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# Complicating moral messages through multimodal composition: wrestling with revenge and racism

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an exploratory analysis of the multimodal composition practices of adolescents and young adults in a free after-school drop-in programme called the Workshop, and the moral development opportunities afforded by these practices. Pasupathi and Wainryb's [(2010). "Developing Moral Agency Through Narrative." *Human Development* 53: 55–80. doi:10.1159/000288208] theory of narrative moral agency is invoked to interpret participants' compositions. Through a process of multimodal design, participants illustrated the cognitive process of reconciling one's moral beliefs with actions in the real world. Switching between modes of expression allowed the focal participants to showcase their nuanced moral positions on justice-related issues, such as complicating a desire for revenge with advocating for peace. The literary, technological, and performance opportunities of the Workshop serve as an example for how social, aesthetic, and moral goals can be achieved in classrooms and contribute to students' moral agency.

## KEYWORDS

Moral reasoning; narrative; multimodality; moral agency; literacy; social domain theory

## Introduction

Nothing can wake you up like encounters with blue men coming through with flashing lights to blind the eyes of those who know what's right ...

Little do they know they missed one who knows how to write. (Shy'An G, 2016, Track 3: Aftershock)

It is a common perception that young people who grow up in the midst of community or domestic violence and/or poverty are victims. However, research (e.g. Curwood and Gibbons 2009; Mahiri 2011; Soep and Chávez 2010) has shown that when given the opportunity to engage with digital media and multiple modes of storytelling, young people who have experienced marginalisation or oppression do not always produce victim narratives – instead, they are eager to produce counter-narratives that challenge the status quo and demonstrate complex reasoning about identity and social issues. As one can see in the lyrics excerpted at the beginning of this article, Shy'An G, one of the focal participants of this analysis, views her abilities as a writer and music producer to be powerful tools that she can wield against unjust police force. This statement both invokes the idea of

fighting back, and a deliberately nonviolent choice of action. Shy'An G's lyrics convey a reasoning process that took multiple factors into account and formed a sophisticated moral stance on a complicated social issue.

This study builds on previous research in multimodal literacy and narrative moral agency in an effort to explore multimodal composing as a developmentally relevant practice for processing oppression and constructing one's own moral understandings. I argue that multimodal compositions that encode personal narratives can, in fact, reveal complicated moral reasoning. Multimodal compositions refer to artistic pieces that draw on more than one system of expression or representation to communicate or convey a message. For example, a written poem that is synchronised to illustrations is multimodal, or a poem that is performed verbally with bodily gestures is also multimodal. Digital media allows for multiple modes to be easily combined into a single composition.

This ethnographic study was conducted at the Workshop,<sup>1</sup> a free drop-in programme that caters to aspiring performing artists, poets, and rappers, and is part of a larger youth development organisation in the San Francisco Bay Area in California. The Workshop was launched in order to provide young people with a creative space to process traumatic and oppressive events in their lives. The focus of the programme was on the cathartic impact to the participant. While many participants had aspirations to become recording artists, students of all literacy and artistic abilities could participate. The director of the programme shared with me her philosophy of why she designed the programme the way she did. To paraphrase, she said, young people do not always have a lot of choice over what happens in their lives, but in creative expression, they can amplify certain elements and downplay others, while gaining a sense of agency over circumstances that seem oppressive.

The aims of this study were to observe the composition processes of young people at the Workshop, through a lens of moral development. Guided by principles from social domain theory about socio-moral reasoning, I participated as an observer in the Workshop's creative community and investigated how young people wrestled with experiences of conflict in their lives through creating art. Workshop participants' artistic compositions and interview narratives are part of the ethnographic material that was analysed for this study. This analysis is an in-depth exploration of the compositions of two focal participants in the Workshop. Their interview responses, actions, practices, and multimodal compositions served as material for investigating the semiotic accomplishments that took place and how they connected to the participant's larger stance on moral issues.

