



**Sociocultural Affordances of Using a Musical/Multimodal/Multilingual  
Approach in a Puerto Rican/Transnational Composition Classroom**

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**Abstract**

This article presents the results of implementing a musical/multimodal/multilingual pedagogical approach to foster literacy practices in an ESL composition classroom at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez Campus. Based on the students' written reflections, multimodal texts, and subsequent interviews, this qualitative research study highlights the sociocultural affordances of engaging students in multimodal interpretation of music and music videos, as well as encouraging student production of multimodal texts, while shuttling between languages. Following A. Suresh Canagarajah (2001), if we adopt a negotiation model with multilingual writers, "rather than treating writers as passive, conditioned by their language and culture, we would treat them as agentive, shuttling creatively between discourses to achieve their communicative objectives" (161). This study also joins others who have explored sound's potential in composing multimodal products (McKee, 2006; Shipka, 2006) but follows a broader conception of multimodal literacy (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) and multimodal discourse (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2004). Coupling a multimodal teaching approach with multilingual considerations provides students with a space for careful reflection of sociocultural issues within a transnational academic writing setting.

**Keywords**

Transnational, Multimodal, Multilingual, Media, Literacy

**Introduction**

Given the rise of new media technologies in the twenty-first century, it should come as no surprise that the field of rhetoric and composition has increasingly been paying attention to the multimodality of texts and the affordances that understanding their production and consumption practices can provide for understanding literacy more broadly. Simply put, the concept of multimodality involves the use of more than one mode of representation, for example, audio-visual and spatial-gestural, among other combinations. As Carey Jewitt and Gunther Kress

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(2003) explain, “multimodality focuses on the modal resources that are brought into meaning-making” (p. 5). Scholars of multimodality, then, are interested in studying the ways in which different modes are present in different communicative events, and how these might contribute to learning. Specifically, this study joins others that have explored sound’s potential in understanding and composing multimodal products (McKee, 2006; Shipka, 2006), but follows a broader conception of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2004).

Within that scope, there are a number of scholars who have been exploring a variety of aspects of the analysis of musical texts in order to inform our conceptions of multimodal composition and its cultural repercussions, especially in a few special collections of rhetoric and composition journals like *Computers and Composition* (2006) and *Harlot* (2013), among others. In the introduction to a 1999 special issue dealing with music from the online journal *Enculturation*, Byron Hawk and Thomas Rickert explain the importance of writing about musical texts and their relationships to culture: “To confront music is to address the issue of being composed... The move is not only from one sound to another, but from one semiotically rich scene to another, one genealogy to another, one legacy to another, and all in search of new sources, new links, new writings” (para. 1). Hawk and Rickert’s coupling of music and culture brings to mind issues of geopolitical locations and different language encounters and resulting sociocultural negotiations. In the process of expanding the reach of global literacies, it is of utmost importance to address the geopolitical conditions of the specific contexts under study, and one way this can be achieved is by paying attention to the numerous ways in which sociocultural issues are addressed in the consumption and production of multimodal texts. To address multimodal composition scholarship with an emphasis on geopolitical location, this article presents the sociocultural affordances of implementing a musical/multimodal/multilingual pedagogical approach to foster reading and writing practices in an ESL composition classroom at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez Campus (UPRM), conceived here as a transnational composition classroom.

### **Contextualizing the Transnational**

To better situate the concept of a transnational composition classroom, in this study, the term *transnational* refers to the neocolonial relations that Puerto Rico and United States have shared for a little more than a century. Having been colonized by Spain for approximately 400 years, Puerto Ricans have developed a conception of Puerto Rican citizenship and nationality that is similar to that of other postcolonial countries in the Caribbean and Latin America more broadly; that is, the Puerto Rican creole or *mestiza/o* is a mix of Taíno indigene, Spanish and African populations, a mix that is reflected in cultural practices like language and music, among others. Since 1898, Puerto Rico and United States government officials have engaged in multiple negotiations about language and other cultural practices, which have created a certain kind of transnational context wherein the dominant language is still Spanish. Thus, the concept of a transnational composition classroom used here is still fraught with the particularities of a specific Puerto Rican setting and its history.

