



LAYERED LITERACIES

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Stand Our Ground against Stand Your Ground

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We dedicate this column to the memories of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, and all youth who struggle daily just to *be free*.

Wear your hoodie, wear it proud!
Play your music, play it loud!

The Fall 2014 issue of *The ALAN Review* centers on banding together and uniting around “our shared commitment to kids and YA literature” while *standing our ground* against scripts, censors, and standardized tests. While the call for articles sharing “stories of battle, loudly fought or quietly conceived” was sent out months ago, we are living in a time when *stand your ground* has taken on new, malicious overtones:

- In February 2012, Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, who was later acquitted based on Florida’s *Stand Your Ground* laws; Martin, wearing a hoodie, was walking home from a convenience store; Zimmerman thought the unarmed teen looked suspicious, initiated an altercation, and shot Martin to death.
- In November 2013, an African American teenager, Renisha McBride, was shot and killed by Theodore Wafer, whose defense is expected to focus on Michigan’s *Stand Your Ground* laws; McBride was

on Wafer’s front porch, seeking help after an automobile accident, when Wafer shot her in the face with a shotgun.

- Also in November 2013, Jordan Davis, an African American teenager, was shot and killed by Michael David Dunn, who was convicted on lesser charges for firing at the other occupants of Davis’s car. Dunn faces a retrial in the killing of Davis because the jury was hung over Florida’s *Stand Your Ground* laws. Davis was apparently playing his rap music too loudly.

That’s what it means to stand *your* ground. It means that armed citizens can shoot and kill unarmed Black teenagers because our systemic and civilizational racism teaches us that Black teenagers should be feared. These young people don’t have a voice in the mainstream media about how they are portrayed; they don’t get a say in how people see them. These are students who sit in our classrooms, fearing for their lives.

So, how do we *Stand Our Ground* against *Stand Your Ground*? There’s a big difference made by the pronouns in these phrases. We can *stand our ground* as teachers and advocates by disrupting troubling discourses about youth, especially youth of color. In her 2004 *The ALAN Review* article, Elaine O’Quinn (2004) explained how adolescents have been cast by culture and society as “problematic”:

Through a blend of modern psychological science, the Enlightenment ideal of rationality that threads throughout the history of modern education, and the traditional Protestant notion of humans as fundamentally flawed and fallen, the haunting specter of adolescents as problematic, emotionally unstable, and innately sinful has permeated societal judg-

ments of who they are. Pathologized as deviant, ascribed with endless maladies that capitalize on societal anxieties and intolerances, and diagnosed as irrational, dependent, and non-conforming, young adults are viewed as dangerous and unpredictable aberrations that must be cured of their reckless natures. (p. 50)

Intersect these maladies with race, gender, and socioeconomic class positions, and youth of color become “public enemies,” “thugs,” “welfare queens,” or “hypersexualized video vixens” who “lack literacy” and “lack character/morality” (Meiners, 2007). David Kirkland (2013) and Maisha T. Winn (2011), long-time urban youth activists, give us ideas about how to talk back to these “discourses of deficiency” (Fine & Ruglis, 2009), and exhort English teachers to help young people develop and act on critical literacy skills (Morrell, 2008), so they may disrupt and resist cultural misrepresentations and work to transform oppressive social structures. If, as Hall and du Gay (1996) remind us, it is through representation that we negotiate our identities, youth must have *ground to stand on*—opportunities and spaces—where they can talk back to distortions and apparitions and also shape their own possible selves.

We can find this ground if we pay attention and listen to youth (Lachuk & Gomez, 2011). As coeditors of the “Layered Literacies” column in *The ALAN Review*, we are called to draw on Internet-based learning opportunities and materials that might prove useful in teaching YAL. When exploring this charge through the issue theme of “Stand Our Ground,” we found something interesting: it is in the Internet-based media that students are speaking out and speaking back to how they are portrayed, sharing their own fears and struggles in a society that portrays them as dangerous.

Miles Ezeilo used his blog (<http://www.the-darkerlens.com/2014/02/18/jordan-davis-thoughts-from-a-black-teenager/>) to respond to the killing of Jordan Davis:

I get scared every time I turn on the news now [A]s a black boy in this day and age, my trust and sense of safety is dwindling as I write this. . . . This entire case hits home for me because Jordan Davis could have been a lot of people I know.

