Ellington's scrapbooks,¹⁵ show how his compositions were celebrated in the context of social dance but more contentiously received on the concert or ballet stage.

While I present this material in the context of a jazz history course as part of a larger theme of exploring resistance to crossover projects by early jazz writers who shaped the canon and conventional narratives of jazz history, a similar approach could be employed from a different angle in a Western music history course, using *The River* or another of Ellington's concert works like *Black, Brown, and Beige*, a piece covered in some widely used Western music history textbooks and anthologies that also had a mixed reception at the time of its premiere. In the next section of this paper, following a more detailed delineation of the critical response to *The River*, I pivot to a discussion of how teaching this work and its reception history has impacted my approach to guiding and assessing student writing.

Mixed Reception of Mixed Idioms

After the students have read an excerpt from an Ellington interview in which he describes his aspirations to compose large-scale concert works, explored excerpts from the score to *The River*, and viewed brief examples from Ailey's choreography, they then read select reviews of the work. Critic Byron Belt's response, while noting both creators' stature as artists, is very critical of how far the orchestral writing in the ballet strays from Ellington's more conventional jazz composition:

Ailey is one of the most creative of modern dance choreographers, and of course the Duke is one of our authentic national treasures. One of my colleagues heard a tape of Ellington's score performed by the master's own band and says that what emerged through the treacle of the over-blown orchestration was scarcely a shadow of the original. Whatever happened to the music between Ellington's pen and last night's performance was only symbolic of what is wrong with "The River."¹⁶

Belt frames "whatever happened to the music between Ellington's pen and . . . [the] performance" by the American Ballet Theatre, which was an orchestration by Ron Collier for the ensemble of classically trained musicians who accompanied the dancers, as a corruption of the composer's artistry. He suggests that

15. The Ellington scrapbooks, most likely compiled for him rather than by him, are housed in the Duke Ellington Collection at the National Museum of American History, collection 301, series 8. In class, I project images of press clippings as they appear in the scrapbooks, in addition to providing some key passages that I have retyped for visual clarity and accessibility.

16. Byron Belt, "'The River' Fails to Flow," *Jersey Journal*, June 26, 1970, clipping in Ellington scrapbook.

the music would have better served its purpose had Ellington followed his standard operating procedure of writing specifically for the individual musicians in his regular ensemble, a group of jazz players encouraged to cultivate highly individualized voices through their improvisational practices and personalized instrumental timbres. The recording Belt refers to here as “the original,” however, itself reflects Ellington’s departure from his typical techniques toward a new style that meshes big band jazz and ballet scores. A journalist who witnessed the recording session in which Ellington’s band made rehearsal tapes for Ailey’s dancers described the composer exhorting trumpeter Cootie Williams not to improvise as he usually would, saying Williams was “apt to stumble upon something good” that wouldn’t be in the score. He also acknowledged to trombonist Booty Wood that something in his part “isn’t really a trombone lick,” and told Cat Anderson it was okay to lay out for sixteen bars of a written part that the lead trumpeter said he couldn’t play.¹⁷ If these rehearsal recordings, which were released on record only after Ellington’s death, can indeed be considered his original version of *The River*, the composer’s goal clearly involved departing from the ways he usually wrote for his typical collaborators.

Like Belt’s review criticizing the ballet score but praising Ellington by assuming that a recording of Ellington’s band playing *The River* must be aesthetically superior to the version by the ballet orchestra, much of the work’s reception aligns with the dominant preference for code switching over code-meshing in American culture, as discussed by Young.¹⁸ Even *New York Times* reviewer Clive Barnes, who raved about the new work, read its mixed influences in a hierarchical context privileging the classical forms associated with white culture. He wrote that “It is the most considerable piece from Mr. Ellington since his ‘Black, Brown, and Beige’ Suite,” classing the new ballet with the large-scale work that premiered in Carnegie Hall in 1943.¹⁹ Yet, while *The River* shared *Black, Brown, and Beige*’s high-art performance context, it was hardly Ellington’s first large-scale work in three decades; in the intervening years he had composed numerous suites, the television special *A Drum is a Woman*, and his stage show *My People*, which commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, among other works. Was it really “the piece” that was “considerable” for Barnes or the place in which the piece was performed?