I will briefly outline the underlying epistemological stance on development that guides the analysis of this data, and the guiding principles from social domain theory that shaped my research questions. The following section provides a brief theoretical background on multimodality, narratives, and moral agency, which served as tools for the subsequent analysis.

This paper takes a constructivist stance towards development, positing that humans construct knowledge by interacting with their worlds and then interpreting their experiences within existing cognitive schemas or creating new ones (Gallagher and Reid 1981; Piaget 1954). Specifically with regard to moral and social development – by which I mean cognitive shifts over time in conceptual understandings of fairness, justice, rules, and personal preferences – over 40 years of research within the social domain theory framework (Nucci 1981; Smetana, Jambon, and Ball 2014; Turiel 1983) have demonstrated that children form understandings of distinctly different types of social actions: moral

(pertaining to welfare, fairness, and harm), conventional (pertaining to rules, authority, and social norms), and personal (pertaining to personal choice and preference). These understandings change and become more nuanced as we grow older, and as we encounter complicated social dilemmas. I expected young people to draw on their moral and conventional understandings with respect to morally relevant phenomena, like witnessing police brutality or dealing with discrimination. Typical social domain theory interviews would be focused on assessing basic moral understandings, focusing upon the nature of the actions as harmful or rule-governed, or on evaluating the extent to which individuals prioritised norms or moral considerations in arriving at decisions (Turiel 2002). Outside of a controlled interview setting, however, young people are responding without prompting to social issues and reasoning about them in creative multimodal ways. In these naturally occurring contexts, the weighing of moral and normative considerations takes on a more nuanced and complex form than is generated in the controlled setting of a standard research interview. In the case of the audio tracks and poems produced by youth in the present study, they were teasing out the subtle complexities of the spectrum between wrong and acceptable.

Although young people are constantly applying their moral understandings to everyday contexts, they do not always get the opportunity to discuss or work through situations of conflict and injustice in school settings. Yet, young people were so motivated to engage in these composing activities that they attended a voluntary drop-in programme on Friday nights. School-based educators could allow for and even stimulate the same kind of complicated reasoning demonstrated by Workshop participants by incorporating multimodal composing and digital media exploration into their curriculum. This study demonstrates that these activities allow young people to critique society, wrestle with their own actions and those of their peers, and complicate their moral stances on issues in their own lives while strengthening their literacy and media skills.

## Theoretical background

### *Multimodality and digital media*

Kress's (2003) theorisation on multimodality and media identifies the properties of different modes of representation and expression, as well as the relationship between mode and the particular technology or medium used to convey meaning within the mode. Using this theoretical perspective guided the analysis in recognising the semiotic sophistication of these participants' products. Mode in this framework refers to the system of representation through which a message is conveyed.

Almost 15 years ago, Kress (2003) gave literacy scholars and theorists a mandate to think about communication in terms of *design*, and not simply writing or speaking. He argued that the modernisation of our world has fundamentally changed how humans engaged with text. He worked to legitimise other ways of communicating, including gesture, image, sound, and combinations of these modes with written and spoken language. Jewitt (2008, 259) argued that the choice of mode and media is a crucial aspect of knowledge construction, and viewed students' multimodal compositions as: 'material instantiations of students' interests, their perception of audience, and their use of modal resources mediated by overlapping social contexts'. This statement reminds us

that artistic creations are never a simple translation of a single message – they involve many different decisions, some social and some artistic.

Different modes of representation have distinct affordances that allow for meaning making in different ways. Playing with a mode's unique affordances can either affirm an audience member's understanding of an issue or disrupt it. For example, greeting cards traditionally contained written messages that were meant to be read privately by the recipient. However, many greeting cards today contain sound mechanisms, which by default expand the audience of the message to include anyone within earshot of the greeting card. The choice to send this card, instead of a silent one allows the sender and the receiver to interpret the message of the card accordingly.