Sharing similar sentiments, there are multiple Facebook tribute pages for Jordan Davis (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/RIP-Jordan-Davis/119289181565449>), Renisha McBride

(<https://www.facebook.com/pages/RIP-Renisha-McBride/213246385513796>), and Trayvon Martin (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/RIP-Trayvon-Martin/268784303205174>).

Throughout young adult literature, we find stories of youth claiming their own ground and speaking truth to power. Certainly the genre could play a role in how we *stand our*

ground for students in ELA classrooms. In what follows, we bring to you the work of a graduate English teaching intern at the University of Tennessee, Andrew Swafford. Andrew is passionate about literature and music and is excited to teach adolescents about the many connections between these two art media. Andrew believes songwriting is the dominant form of poetry in the 20th and 21st centuries and is intrigued by the idea of the long-playing album

as a sort of “musical novel.” Some of Andrew’s favorite musical genres include hip-hop, alternative rock, electronica, and ambient.

For an assignment in his Young Adult Literature class with Susan, Andrew created two book talks that revolve around the music that matters to teens in young adult literature. We thought it important to include them here because it was music (<http://youtu.be/06BZss9iy04>) that allegedly led to Jordan Davis’s murder. We also think it’s in both the consumption and production of music where we can see teens telling us who they are and long to be. Perhaps if we engage youth with the music they love and strive to understand why music matters to teens—rather than dismiss it—we can begin to *stand our ground* against the beliefs and actions that underlie a *stand your ground* mindset.

The first of Andrew’s book talks considers Coe Booth’s (2007) *Tyrell*, in which we find significant possibilities for responding to the killing of Jordan Davis in particular and to “thug” discourses in general. Tyrell loves old-school rap and hip-hop music,

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and with good reason—the music speaks to Tyrell’s anguish and feelings of powerlessness, but it also inspires him and ultimately provides an economic livelihood for him and his family. As Jabiri Mahiri (2000; 2005) explains, “Rap has clearly emerged as

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powerful discourse able to effectively critique other discourses including dominant ones. This capacity offers urban youth possibilities for counter-hegemonic actions in their social worlds” (2000, p. 383). Mahiri likens the rap artists that Tyrell loves—KRS-One, Mos Def—to “public pedagogues—educators with degrees in street knowledge and a lyrical curriculum for raising consciousness” (2000, p. 383).

While reading *Tyrell* with students, teachers could explore the rap and hip-hop songs mentioned in the text and treat them as important intertexts that complement Tyrell’s story. But Mahiri (2000) warns that teachers don’t need to necessarily incorporate what he calls “pop culture pedagogy” in the classroom, because “pop culture works in young people’s lives in context-specific ways that often could not be reproduced in the context of school.” Rather, Mahiri encourages teachers to “become more aware of the motives and the methods of youth engagement in pop culture in terms of why and how such engagement connects to students’ personal identifications, their need to construct meanings, and their pursuit of pleasures and personal power” (p. 385).

The second book talk considers Stephen Chbosky’s (1999) *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, where the music Charlie and his friends share speaks to the intense pleasure and joy the teens experience in their relationships with each other—relationships marked by sincerity, vulnerability, and perhaps most important, acceptance. Charlie comes of age in the ’90s, before playlists and MP3 players, a time when the mix tape ruled. Creating a mix tape took time and work, and thus was an act of love and commitment, a deliberate act of choosing *just* the right song, putting it in *just* the right order, and creating *just* the right experience for the listener.

As Matias Viegner explains in Thurston Moore’s (2005) book *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, the mix tape is “a poem, a cento, made up of lines pulled from other poems. The new poet collects and remixes” (p. 35). And therein lies the pleasure and personal power of which Mahiri speaks: an aesthetic pleasure in the music itself and an engaged, “flow-like” pleasure in the act of creating something for someone important. And there’s power in the creation, too. As Viegner goes on to explain, making a mix tape turned consumers of music into producers and “gave listeners some control over what they heard, in what order, and at what cost.” It turns out hip-hop artists and DJs and mix tape creators have much in common and much to say. We can stand our ground with youth, but we have to be willing to listen and pay attention, especially to the music they love.