Although the attention to transnational populations has been gathering more attention within rhetoric and composition, scholars should pay attention to the framework’s potential for reductive generalization. For example, within literary scholarship, the term *transnational* has also been used to characterize a broadly defined category of *Latina/o* writing in the continental U.S. (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2014). Taking up a more explicitly postcolonial lens, Louise Rodriguez

Connal (2004) applies the concept of language hybridity to Puerto Rican populations in the continental U.S., suggesting that we should study the “linguistic patterns and codes used by our students” (p. 212). However, scholarship on transnational rhetoric often pays attention to conceptions of hybridity while still being critical of its limits (Walsh, 2012). A potential problematic of adopting a concept such as hybridity is that it can gloss over the particular conditions and historical contexts of specific populations. As Deepika Bahri (2004) states: “If the concept of hybridity is useful in undoing binaries and approaching the complexities of transnationalism, as many would find in composition studies, it also tends to avoid the question of location because it suggests a zone of nowhere and a people afloat in a weightless ether of ahistoricity” (p. 80). The dearth of rhetoric and composition literature on Puerto Rican literacy practices warrants an explanation of the complexity of language use in Puerto Rico in order to expand theorizations of transnational occurrences of hybridity in this Caribbean setting.

In “Configurations of Transnationality: Locating Feminist Rhetorics,” Wendy S. Hesford and Eileen E. Schell (2008) pose Puerto Ricans as a “transnational ethnic configuration” as they call for the field’s “consideration of the epistemological and historical ties between disciplinary formations and U.S. imperialism” (p. 463). Indeed, contested language politics in the development of public education policies for this neocolonial territory have affected the ways in which English language varieties are utilized by Puerto Ricans, and, by extension, how English Composition courses are taught in Puerto Rican higher education settings. With Spanish being the dominant language used in social, governmental, and popular media, the reigning policy for language use in the public school system consists of Spanish as the language of instruction for all subjects, except for the one hour of mandatory English courses for K-12 levels (Comisión de Educación, Ciencia y Cultura, 2001). However, certain private education institutions tend to adopt bilingual approaches or use English as the language of instruction for all subjects except Spanish. Thus, by the time students arrive at higher education institutions like UPRM, they bring in different levels of English language proficiency that may be influenced by their socioeconomic background.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, as Catherine Mazak (2008) explains, complex linguistic situations arise when there are imposed languages in colonial situations: “In some ways, the Americanization campaign of long ago is still present, not as explicit policy in Puerto Rico, but as a continuing consequence of colonialism and global capitalism” (p. 69). The teaching of English composition in Puerto Rico is thus affected by cultural negotiations that occur inside and outside of the classroom, negotiations affected by its neocolonial history.

Not ignoring how the English language has, historically, been imposed in Puerto Rico since U.S. occupation, and the contemporary repercussions of implementing such policies, it must be noted that addressing hybridity can also suggest that culture and language are affected by *transcultural flows* wherein “new technologies and communications are enabling immense and complex flows of people, signs, sounds, images across multiple borders in multiple directions” (Pennycook, 2007, p. 25). An attention to transcultural flows acknowledges points of departure and arrival in constant motion, which relates to the notion of hybridity discussed above. It is necessary to acknowledge transcultural flows in the context of this study, as different media have exerted great influence in the development of Puerto Rican language practices. It certainly can be argued that a hybrid media culture combining elements from various contexts has steadily emerged. It seems logical, then, to incorporate the kinds of media that many students

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<sup>2</sup> Although there were no explicit questions about the students’ socioeconomic background, in 2008 the working class in Puerto Rico constituted 34 percent of the population, while the percentage of the population below the poverty level constituted 44.8 percent at the time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

are already familiar with into Puerto Rican English classrooms as an effective teaching strategy that might contribute, not only to pedagogical practice and scholarship, but to debates about cultural flows in contemporary, mass mediated and transnational contexts.