There is a vibrant field of research that utilises Kress's framework of multimodality to document and explore opportunities for youth identity construction and self-representation via multimodal compositions. For example, Halverson (2010) draws on multimodality as well as new literacy studies to analyse youth-produced films, and argued that there is an inherent connection between narratives and identities. Especially when youth utilise digital media platforms, they have the chance to try on multiple identities as they work with their peers to create a final product. The present study further explores processes of self-understanding and representations, specifically in relation to personal circumstances of violence and injustice, focusing on how multimodal compositional practices can foster moral reasoning and engagement in ethical dilemmas.

### ***Links between narrative storytelling and development***

Secondly, I draw on a strand of literature that argues that constructing narratives can heighten consciousness or facilitate self-reflection (Bruner 1987, 1991). Narrative discourse itself has been shown to afford cognitive processing and an understanding of personal experience, and even a sense of agency. Daiute (2010), for example, has shown that in the face of war and political conflict, adolescents still crave chances to creatively express themselves and use narratives to make sense of their experiences. She wrote:

Assuming that development stops because of trauma or hatreds in those situations discounts the potentially powerful mechanism of higher-order thinking. Young people's use of cultural symbols is not a leisurely pastime but a strategy for making sense of unpredictable and challenging situations. (239)

Hull and Katz (2006) examined multimodal digital storytelling projects and argued that the storytelling projects, 'in combination with supportive social relationships and opportunities for participation, can provide a powerful means and motivation for forming and representing an agentive self' (48). Their analysis of their participants' digital stories focused in particular on the representation of identity, and how participants decontextualised images, sounds, and words from popular culture or historical references, and then recontextualised them within their stories to add semiotic complexity. This was a signal, for these authors, of authorial agency and developing an agentive self. Their conception of agency development entails using the social, historical, and cultural resources at hand to construct identities as 'competent actors in the world able to influence the direction and course of their lives' (47).

In attempting to build on this previous work, I propose that as youth develop agentive stances towards themselves and their social worlds through creative compositions and

digital stories, they are also making judgements about their own actions and the actions that they witness by their peers and community members. These judgements ultimately inform what *kind* of agents they become.

### **Narrative moral agency**

Narrative moral agency (Pasupathi and Wainryb 2010; Wainryb 2011) is a framework in which narratives are positioned as opportunities for personal transformation and specifically, the development of moral judgements and reasoning, in relation to specific events or actions. The act of narrating and reflecting on one's own actions and experiences that have to do with harm, fairness, or rights provides an opportunity to take a moral stance on an issue or event in one's past. The cognitive wrestling between one's own actions, and one's own beliefs, desires, and emotions about right and wrong/fair and unfair, is brought about in the construction of a personal narrative (Pasupathi and Wainryb 2010, 65). In particular, these authors suggest that when one is a perpetrator of wrongdoing, there is an opportunity for the development of moral agency through narrative activity.

Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) wrote that their conception of *agency* is phenomenological – or experiential. Agency for these researchers is not about having control over one's actions, or pitting autonomous actions against social or external circumstances. Instead, they argued that moral agency is one's ability to make sense of morally relevant actions in terms of one's own beliefs, desires, and emotions. They wrote:

People do not become agents simply by knowing about beliefs and desires, but rather by acting in relation to their own and others' experiences with desires, beliefs, and emotions, and by experiencing their actions as rooted in and related to desires, beliefs, and emotions. (58–59)

Their idea of moral agency is context-based, and their investigations into this construct, therefore, involve how people also take into consideration nonmoral concerns and practical everyday dilemmas, in addition to moral harm.

Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) elicited narrative accounts via interviews. In this analysis, I am expanding the scope of their framework and suggesting that the artistic compositions that young people created in the Workshop, while not formatted like traditional narrative accounts, offer the same opportunities for wrestling with past actions and current moral beliefs, especially when considered in conjunction with participants' interviews about the same past actions. Although the stimulus events for participants' compositions rarely recounted instances when they were perpetrators of wrongdoing, they often wrote about events that had a moral component, i.e. social injustice, relationship harm, or physical abuse. One can also consider in what ways the emotions and beliefs expressed in the interviews are different than those included in the compositions, as indicators of how different modes of expression allow for greater complexity in moral reasoning.