17. “The River Optimism: A Ballet by Duke Ellington,” *Bangkok World*, June 18, 1970, clipping in Ellington scrapbook.

18. For an additional example of white critics praising Black jazz artists in traditionally Black spaces and genres but censoring their efforts to cross over to white spaces and audiences, see Christi Jay Wells on Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald, “A Dreadful Bit of Silliness: Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald’s Early Critical Reception,” *Women in Music* 21 (2017): 43–65.

19. Clive Barnes, “Loving Care for the Past,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1970, clipping in Ellington scrapbook.

While less negative than Belt, who found *The River* “silly, pretentious, and utterly banal,” *New York Post* reviewer Frances Herridge was more skeptical than Barnes about the appropriateness of Ellington’s music at the ballet, writing: “The mixture could be enough to make a traditional balletomane cringe.” While Herridge liked some aspects of the work, she also wavered between an apparent desire for more exoticism in the place of “simple ballet” and “romantic and symphonic” music. On the other hand, she expressed a feeling that the work’s mixed idioms undermined its attempts at seriousness. Indeed, she called the themes of Ellington’s written scenario “too pretentious for such modest choreography.”²⁰ In short, Herridge places Ellington and Ailey in a musical and choreographic double bind, a version of what Young describes for African American speakers and writers: “If they do give up [Black Vernacular English], they’re damned for being affected, overformal, artificial, even by those who require the extraction. But if they do use [Black Vernacular English], they’re damned for being too black, too radical, too militant, profiled as ignorant. Being damned in both directions stems from not being able to blend the two together.”²¹

While the blend of styles in *The River* was the main feature that interested reviewers and commentators, it also exposed their discomfort with the intermingling of idioms associated with different races. The reviews also reinforced a cultural hierarchy that privileges traditionally white forms of expression for artistic explorations of serious topics in high-art spaces.²² Ellington’s interest in broad themes and mixed styles may hold appeal for some audiences, yet the mixed reception also reveals an engrained resistance to code-meshing in a culture that tends to present forms of expression associated with minority groups as novelties, additions, or outside voices rather than equally valid communicative options in a diverse society.

20. Frances Herridge, “Ballet Theater Does Ailey Work,” *New York Post*, June 26, 1970, clipping in Ellington scrapbook.

21. Young, “Nah, We Straight,” 66.

22. Despite the hybrid work’s mixed early reception, it has also clearly filled a niche in concert halls and on ballet stages. It has been performed by a number of major dance companies and orchestras, including the Royal Swedish Ballet, the Pennsylvania Ballet, and the symphonies of Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, and Cleveland. In the decade surrounding the centennial of Ellington’s birth, it was performed an average of twenty times per year, peaking with thirty-five performances in 1999 when the composer would have turned one hundred, and while *The River* has been most popular in the United States, it has also been played by orchestras in Italy, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Peru. It has also served as a repertoire staple for the Ailey company throughout the past five decades. See Stephen Earl Tucker, “Edward Kennedy ‘Duke’ Ellington’s Ballet, ‘The River’: A Conductor’s Approach to the Preparation and Performance of the Score” (DMA diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007).

Grading Code-Meshing

While I encourage my students to dig into how and why Ellington met with resistance in his efforts to cross traditional boundaries, I don't want to make his story a cautionary tale about how the risks of experimentation are unlikely to be worth the rewards. As exploring diverse forms of musical expression has become an increasingly central aspect of the courses I teach, I have become more aware of the necessity of creating space for diverse forms of expression from students. Despite having grown accustomed to showcasing a wide range of musical styles that reflect their creators' diverse cultures, backgrounds, and values, I was still caught off-guard by the following statement from Asao Inoue's book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, as it pushed me to acknowledge the extent to which I expected my students to aim for a single standard language even as they wrote about a variety of musics: "All grading and assessment exist within systems that uphold singular, dominant standards that are racist, and White supremacist when used uniformly. This problem is present in any grading system that incorporates a standard, no matter who is judging, no matter the particulars of the standard."²³ Inoue, a professor of rhetoric and composition who has written numerous award-winning books and articles on writing assessment, makes a case for entirely avoiding measures of quality when grading student writing. My previous attempts to move toward fairness in my grading rubrics for student writing had led me to inch gradually in the direction of Inoue's model. For instance, I already placed more weight on first drafts, in which quality of the writing doesn't matter, and gave some points on final drafts simply for making revisions, regardless of the relative quality of the results from my perspective. After encountering Inoue's work, however, I forced myself to sit for a while with the idea that the grades I gave my students still weren't—and probably never would be—entirely equitable. As Valerie Balester puts it, "The knotty problem with rubrics is that in the attempt to standardize scoring and instruction, they also standardize prose."²⁴ Looking back, I could also see that the students who had the highest grades in my classes were most often those whose language habits mirrored mine. While these students represented a variety of different races (and, of course, race alone is far from being a singular defining factor in how students speak and write), it was also true that most of the students I was