### **Research Design: A Musical/Multimodal/Multilingual Approach**

Recognizing that multimodal critical media literacy practices are affected by global capitalism and neocolonial conditions in specific geopolitical (Puerto Rican) contexts, this article presents a case study of a group of English Composition and Reading students in the last of four courses from a “Basic English Track.”<sup>3</sup> Following normative English Composition teaching practices, this group of students engaged in narrative analysis and criticism of literary texts from a standard print-based textbook. As part of the research framework, however, they also participated in a unit wherein they systematically analyzed multimodal media texts by reading a song’s lyrics before listening to its musical composition, or watching the music video production, and comparing their interpretations. Thus, throughout the semester, students engaged in close readings of literary and media texts using the corresponding terminology or the specific academic discourse for both forms. Students also read scholarly articles about the music that they were to interact with, which provided them with examples of the kind of analysis that they were to partake in. Towards the end of the unit, students also produced multimodal texts of their own. While the texts they were exposed to were all in English, their multimodal productions were based on the analysis of self-selected music texts in a variety of languages. The purpose of designing the class in this way was for students to be able to draw their own convictions about the narratives in different texts and to learn how to express them using the appropriate academic and media terminology. The results suggest that engaging students in systematic study of musical/multimodal texts motivates them to critically analyze their media consumption practices (as they expressed in numerous class discussions) in addition to practicing nuanced academic writing about sociocultural issues they can identify with/in multilingual texts (as evidenced in their written reflections and academic essays). While the study was carried out in 2008,<sup>4</sup> the insights provided by the data presented in this article can also inform the field about musical/multimodal/multilingual practices in the specific geopolitical location of Puerto Rico, a U.S. Caribbean territory where, to date, no other composition studies have adopted the perspective of multimodality.

On a methodological note, before implementing the study, all of the students signed a consent form wherein they agreed to participate in the study knowing that their identities would be protected by my use of pseudonyms. Once the study was underway, one of the main methods of data collection was participant observation, as teacher researchers are often prompted to rely on participant observation of their own classes (Creswell, 2005; Nickoson, 2012). Besides relying on participant observation, data was collected through interviews and document collection. To identify interview participants I used extreme case sampling as elaborated by

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of this study, the policy for student placement at UPRM mandated students who score less than 570 points on the English section of the College Board Entrance Examination to be placed in the Basic English track. This track consists of two Basic English courses taken during their first year of undergraduate studies and two composition courses taken at any point thereafter. The course under study was the second part of the English Composition and Reading courses (ENGL 3202), offered in the fall semester of 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The findings of this study were part of the research completed in the process of acquiring a Masters of Arts in English Education in the same institution; the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez, or UPRM.

Robert Stake (2005), prompting the identification of interview participants who exhibited difficulties with classroom interactions and discomfort in the analyses of texts, in addition to those deemed “successful” at this. Besides providing insights into the ways students approached the different types of texts, interviews supplemented my understandings of students’ multimodal analyses. Moreover, our interviews did not follow a set structure because, as Andrea Fontana and James Frey (2000) note, during unstructured interviews there is an “establishment of a human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to *understand* rather than to *explain*” (p. 654). In this flexible process, students could see these interviews as their opportunity to teach me something, and they seemed to enjoy the notion of participating in the expansion of a public record on Puerto Rico.

Consonant to feminist research methodologies (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Selfe & Hawisher, 2012), there was a second set of interviews held in order to verify my interpretations of their assertions in the first set of interviews. These interviews were intended to promote students’ active reflection about their multimodal reading practices and to facilitate accurate descriptions of the different modalities they relied on for meaning making, as well as their media/print literacy practices. Based on my observations of students’ interactions with multimodal texts, the collection of their written reflections throughout the research process, and the information gathered through interviews, this qualitative research study highlights the sociocultural affordances of engaging students in multimodal interpretation of music and music videos in addition to traditional print-based literature, as well as encouraging student production of multimodal texts in addition to academic writing, all the while shuttling between languages.

Following A. Suresh Canagarajah (2001), if we adopt a negotiation model with multilingual writers, “rather than treating writers as passive, conditioned by their language and culture, we would treat them as agentive, shuttling creatively between discourses to achieve their communicative objectives” (p. 161). Considering the language politics mentioned above, the negotiation model allows for an exploration of strategies that Puerto Rican students employ in English Composition courses in what can be labeled an English as a Second Language environment. Negotiation of linguistic and cultural scripts is also applicable to students’ critical media literacy practices. As media literacy scholars David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (1994) propose, the ways students read and understand texts occur in a social context, and are subject to many different factors that include not only the particular modes used, but also the specific content and cultural associations particular texts may provoke for them. Similar to Hawk & Rickert’s (1999) assertion, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) account for the cultural genealogies that any particular multimodal media text may connote for its users. Ultimately, this article argues that coupling a musical/multimodal teaching approach with multilingual considerations provides students with a space for careful reflection of sociocultural issues within a transnational academic writing setting.