### **Background context**

Participants in the Workshop had access to state of the art technology: DJ turntables, computers with audio editing software, film editing software, and beat-making software, and even industry-standard recording studios. Workshop events included poetry workshops with a professional poet, live poetry nights, hip-hop cyphers, and open mic events. Events often took place on Friday evenings, in part to provide a safe place for young

people to go. Food was often provided. The physical space where Workshop events took place was a large open room, with a slightly raised stage platform at one end, and turntables off to the left. A few armchairs and a sofa were constantly getting rearranged to form writing and socialising spaces. Immediately to the left of the entranceway, several large wooden boards stood against the wall (Figure 1).

These boards had been used to cover the windows of the youth organisation during riots and protests following the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Youth painted murals of young black faces on these boards, as well as plastered posters of Martin's face with text reading: 'I am Trayvon Martin and my life matters.' At the time of the study, three years after Martin's death, these boards were decorating the walls of the poetry space for the Workshop, conveying the message that stories of injustice should not be forgotten or ignored.

Because multimodal compositions involve the complex cognitive task of making meaning in multiple semiotic systems (Mahiri 2011), they are ideal artefacts through which to investigate reasoning about moral issues relevant to young peoples' lives. The confluence of multiple aims present in the Workshop: (a) aesthetic, (b) social, and (c) moral, created a perfect storm of creative parameters for participants to tell thought-provoking stories about their worlds. Aesthetic, social, and moral aims were always simultaneously active – I never observed a participant compose a poem purely to create something beautiful, without also being motivated to share it with others and make an impact on their peers, or a participant create something with only the desire



**Figure 1.** Murals of Trayvon Martin painted by youth participants of the Workshop line the walls of the poetry space.

to wrestle with issues of fairness and harm, without also employing artistic tools like metaphor, rhyme, and rhythm.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

Workshop participants were between 14 and 24 years old. The focal participants featured in the Results section were given a choice of how they wanted to be referred to in presentations and publications about this study. Both of them chose to be referred to by their artist name, as opposed to an anonymous pseudonym. While most research protocols call for preserving anonymity for the safety of the participants, when one's subjects are aspiring artists who wish to be identified with their work, one must rethink standard protocol. Some participants had already released their compositions online under their artist names. I felt compelled to support the development of their artist identities. Furthermore, the participants granted the researcher access to their original lyrics and compositions to analyse in a public fashion. The researcher decided that publishing excerpts of their lyrics and poems, while attributing them to anonymous pseudonyms, could possibly be detrimental to participants.

### ***Data corpus***

This ethnographic research was conducted over a period of two months (October–November 2015). The Workshop held programme sessions that were between two and three months long, and so I was able to observe one session of events. I acted as a participant observer, writing poetry along with the participants in poetry workshops and participating as an active audience member for live events. Field notes were collected during participant observations, and interviews with the participants and directors were conducted and transcribed by the researcher. In total, 14 observations were conducted of various Workshop events including intimate writing workshops, poetry nights, live performance events, and individual recording sessions in a studio. During the first three writing workshops and poetry nights, field notes were taken by hand. After a few weeks, the director of the programme felt comfortable with the presence of an audio recorder during these sessions and live poetry night events. The studio recording sessions were video recorded with the permission of the participants.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants in the programme, as well as the poetry instructor and the director of the Workshop. I recorded and transcribed these interviews. Participants were identified and approached for interviews after they had performed or shared a composition. In a sense, this final product gave the researcher a starting point to investigate the motivations and thinking processes that went into creating it. Participants who were interviewed were asked if they would share the lyrics or the audio files of the composition they performed with the researcher for a closer textual analysis.