23. Asao B. Inoue, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2019), 3.

24. Valerie Balester, "How Writing Rubrics Fail: Toward a Multicultural Model," in *Race and Writing Assessment*, ed. Asao Inoue and Mya Poe (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 63. Balester advocates for rhetorically driven rubrics interpreted by instructors who are trained to understand linguistic diversity as a useful rhetorical strategy.

giving high grades to were white, and the students receiving the lowest grades were frequently people of color and non-native English speakers. I had been grading students as I was accustomed to being graded when a student myself, and the students who were most successful in my courses were, generally speaking, the ones whose backgrounds, educations, culture, and ethnicity most closely resembled my own. I needed to reevaluate my standards and reconsider why students who are different from me take my classes and what meaningful learning and success in music history might look like from other perspectives.

As music history instructors, we are likely familiar with the experience of having a group of students who have found their way to our classrooms in large part due to their shared strengths as musicians but who also have wildly different linguistic backgrounds and educational goals. For instance, performance-focused students who have never devoted time to developing writing skills, international students new to coursework in English, honors students with several semesters of experience in writing-intensive courses, and music education majors pushing through an overload of credits and several hours per week of marching band commitments may all find themselves in the same music history class. This mixture of students is already diverse even before considering the role factors like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability may play in students' experiences with language, communication, and writing. In addition, these students will all use writing in their future careers, but not necessarily in the same ways. While a handful may go on to regularly write academic papers as a primary form of written communication, others will be teachers corresponding with students, parents, and administrators; performers explaining and promoting their work in website content, program notes, or press releases; arts administrators writing grant applications and fund-raising letters; and creators whose use of written language forms a part of their artistic and entrepreneurial pursuits. Such a diverse classroom points to a question Inoue raises: "How do we respond to the code-meshed, multilingual, heteroglossia (in writing and speech) of our students when language is not normalized, when there is no living 'standard' English in practice, only Englishes performed?"²⁵ Indeed, when I asked a class of music history students what "standard English" is, the first response a student offered was, "Not what I grew up speaking." The second was, "Maybe how my mother-in-law talks?" When I ask my students to write in "standard English," some of them hear a request to write like someone else.

In reflecting on his own experience as an African American student, Young writes, "It didn't take me long to see that in the right environments, especially

25. Asao B. Inoue, "Foreword: On Antiracist Agendas" in *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, eds. Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017), xv.

at school, that the more I acted white, the more I seemed to succeed.”²⁶ When I grade my students on how *well* I think they write in what I think is “standard English” (perhaps more appropriately labeled “my English”), I have set them on a very bumpy playing field with a questionable goalpost. In Inoue’s words to teachers:

Now, let me be blunt. If you grade writing by a so-called standard, let’s call it Standard English, then you are engaged in an institutional and disciplinary racism, a system set up to make winners and losers by a dominant standard. Who owns the dominant standard? Where does that standard come from? What social group is it most associated with? Who benefits most from the use of the standard? How is that social group racialized in our society? Do you see where I’m going with this?²⁷

Inoue’s questions about writing are so like the ones I ask my students to consider when listening to music that I have found it urgent to address them in my own writing assessment practices. While I recognize that music history instructors also come from a variety of positions in relation to institutional systems and may have varying degrees of comfort with changing—or even the ability to change—grading approaches in their classes, I hope the examples offered below can provide some ideas on how alternative writing assessment practices can be used both as meaningful pairings with diverse course content and as tools for the promotion of social justice and institutional change.²⁸