### **Puerto Rican Musical/Multimodal/Multilingual Literacy Practices**

Interested in Puerto Rican students’ literacy practices in general, at the beginning of the unit under study here, students were asked to write reflections on their reading practices. Most responded with a reference to their print-based reading practices, specifying the conditions in which they liked to read, such as a quiet place in their homes. Some others referred to the actual act of reading, such as taking note of the different themes or characters developing in the texts they read by making annotations on page margins. During the interviews, however, students

were a bit more honest, one of them even admitting “I just read for the classes, do my work for the university, and that’s it!”<sup>5</sup> While this insight about contemporary Puerto Rican students’ print-based reading practices, or lack thereof, doesn’t necessarily represent the general population, it is still significant to note that reading for pleasure was not a common practice among the group represented here. However, the unstructured interview setting allowed me to probe more about one student’s everyday textual consumption. With my suggestion of a text being more than print-based literature, following a poststructural literary approach (Eagleton, 1996), the student then admitted to watching television all the time.

Because student responses were not providing an understanding of their musical literacies, per se, the following journal assignment prompted them to reflect on how they listen to music. Referring to the work of Aaron Copland (2002), Heidi McKee (2006) elaborates the division of the act of listening to music into three planes: the “sensuous” plane, when someone listens to music generally focusing on its rhythm; the “expressive” plane, in which the listener focuses on the meaning of the song; and the “sheerly musical” plane, which refers to paying attention to the musical structure of the song, promoting a more active kind of listening (p. 344). In light of this perspective, students were prompted to consider these categories in a written reflection about their music listening practices before starting the media unit. They were later exposed to the four distinct elements of music that Copland (2002) describes throughout his book: rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone color, which in turn provided them with terminology for understanding the multiple modes with which they could describe their constructed meaning(s) from music-based texts.

Similar to McKee’s (2006) assertions about music listening practices (p. 344), students in this study admitted to listening to music in ways that overlap across all three planes; as Daniel mentioned in a class discussion, “it is something intuitive that we all do when we listen to music.”<sup>6</sup> Most of them, however, expressed a preference for rhythm, focusing on the sensuous plane of the song prior to its actual content. This was confirmed in a group discussion on how they choose the music they like. Students specified that the first thing they notice when listening to new music is the rhythm. In addition, students who were interviewed also specified that they tend to notice the rhythm and then proceed to focus on the lyrics, or the “message” of the song.

As suggested above, following and exposing students to Aaron Copland’s (2002) description of different musical listening planes – the sensuous, expressive, and sheerly musical – provided us all with a framework to discuss music consumption practices. In most cases, there was a connection between listening to music while “doing” something else, such as driving, schoolwork, or house chores. Similarly, other students mentioned that they listen to different kinds of music depending on the “moods” that they are in. For example, Caryn described how she listens to punk music when she is angry, or slower music when she wants to relax. Therefore, music can be used to create atmosphere, or it can be played as a consequence of one. Both reflect the idea that music is often associated with feelings, or used for setting a mood in a particular atmosphere, which was also suggested by McKee (2006, p. 343). However, one of the main goals of the unit was to go beyond the sensuous listening practices into explorations of

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<sup>5</sup> While quoting the students’ words I leave their grammatical errors intact to avoid changing their statements by incorporating my own corrections, and because this offers an appreciation of the ESL context in which the study took place.

<sup>6</sup> As specified above, I use pseudonyms to refer to the students to protect their identities. These pseudonyms were chosen following gender and language (English or Spanish) conventions.

expressive and sheerly musical components that carry over cultural and ideological genealogies, as Hawk and Rickert (1999) suggest.

To maintain a focus on their musical media literacy practices outside of the classroom, students were prompted to describe the various interactions they had with music. To “find” new music, for example, students rely on each other, the Internet, radio, and less often on television. One could expect television but, as Daniel expressed, students have numerous expenses, and paying for cable is one that is often unnecessary because people can currently watch most popular television programs via Internet websites, such as YouTube. This assertion indicates that students do participate in active evaluations of media texts individually as well as socially, particularly outside of the classroom and using new media technologies like YouTube. While these evaluations are based on a wide variety of modes that students did not address explicitly, I argue that by systematically participating in the analysis of different modes of meaning in the classroom, students will carry these practices over to spaces beyond academic settings. In other words, students developed the kinds of analyses of media texts they were already performing outside of the classroom by applying the specific terminology used to describe the way music and music video media texts function.