As the Layered Literacies column editors, we want you to experience Andrew’s book talks twice—once in print and again through multimedia presentations on YouTube. While the source material is similar, the textual and multimedia presentations are not the same. We believe wrestling with the different possibilities each medium provides presents a methodological way to move toward engaging our students across multiple media and multiple platforms in a content area too often relegated only to the printed page.

Tyrell by Coe Booth

What follows is a transcript of the *Tyrell* online video; see it at youtu.be/FHmHFrwew5A.

My music was mad, and so was I. Them rappers was saying shit I couldn’t say to no one ‘cause no one was listening to me. Only thing, I don’t listen to that gangster shit too much no more. Yeah, I’m up on all the new music, but the CDs I play the most is rap from back in the day, brothas like Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, KRS-1, and Tupac, ‘cause them niggas had some real deep shit to say. My pops got me into them ‘cause that’s the only kinda rap he play at his parties, and when I took the time to listen to the words, man, I started to respect them dudes. They was the real deal. Not like now when most of the rappers is just frontin’ like they from the streets or starting beef with other rappers over nothing just so they could be in some fake war and sell more CDs. The new rap is all right, but there ain’t never gonna be another Public Enemy. Never.

Tyrell, the main character of this novel, is a really complicated guy, but one thing he has going for him is that he is a hip-hop expert, and his knowledge of

music is the weapon he uses to battle the harsh world he's living in. Tyrell's father [serving a stint in prison] is a DJ, and by the end of the book, Tyrell becomes a DJ as well. Without giving anything away, near the end of this novel, Tyrell DJs a huge party. He's spinning records on a Technics SL-1200, which is the turntable hip-hop was *invented* on, and he tells us about playing this classic hip-hop track called "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash:

Man, ain't no way you could listen to this song and not see where the man coming from. Them lyrics is deep. *Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge, / I'm trying not to lose my head. / It's like a jungle sometimes, / It makes me wonder how I keep from going under.* And the way Melly Mel say them words, man, you know he feeling them. He talking 'bout life on the streets and how you don't hardly get to have no kinda childhood when you grow up in the hood. The song is mad real.

Tyrell is living in 2007, and he's 15. Why does he love this music from the '80s so much—this era of hop-hop that we call the Golden Age of hip-hop? I think it's because these rappers he loves aren't just bragging about how much money they have or how many women they get. They're rapping about real life on the streets: being poor, being oppressed, being discriminated against, being dissatisfied with the world in general, and needing to express what that dissatisfaction is like. And this stuff means a lot to Tyrell because Tyrell is homeless. His father's in jail for dealing drugs, and he has to take care of his mom and his baby brother, who have no place to live. That's the kind of struggle that rappers in the '80s were talking about, and that's why Tyrell understands this music so well.

Now, this novel, *Tyrell*, definitely isn't just about music. It's more so about poverty, drugs, family, love, and even sex. Especially sex, actually. But what I think is most interesting about the book is how Tyrell relates all of those things to music—which is what he uses to try and get himself out of the mess he and his family are in. I'm not going to tell you if that works out or not. You'll have to find that part out for yourselves by reading *Tyrell* by Coe Booth. [See, too, the sequel *Bronxwood*.]

***The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky**

What follows is a transcript of the *Perks of Being a Wallflower* online video; see it at youtu.be/g0tQgEeOgLc.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower tells the story of a high school freshman named Charlie who lives in the early '90s and has a lot of emotional issues. His best friend has committed suicide, and he's been around death and abuse for a good deal of his life. As a result, Charlie's very fragile and doesn't really know how to talk to people. He feels sad and alone in a way that most teenagers can relate to, even if they haven't had many traumatic experiences.

High school finally clicks for Charlie when he finds a whole group of outsiders who are all insecure or damaged in some way, and they bond through a shared love of music, movies, and books. Music is the most important, though, as Charlie and his friends make mix tapes for each other. A mix tape is either a collection of songs specifically designed to be a gift from one friend to another or a collection of songs that perfectly captures a particular moment in life:

My dad said I couldn't drive until the weather cleared up, and it finally did a little bit yesterday. I made a mix tape for the occasion. It is called "The First Time I Drove." Maybe I'm being too sentimental, but I like to think that when I'm old, I will be able to look at all these tapes and remember those drives.