I have now experimented with multiple versions of labor-based grading systems using the model Inoue describes in detail in *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*. For me, his system is best suited to relatively small classes in which writing is a central focus, so I have used a version closely related to his in graduate and honors undergraduate classes with around twenty or fewer students. In an honors music appreciation course, for example, I assigned one or two brief writing assignments per week, usually in the form of responses to assigned reading or listening, and a final project with a couple of preparatory stages like an annotated bibliography and rough draft. Completing a good-faith effort of

26. Vershawn Ashanti Young, “Your Average Nigga,” *College Composition and Communication* 55, no. 4 (2004): 701–2.

27. Inoue, “On Antiracist Agendas,” xv.

28. Writing teacher Jesse Stommel offers the following reflection on experimenting with approaches to grading: “I have not felt I could be fully out about my approach to grading at every institution where I’ve worked. When I was a ‘road warrior’ adjunct, teaching up to 9 courses at 4 institutions, how I talked about my pedagogy was different from one institution to the next. I had to balance my own approach with the specific requirements at each institution. But I can also say that none of the institutions where I’ve worked (including R1s, community colleges, liberal arts colleges) has entirely dictated how I had to approach assessment—at every single one there was sufficient wiggle room for experimentation.” Jesse Stommel, “How to Ungrade,” March 11, 2018, <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>.

all those assignments would earn a B for the semester. (I only marked a handful of assignments unsatisfactory over the course of the semester, and only in cases of work that was significantly short of the assigned word count or not clearly related to the assigned material.) For an A, students also had to take on two additional projects from a list of options—these included creating video presentations that supplemented course content or offering feedback on their peers' project drafts. A complete final project was required for a passing grade, and a set number of missing or incomplete assignments would result in a C or lower. For each assignment, I provided comments but no grades. I was curious to see whether I would perceive a difference in quality by my old standards when comparing students' efforts in this labor-based course to a version I had taught in the past that was very similar in most respects but used conventional grades. I found that the work that the two groups of students submitted was extremely similar. In other words, I did not notice students making any more or fewer mechanical errors in their writing, and they seemed to experience similar amounts and types of rhetorical victories and challenges—I was simply free to comment on these features of the writing without assigning scores.

In graduate courses where I have opted out of conventional grading, I have noticed more students taking creative risks with the tone and style of their writing than I used to see when those aspects of their prose showed up as point values on my rubrics. Put directly, without grades, my students have moved toward code-meshing. Some of their efforts strike me as more rhetorically successful than others, but one common result has been that I now feel like I know my students better as people—their work for class more frequently reflects their values, goals, and past experiences in personal, individual ways than the more strictly policed academic writing I was used to reading in past years. Given that the majority of the students I work with major in performance or composition rather than musicology or theory, I could see the conscious development of a personal voice as a writer to be a more reasonable and practical goal than mastering a traditional academic style—explaining their work as artists and connecting with broad audiences would certainly be easier in the former style than in the latter. In graduate classes, I include discussions about traditional academic writing as a source of power within the current structure of the academy and offer instruction on how to do it, but removing traditional grades has freed students to explore and hone other means of communication that relate more closely to their individual professional goals.

In survey courses with more clearly defined content requirements and more students, I don't find substantial written feedback on weekly work to be practical, so I have adapted my labor-based system to involve one larger written project with feedback, some shorter writing assignments that I simply

mark as complete or incomplete, and a set of pass/fail collaborative quizzes.²⁹ In addition to a passing quiz average, students need to submit a completed final written project for a C or better in the course. They can decide to pursue a higher grade by completing additional assignments. Each student submits a grade contract during the first week of class to let me know what they intend to earn and which assignments they will complete to do so, and then we revisit the contracts at midterm to see if the grades they originally chose are still the ones they intend to pursue or if they have adjusted their plans to include more or less work. The work for a B or higher requires more writing that engages more advanced readings beyond the textbook, and the work for an A requires some kind of contribution to the experience of other students in the course, like leading a study session or discussion group, giving a presentation, or participating in multiple student-led sessions outside regular class time. Ultimately, the aim is that any student can choose to earn any grade. While many want As, others acknowledge up front that their lack of available time or interest makes planning for a B or C a better option for them.