In order to promote this kind of academic multimodal evaluation of music and music video media texts, I provided students with printed handouts of the lyrics to the songs or music videos that were to be discussed. Specifically, students would use the handout to write their interpretations of each stanza prior to listening to the song. Then, after playing the song or music video, students were encouraged to add different interpretations to their initial annotations, focusing on the musical or video conventions discussed in class, such as the four elements proposed by Copland (2002), and film studies terminology like *mise-en-scene* (Monaco, 2000). Considering that “discourses are articulated in modes other than speech or writing” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 29), this multimodal approach afforded an opportunity to determine the different discourses that students relied on for making meaning across the different modalities with which they interacted.

As indicated previously, this kind of activity followed a unit in which students engaged in narrative analyses and criticism of short stories, so I encouraged them to compare the songs’ content to the stories they read. An example of students’ comparisons across printed stories and music-based media texts is grounded on their various descriptions of a live performance of Canadian indie rock band, Arcade Fire’s “No Cars Go” (arcadefirestarter, 2007). At first they paid specific attention to the different instruments the group uses in the song, especially the violins, and they even expressed a predilection for this text because of it, thus enacting a sheerly musical read. However, they also relied on the lyrics to make meaning of the song. This exercise highlighted how students not only noticed the ways artists use different modes to evoke different discourses, but also made assumptions across the music- and print-based texts. For example, in an online discussion focusing on the lyrics of the song, Manuel made connections between the end of the short story “Silent Snow, Secret Snow” (Aiken, 2001) where the boy is trying to fall asleep but feels the cold ‘winter’ whispering to him, and the “No Cars Go” lyric line: “between the click of the light, and the start of the dream” (Butler and Chassagne, 2007). Similarly, following Manuel’s lead, other students in the class began to make connections between dreams, life, and death in relation to both the music lyrics and the short story.

Furthermore, the short introduction to film terminology that students were exposed to provided them with the academic discourse necessary to describe their analyses of music videos and the multiple discourses encompassed by their design. For example, when discussing music

videos by the bands No Doubt and Hole, both featuring female lead singers, students focused on how the lights and camera angles contributed to the distinction made between men and women in the videos. Besides noting that “both directors connect a story with the words of the song,” Daniel wrote that in No Doubt’s video for “Just a Girl” (NoDoubtVEVO, 2009) there is “a lot of light in some points, especially when she is focused, and dark light in the boy’s bathroom,” which contributes to a gendered distinction. Also, Margaret specified in a journal entry “that these techniques can influence in the meaning because I have more knowledge to think beyond and then reach to more conclusions than when I read the song.” These comments clearly point to how the modes of lighting and camera angles, among others, might contribute to meaning making in modes that extend the limits of monomodal printed lyrics alone.

To close the unit, students were encouraged to engage in this kind of analysis through a multimodal production of their own. The emphasis on musical/multimodal/multilingual negotiations was most salient through their multimodal productions based on the analysis of a self-selected music text. For example, Betsy’s analysis of a song by Rammstein was definitely dependent on sound, as this is a German rock band, and she could not initially understand the language used in the song. Therefore, although she went on to provide an English translation of the song’s lyrics, after she played a video of the band performing the song as part of her multimodal presentation, her initial reaction was to sound alone. When asked about the reasons behind her preference for the song, she specified that she had heard it with a friend and thought it was emotionally stirring. Also, the fact that she knew other songs from this band, which is particularly known for its heavy metal sound, made her even more attracted to this song in particular, because, in her opinion, the song was soothing, and thus provided an atypical sound in relation to the band’s usual repertoire. In her analysis of a self-selected text, Betsy thus demonstrated a multilingual negotiation as well as a transnational music consumption practice.

While some students expressed that they chose particular songs because of their accompanying music videos, others remained focused on the print-based discourses represented in the lyrics. This was true in the case of Manuel, who focused on Ricardo Arjona’s use of irony in his songwriting. Although the assignment of analyzing songs and videos offered a rare opportunity for students in an English class to focus on multimodal – and multilingual – forms of communication, some students still relied on the ingrained practice of adopting print-based discourses in the more familiar Spanish language media texts. In this case, Manuel opted to simply make copies of the print-based lyrics, including his analysis of irony in two of Arjona’s songs. He did not follow the instructions to use a multimodal format for the presentation, and he also had difficulties using the English language overall, relying on Spanish to communicate his analysis. In this case, the student had more difficulties shuttling between the two languages.