Thanks to the tapes Charlie exchanges with his friends, Charlie's taste in music is very diverse, and he's into music from a lot of different decades and genres ranging from folk [Simon & Garfunkle] to grunge [Smashing Pumpkins] to progressive rock [Genesis] to Britpop [The Smiths]. Here [are the words to] Charlie's all-time favorite song, *Asleep* by The Smiths:

*Sing me to sleep
Sing me to sleep
I don't want to wake up
On my own anymore*

"Why does he love this music from the '80s so much? . . . I think it's because these rappers [are] rapping about real life on the streets: being poor, being oppressed, being discriminated against, being dissatisfied with the world in general, and needing to express what that dissatisfaction is like."

*Sing to me
Sing to me
I don't want to wake up
On my own anymore
Don't feel bad for me
I want you to know*

This song has profound meaning for Charlie, who probably relates the lyrics to his suicidal friends. We all do this with music. Music doesn't just have meaning because of what the musician wrote—it can also have deep *personal* meaning for the listener and can become part of who we are, attached to our memories

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and relationships. Sharing music is, for Charlie, a way to feel connected with other people, and listening to beautiful and personal music is a way that he can feel a sort of peace in knowing that someone else understands what it's like to feel alone or to feel sad.

Here's a passage where Charlie talks about the significance of the mix tape he makes for his friend Patrick:

I spent all night working on it, and I hope Patrick likes it as much as I do. Especially the second side. I hope it's the kind of second side that

he can listen to whenever he drives alone and feel like he belongs to something whenever he's sad. I hope it can be that for him. I had an amazing feeling when I finally held the tape in my hand. I just thought to myself that in the palm of my hand, there was this one tape that had all of these memories and feelings and great joy and sadness. Right there in the palm of my hand. And I thought about how many people have loved those songs. And how many people got through a lot of bad times because of those songs. And how many people enjoyed good times with those songs. And how much those songs really mean.

For Charlie, falling in love with music is an important part of growing up and forming relationships with people, as it is for many teenagers. There's one moment in particular that I find really interesting—it's when Charlie is sitting in a pickup truck with his

friends and hears the song “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac on the radio.

The song is about moving on in life and accepting change—which is incredibly important during teenage years. Here's how Charlie describes the experience of listening to “Landslide” in the book:

The feeling I had happened when Sam told Patrick to find a station on the radio. And he kept getting commercials. And commercials. And a really bad song about love that had the word “baby” in it. And then more commercials. And finally he found this really amazing song about this boy, and we all got quiet. Sam tapped her hand on the steering wheel. Patrick held his hand outside the car and made air waves. And I just sat between them. After the song finished, I said something. “I feel infinite.” And Sam and Patrick looked at me like I said the greatest thing they ever heard. Because the song was that great and because we all really paid attention to it. Five minutes of a lifetime were truly spent, and we felt young in a good way.

What does Charlie mean when he says he feels infinite? I think that's something that's up to your interpretation. I hope you check out *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky and decide for yourself.

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Judson Laughter is an assistant professor of English Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His research interests include multicultural teacher education, critical race theory, and the preparation of preservice teachers for diverse classrooms through dialogue and narrative. Dr. Laughter is currently the advisor for the Track I (non-licensure) English Education program. He teaches courses in English methods, action research, sociolinguistics, and trends in education. When not wearing his academic hat, Jud enjoys crossword puzzles, cycling, and traveling.

Andrew Swafford is pursuing a master's degree and licensure in English Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. After graduation, he plans to become a

high school English teacher. Andrew is passionate about literature and music and wants to teach adolescents about the many connections between the two. In particular, Andrew is interested in songwriting as the dominant form of poetry in the 20th and 21st centuries, as well as the long-playing album as a sort of “musical novel” with themes and characters. Some of Andrew’s favorite musical genres include hip-hop, alternative rock, electronica, and ambient.

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