While some models for contract-based grading, including Inoue's, have students document the amount of time they put into class work as a central metric, I opt to simply count completed assignments, in part because of the enormous number of factors that impact the amount of time any individual student will need or be able to devote to any given project. One of the most significant criticisms leveled at labor-based grading is that the labor at its center is not equally accessible to all students. As Ellen Carillo argues, students with disabilities, the need to work while in school, or intersectional identities that create multiple layers of marginalization do not necessarily have the same resources to devote to a course that many of their peers do for reasons that have no direct

29. My adoption of collaborative quizzes was inspired by a workshop with Jay Howard, author of *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015). In my survey course, students have to maintain an average passing score of 70 percent or better on the quizzes throughout the semester to pass the course, demonstrating general familiarity with the content, but any passing grade works equally well. Three quarters of their quiz grade comes from taking the quiz on their own, and the remaining quarter comes from immediately retaking the same quiz in a randomly assigned small group. Generally speaking, a group score only shifts an individual score by a few percentage points. Someone who needs one more right answer to pass has a good chance of getting through a rough quiz, but any individual score of 59 percent or lower can't be brought up to a passing level by even a perfect group score—a person who is woefully underprepared for quizzes won't pass the course on group work alone. Meanwhile, all get immediate feedback on their answers and reinforcement of key material and concepts as they discuss their responses to each question with their peers, coming to a consensus before submitting their group work. When I transitioned from traditional grades on collaborative quizzes to a pass/fail model, the class average score remained consistent, somewhere in the mid 80s, so the students' work suggests to me that they prepare equally well for them without the threat or reward of a typical grade.

relationship to their desire to learn the material or willingness to put in effort. For this reason, Carillo advocates instead for what she calls engagement-based contracts:

Focusing on engagement rather than labor . . . addresses my contention that labor-based grading contracts perpetuate a normative conception of time, as well as the unnecessary and unfounded connection between time and willingness. Students may have the will to labor, but they may not have the time to do so. This is often a socioeconomic issue that limits how inclusive labor-based grading contracts actually are. It is also a (dis)ability issue. If students are allowed to choose the form of engagement that is suitable and possible for them at a particular moment in time, that can help bridge willingness and ability.³⁰

Carillo also suggests the possibility of starting contracts from scratch in collaboration with the actual students in a class rather than constructing a contract in advance for hypothetical future students, a system that, even when flexible, puts the onus on students to seek accommodations around implicit norms and standards. Indeed, while labor-based grades can level one aspect of the playing field, they also bring new rough patches as reminders that efforts toward justice in education and assessment are a work in progress rather than an arrival point. With each move I make toward fairness in my classroom, I encounter yet another real individual student whose specific situation has me reconsidering my methods.

As pointed out by Linda Nilson, labor-based grades can indeed lead to grade inflation, and her book *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* offers an alternative grading model that uses a similar contract approach but ties grades more directly to mastery of course objectives.³¹ As an instructor, however, I find it challenging and not necessarily maximally productive to direct all student writers toward the same measurable outcome and then decide whether or not they have completed an assignment “correctly” or “mastered” a given skill. In approaching each student writing project with the open-ended goal of providing individual feedback, I leave myself the flexibility to respond to any elements of the writing that I see as particularly strong or in need of revision and treat writing skills as lifelong practices rather than a series of perfectly ordered steps to be mastered. In addition, research on an anti-grade-inflation policy at Wellesley College found that Black students, who already had lower grades than their white colleagues before the program was enacted, were disproportionately impacted when faculty members

30. Ellen C. Carillo, *The Hidden Inequalities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (Logan: Utah State University Press), 58–59.

31. Linda B. Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015).

intentionally reversed grade inflation.³² I also find that avoiding any form of grade on writing projects is helpful in guiding students away from seeing a grade as the underlying purpose of a piece of writing. The purpose of their writing is to communicate their ideas, and I respond to it as an opening for conversation rather than an opportunity to rate their ability. As Susan Blum points out in her introduction to *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, decades of educational psychology research point to the fact that grades are counterproductive to the goal of motivating students to learn.³³ A labor-based approach that gives credit for all good-faith efforts, incentivizes extra effort to support the learning of the whole community, and ultimately allows all students a pathway to earn the grade they feel they need or want better supports my pedagogical goals. One of my roles is then to foster an environment in which most students can find intrinsic motivation to take on challenging material and create high-quality work.