This same student, however, was able to critically consider previous interactions he had with songs like Bloc Party’s “Helicopter” (Okereke, 2007). In an online discussion post Manuel admitted the difference of actively reading the song’s lyrics: “I listen this song before this moment, and I like. Now, i Understand the message and is so interest.” In other words, although he had already *heard* the song, he had not previously paid any attention to the content of its lyrics, nor had he seen the video before. AS I noted previously, students’ grammatical errors are left intact here in order to avoid manipulating data, and for readers to appreciate the ESL context in which the study took place. In this case, it is relevant to note that in spite of Manuel’s grammatical errors (which my subsequent feedback prompted him to fix), his statement suggests that his new reading of the text allowed him to engage the song’s content more critically. More importantly, his prior interaction with the song was based on playing it in the video game *Guitar*



*Hero*, in which the user plays classic and contemporary rock songs using a guitar shaped controller. This intriguingly connects the notion of being critical to particular modes being emphasized, as “any mode may become fore-grounded...different modes have potentials that make them better for certain tasks than others,” (Jewitt and Kress, 2003, p. 3) which affects the kind of reading that takes place. Besides becoming aware of the content of the song, this student was able to make connections between his everyday interactions with media texts, and the topics that such texts address. In the case of this text, according to student discussion, the song stated a critique of North American racial and military politics of the time.

The focus on multimodality, then, not only allows the instructor to consider the multiple ways in which students can make meaning out of texts, but also how they can construct meaning in their own multimodal presentations, writing, and oral discussions. Students in this class relied on a multiplicity of modes to perform these processes to various degrees of success, as detailed above. However, the reliance on particular modes changed as their experiences with texts broadened. Moreover, the modes they used depended greatly on the context in which these experiences occurred, i.e. their music listening practices outside/inside the classroom. Studying multimodal texts formally, and learning to apply the terminology associated with particular modes to each text, helped students develop more complex interpretations of the texts studied. The attention to the specific modalities that students relied upon during meaning making processes resembled that of Jody Shipka’s (2006) move toward multimodal soundness. Similar to Shipka, I also examined some of my students’ multimodal texts “that feature sound and demonstrate a kind of conceptual, material, and rhetorical soundness resulting from their producers thinking carefully and critically about the impact of the various choices they made throughout the process of composing” (p. 356). This move towards soundness is important because it indicates a process of careful reflection upon multimodal composition strategies. However, Jason Palmeri’s (2012) expansion of multimodality’s history within rhetoric and composition is also relevant for the multimodal approach taken up here, as he revisits scholarship that has been historically dealing with conceptions of “new media” since the 1960’s (p. 87). Although my study focuses on music listening/producing practices, it accounts for the numerous modalities that students engaged during multimodal analysis and composition practices, including print text, images, and film conventions. More important here is the focus on students’ negotiations of musical/multimodal/multilingual resources in their discussions of sociocultural issues in Puerto Rican media consumption practices.

### **Sociocultural Affordances of a Musical / Multimodal / Multilingual Approach**

According to Buckingham and Sefton-Green, students’ interactions with “intertextual and multimodal analyses and performances become sites where [students can] research and document, map and explore the politics of identity: converging and contradictory representations of gender and colour and class” (1994, p. xiii). In this case, specific attention was given to how students perceived sociocultural issues of language, politics, gender dynamics, and race. Thus, even though all the students in the classroom considered themselves Puerto Ricans, during this unit they interacted with multilingual, multicultural texts, as members of a global society that included their own local context and extended far beyond it (New London Group, 1996). A quote from Celeste Olalquiaga, who writes about the transfiguration of nationality, is helpful in explaining the issues explored here:

los procesos sincréticos se realizan a través de una economía en cuya modalidad de intercambio el significante de allá – el del otro – es consumido (leído) conforme a códigos locales, ya preexistentes; esto es, códigos de acá’... Se trata de la manera idiosincrática en que cada cultura “lee” lo Americano y de la multiplicidad de formas en que se lo apropian y, en muchos casos, hasta lo subvierten. (Olalquíaga, 1992, p. 16; as cited in Pabón, 2002, p. 29)<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the political significance of language and music preference, among other cultural issues, informed the different readings the students performed. Students’ interactions with texts from other Euro-American contexts such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, were necessarily influenced by the ways they interacted with Puerto Rican and other Latin American music and music video media texts. Thus, these students’ readings provide insights into the ways in which different music genres from the United States and other places, *de allá*,<sup>8</sup> are perceived *acá*,<sup>9</sup> in Puerto Rico.