Just as I consider music like *The River* to be legible through the lens of code-meshing, I see many parallels to labor-based writing grades in other places in a typical university music program, and I think music history instructors can look to some of our colleagues in performance to see students thriving on intrinsic motivation in classroom settings that grade engagement more than ability. It's not only the principal players in the orchestra that earn As for the semester, and a less skilled performer making a modest success of a relatively simple piece after a semester of diligent practice and improvement might well score higher on a jury than a more skilled player whose performance of a more challenging work is underprepared. A singer who struggles with intonation in an open-enrollment choir is unlikely to get a C after showing up on time for and being attentive during every rehearsal and performance—feedback and instruction on how to improve would be more typical in this circumstance than a hit to the student's GPA. At the same time, we are surrounded by instructors who demand excellence and foster growth. In many cases, students want to do well in music performance contexts not because of the threat or reward of a grade, but because they are in learning environments that are conducive to intrinsic motivation.

32. Kristin F. Butcher, Patrick J. McEwan, and Akila Weerapana, "The Effects of an Anti-Grade-Inflation Policy at Wellesley College," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 195.

33. Susan D. Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

Open to Surprises

With the goal of fostering intrinsic motivation in mind, I have moved away from conventional grading and toward more open-ended assignments and projects as a means of setting up students to do their best work. As author and writing pedagogue John Warner argues, “Student writing tends to be judged against a standard of ‘correctness’ and resemblance to a kind of ‘standard’ academic writing that doesn’t actually exist in nature, the making of which bears little resemblance to the process writers employ when confronted with genuine writing tasks.”³⁴ A number of musicologists have documented successful shifts away from requiring conventional academic papers as a key component of music history courses. As Erinn Knyt writes, “For some students, the biggest impediment to writing a good research paper is a lack of real engagement with the project as they fail to see its importance for their lives and careers.”³⁵ After shifting to a system in which students could choose to design alternative projects to replace traditional paper assignments, Knyt found, “The majority of the alternative projects were exceptional. Many of the creative projects displayed more careful planning, more extensive preparation, and greater attention to detail than traditional projects produced by the same students in other classes. I found that most students choosing the alternative formats typically wrote just as much or more and consulted just as many or more sources than students did with traditional research papers.”³⁶

Similarly, Sara Haefeli found that assigning students blogs read by their peers rather than regular papers with an assumed audience of the professor alone “not only promoted better writing outcomes but a specific kind of thinking process—what Bloom’s taxonomy advocates would call ‘higher order thinking skills.’”³⁷ In part, the success of alternative writing assignments may lie in the fact that they encourage students to write in their own version of English. Warner notes that, “The writing-related tasks we frequently visit upon students would prove difficult for even highly experienced writers. Writing on subjects with which we’re newly familiar, in forms that are foreign, and addressed to audiences that are either undefined or unknown (other than ‘for the teacher’) bears little resemblance to the way we write for the world.”³⁸ Esther Morgan-Ellis and Kristen Strandberg also note that alternative writing assignments, especially those that will be read by a broader audience than the professor

34. John Warner, *Why They Can’t Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 14.

35. Knyt, “Rethinking,” 25.

36. Knyt, “Rethinking,” 35.

37. Haefeli, “Using Blogs,” 40.

38. Warner, *Why They Can’t Write*, 27.

alone, “often produce better quality writing. Rather than attempting to produce an essay using what they perceive as academic language, students write clearly and directly for a specific audience.”³⁹ Instead of asking students to write papers that look like stepping stones to replicate my academic work or to aim for words and content that they hope might earn my A, I seek to motivate them to hone their expressive use of language to engage with their own interests and goals as artists and communicators.

In a jazz history course for approximately sixty undergraduates that functions similarly in many respects to the kind of lecture-based Western art music history sequence courses I have taught in the past, I give students the option of writing a traditional academic paper or reimagining the project in an alternative format of their choosing, and all papers are read not just by me but also by groups of their fellow students. This assignment is set up by our conversation about Ellington’s *River* and its reception, during which students explore the idea that different forms of expression carry different forms of cultural currency, reach different audiences, and achieve different outcomes. We consider how Ellington took an artistic risk that met with mixed results in part because of the systems in which he was working, and we talk about the possibilities and potential problems involved in taking risks as college-level writers, noting that some students may want the opportunity to master academic writing for the doors that skill opens while others may want to trouble the system that values some forms of writing over others.

In the end, the majority of students write straightforward academic essays, but some of the most successful and interesting writing shows up in alternative-format projects. I don’t have a formal way of measuring or documenting student motivation, yet my interactions with students suggest that at least some of them find that the option to create an alternative project sparks a desire to engage more deeply with the assignment. For example, a student who was taking this course in the same semester as her general education composition course told me afterward that she ended up putting much more thought, time, and effort into the comic strip she created for her jazz history assignment than she did for any of the traditional papers in her writing class. In the process of creating her project, she met with me during my office hours to discuss the logistics of how she would meet the requirements for the project within the format she had chosen and, specifically, how she would code-mesh by incorporating both technical language from the class and vernacular slang she envisioned for the characters in her comic. In the course of our conversation, we were also able to discuss some of the challenges she was having understanding the reading that was part of the assignment, a very productive exchange that I doubt would have happened if her excitement about drawing a comic hadn’t gotten her to my

39. Morgan-Ellis and Strandberg, “Practical and Engaging Alternatives.”

office in the first place. Another student and I had a similarly productive conversation as she developed her ideas for a fictional Twitter exchange between members of the 1960s jazz avant-garde, blending careful description of musical sound with inflammatory social media rhetoric. The ability to mix elements of Englishes they knew from outside class with the terminology and material we were studying helped them create rich, interesting, and expressive projects.

Completing the writing assignment is a necessary element in passing the course, and certain components are required: use and documentation of both primary and secondary sources (in this case, I provide some preselected ones given that the course serves a broad population with varying degrees of research and writing experience), analysis of music (again, from a selection of specific recordings I provide with the option to add other examples), and discussion of connections between the music and the historical context in which it was performed or recorded. We spend one class session on a writing workshop in which students work in small groups to plan their projects and discuss the assigned readings and music. They then submit drafts and spend a second class session on a peer-review activity before submitting final versions to me for feedback. I provide comments only, unless one of the assignment's required elements is missing, in which case the student submits another revision to successfully complete the assignment. While many choose standard papers, which are not notably different in quality to academic papers I received in courses in which I used traditional grading, others have made videos, podcasts, websites, or program notes that take on a more public-facing style and tone. Other students have produced highly individualized creative writing, including a television script, a letter from a fictional (and grumpy) government bureaucrat weighing in on the use of jazz in Cold War diplomacy, and a newspaper as it would appear in print, complete with headlines, photos, and advertisements.

Conclusion

While musicologists continue to make great strides toward more diverse and inclusive curricula by engaging with a wider variety of musical voices in music history classes, there is much we can learn from scholars of writing pedagogy about how to value diverse forms of student writing and instruct student writers from disparate language experiences and backgrounds. By connecting the work of the musicians we describe in our classes to the way we design and grade assignments for our students, we can foster an environment for creative risk-taking in the classroom while also making space for more versions of what student success could look like. In the critical take-down of *The River* that I have my students read, Belt notes that the unorthodox and, to his mind, inappropriate work could have been stopped “if someone in artistic power had sat

back and observed dispassionately what was going on under their noses.” He considers the work to have slipped through when “management . . . simply abdicated its responsibility to determine artistic standards.”⁴⁰ The responsibility to determine and enforce standards is indeed a powerful one, and half a century after *The River’s* rough premiere, it is time to reconsider whether classroom standards are helping students learn or are merely gate-keeping to maintain an acceptable standard for student work long delimited by a white, middle- and upper-class perspective. When students are given the opportunity to bring their existing language knowledge into a course and combine it with the new knowledge they gain, the door is open to new forms of expression that can speak to diverse communities—not just the ones in which they are learning but also those they come from and those they may aspire to build.

40. Belt, “‘The River’ Fails to Flow.”