To study students’ perceptions of designations of nationalistic identities based on music listening practices, students read “Captain Candelario’s Heroic Last Stand” by Rosario Ferré (1996).<sup>10</sup> They then watched a clip from a 1987 Puerto Rican television news report on different perceptions of *cocolos* and *rockeros* (pochgorgotron, 2008)<sup>11</sup> in order to later write about connections between political views and music in their final essay. Most students chose to write an argumentative essay on this topic as it was/is present in Puerto Rico. In the drafting process, teacher feedback was restricted to structural and grammatical concerns in order to maintain a neutral stance about students’ political positions. Particularly important, from a researcher stance and for the purposes of this study, was identifying how politics are related to musical preferences in the students’ discourses.

While, generally, students noted that musical genres could be associated with a particular nation, Daniel made a more explicit connection between the two “invasions” that Puerto Rico endured, first by Spain and later by the United States, noting that the island has been/is influenced by whichever country was/is in power. Manuel, on the other hand, made a clearer connection between musical preference and the status of Puerto Rico, specifying that the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA), or a Free Associated State political status identified Spanish as our “idiom,” from the Spanish word *idioma* or language, thus suggesting a linguistic influence. Because Spanish is the main language promoted by the longest standing political status of Puerto Rico (ELA), he infers that most of the population would prefer music that is in Spanish. Both accounts conveyed students’ understandings of Puerto Rico’s political status, which they defined as a territory of the United States, with an autonomous government and various social strata.

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<sup>7</sup> *The syncretic processes are achieved through an economy of exchange in which, the significant from “over there” – of the other – is consumed (read) conforming to preexisting local codes, that is, codes from here... It’s about idiosyncratic ways in which each culture “reads” American texts and the multiplicity of forms in which it is appropriated and in many cases, subverted.*

<sup>8</sup> *from over there*

<sup>9</sup> *here*

<sup>10</sup> In this short story, Ferré explores an imaginary futuristic post-independence Puerto Rico and uses music to describe the split political positions in the island, where the *salseros* or *cocolos* who lived in the island’s poor slums were referred to as a threatening group to the Metropolis (U.S.), while the *rockeros* were depicted as a middle class and neutral group that accepted their political fates.

<sup>11</sup> In spite of the poor quality of the video, viewers can be informed about how high tensions around the two subcultural groups were described in local news media of the time, thus acquiring a nonfiction account of what Rosario Ferré discusses in her fiction piece. A person who experienced these tensions and would like to preserve this memory probably uploaded the YouTube clip.

Puerto Rican history scholar, Carlos Pabón's (2002) claim that the term *nation* is constructed through the descriptions and exaltations of all that is "Puerto Rican," is supported by the fact that most students agreed that salsa music "represents" the Puerto Rican nation better than the more "foreign" rock music genre.

Daniel's final statement pointed to an understanding of how students' musical preferences are not necessarily fixed to cultural identity: "it doesn't matter if you are a Puerto Rican who likes Chinese music, the important thing is that you know who you are." Similarly, Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2007) suggests, "the access to global culture through mass media has produced a context where people may imagine themselves in ways that defy narratives based in fixed identities, including that of colonial" (p. 439-440). In this case, Daniel demonstrated that this was true for some individuals in the context in which he lives, while recognizing, although he does not approve of it, that there are others who relate musical preference to individual political identities. Finally, he argued for the importance of simply understanding the reasons why people develop musical preferences related to the particular identities they have assumed. By reflecting on a local issue that involved mainstream music listening practices, juxtaposed to a critique of Puerto Rican nationalism via fiction, students were able to express their sociocultural understandings of the processes that Olalquíaga connects with the neocolonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.

The class discussion on race and musical preference was informative to discussions around musical miscegenation and appropriation. After the students read "A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost its Soul" by Sasha Frere-Jones (2007),<sup>12</sup> they were able to explore this concept in depth, referring to music and other contexts in which there is miscegenation. An example of their application of this concept is the video for The Offspring's "Pretty Fly (For a White Guy)," (offspringVEVO, 2009) which portrays a suburban white young man wanting to be (wannabe) like a black, or Latino "guy" who identifies with the hip hop subculture. Because this text was also part of the musical and racial miscegenation discussion, in their journal reactions, students noted the ways in which The Offspring incorporated Spanish language expressions and other "Latin" musical features in the song, which makes it different from a typical U.S. American rock song. In other words, while Latino ethnicity is a big part of this Californian band's upbringing, the students noticed how the band characterized racial/ethnic identifications with specific music. Caryn, for example, compared the music video's parody of the main character's attempt to dance like the black dancers featured in the video in order to be able to be accepted to the ways in which some people in the United States identify Puerto Ricans with salsa music and "how they expect us to be able to dance it." While most students focused on the stereotypical descriptions of the different characters in the video, Adelina criticized the exploitation of women in the video, by being used merely as sexual objects. Thus, in their written reflections, students were being critical of both gender and ethnic/racial dynamics that were presented in the music video.

These are only a few of the examples in which sociocultural issues were brought up as part of our discussion of different music and music video media texts. A careful analysis of the multimodal features of these texts allowed students to identify a rich array of components that provided them with a specific reading that they would write about using the university's online

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<sup>12</sup> In the article, Frere-Jones (2007) describes how rock and roll has historically been influenced by particular black music genres such as blues and reggae, mentioning the Rolling Stones and The Clash as examples of this. However, focusing on Arcade Fire, which was the band that students were to read that week, he claims that rock and roll "underwent a racial re-sorting in the nineteen-nineties."

platform, and engage in subsequent oral discussions, ultimately writing a more traditional argumentative essay. The apparent proximity between the media texts chosen for the unit and the students' mainstream music listening practices at the time allowed for more practical discussions of topics they could relate to. These topics pertain to sociocultural issues of nationality and subcultural identities, gender, and race. The history in the geopolitical context in which the study was carried out necessarily affects the kinds of discussions that could be engaged in this transnational English composition classroom.

### **Closing Remarks**

In light of the data presented in the previous sections, there is a sense of contradiction upon revisiting this article's opening remarks about the rise of new media technologies in connection to the development and adoption of multimodal theories of communication. Although there are numerous advantages provided by new media technologies such as the rapid distribution of music and music videos through YouTube, as Daniel indicated, further reflection about how these have been used in the teaching of English throughout the last century might provide more substance to Jason Palmeri's (2012) assertion that "Composition Has Always Already Been Multimodal," thus, multimodality is not necessarily a new phenomenon (p. 21). This was certainly the case in Puerto Rico, as the 1940's represented a proliferation of communication technologies like the radio, which was part of a pedagogical project from U.S. institutions like the *Modern Language Association* (Atkinson, 1942). While this is definitely not the only instance in which new media were used to promote the Americanization project that Mazak (2008) refers to, it is important to remember how new media technologies have the capability of advancing global capitalism, and how this, in turn, affects students' literacy practices. Future studies should attempt to provide more connections between the geopolitics of different transnational settings and how global capitalism plays into distinct literacy practices.

The musical/multimodal/multilingual analyses and productions that students engaged throughout this project were intended to provide a space for them to reflect upon the cultural genealogies that particular media consumption practices may elicit. Overall, these students were able to critically analyze the intentions behind each of the artist's composition strategies, which some of them were later able to emulate to various degrees. The socioeconomic background of each student may have contributed to the different levels of English proficiency they brought in at the outset, but allowing for a multimodal and multilingual negotiation model demonstrates that there are other ways in which students undertake the kind of critical analysis that facilitates productive composition practices. Indeed, running into a student a few years later she remarked that she was able to transfer some of the writing strategies she learned in our course to her writing essays in Spanish. To reiterate, though, the emphasis on context and historical background is essential in any kind of scholarship about transcultural flows of language advocated by scholars like Alastair Pennycook (2007). This study serves as an example of how these transcultural flows manifested in a Basic English composition course in Puerto Rico. Further rhetoric and composition studies in this context are encouraged.

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