In the end, 15 compositions (consisting of poems, audio tracks, and spoken word recitations) were analysed. The lyrics of the compositions were transcribed from audio recordings of live poetry night events, solicited via email, obtained in person (hard copies), or transcribed from audio recordings of recitations in interviews.

Interviews with participants began by soliciting the motivation behind the composition of interest. I asked for a spontaneous narrative account of the event that inspired each composition. I prompted the participant to recount the events in detail and how they felt at the time, without pressuring them to recount experiences that made them uncomfortable or emotionally distressed. Other interview questions revolved around the intended audience of the composition, how they felt when they performed it in front of others, and what they hoped the message would accomplish.

### **Analytic procedures**

This analysis regards each participant's compositional practices as the central unit of analysis, with a focus on how real-life events were folded into compositions. Field notes were coded for incidents and dialogue relating to participant recollections of specific experiences. This helped the researcher build a qualitative profile of the participant's composition and performance practices in many different settings. These data combined with his or her interview and composition artefacts were examined as a whole to make sense of how the participant was creatively interpreting events from his or her life.

Specifically, field notes were coded for (a) episodes and dialogue pertaining to sensitive episodes of participants' lives, (b) actions unique to the participant's creative habits or practices, and (c) interactions relating to how the participants viewed themselves as artists. Interviews were coded for (a) explanations and interpretations of their compositions and (b) statements about their stance and relationship to their compositions (e.g. how much pride, ownership, and connection they feel towards the composition). Compositions were coded for (a) references to violence and conflict, (b) point of view and perspective, (c) social and interpersonal critiques, (d) emotions, and (e) direct questions or appeals to their audiences.

The researcher was sensitive to the fact that the text was composed with certain tools, but possibly performed with additional ones – for example, a set of lyrics that was composed by hand in a journal, then digitally recorded on top of a beat, and then performed live in front of an audience. Each of these design choices was considered to be significant and intentional (Kress 2003), and often sparked individual interview questions.

A comparison was done between the account of the motivating event as related in the interview, and the perspective and interpretation of the event as portrayed in the composition. I was interested in whether these two expressions of the same event were similar or different in terms of tone, emotion, and perspective.

### **Results**

I will give an overview of the general findings of this analysis, and then take a deeper dive into the practices and compositions of two participants. Participants were motivated to create texts in the Workshop by their feelings of dissatisfaction, anger, helplessness, shock, and frustration that stemmed from real-life episodes. These real-life episodes included relationship betrayal, depression and attempted suicide, police brutality, incarceration, family conflict, discrimination and racial conflict, and living in poverty. Sometimes participants wrote for their own cathartic release of emotions, and other times they wrote with audiences in mind. The Workshop events offered an opportunity to

revisit and reclaim the final word on episodes that ended in undesirable ways. Although participants often judged the event that they were writing about to be unfair, unjust, or wrong, their messages were complex and conflicted.

### ***Compositions as narratives***

Although their compositions were explicitly motivated by specific events and episodes in their lives, the compositions usually did not tell linear stories of any one incident. The lyrics of compositions were often abstract, utilising metaphors and analogies to address feelings that the incident inspired or themes related to the incident. This is not surprising given that the focus of the Workshop was as much aesthetic as it was therapeutic – participants listened to hip-hop, spoken word poetry, and R&B music for stylistic inspiration, and poetry instructors emphasised rhythm, rhyme, and word play over linearity. These compositions were not intended to fit a narrative mould. In the case of the two compositions we will examine in this paper, Shy’An G’s ‘Aftershock’ and Tay’s ‘Embrace the Melanin’, the lyrics do not describe or recount any one event. Instead, they are expressive outgrowths of lived experiences that intentionally play with mode, media, and format, and take poetic licence – components that I argue contributed to the complexity with which they presented and critiqued their issue.

The two participants described in the following analysis had participated in the Workshop for more than two years. They had developed artistic personas and identities in the programme. These participants also demonstrated extensive knowledge of the history of racial conflict, racial injustice, and economic inequality in their communities. This knowledge was evident in the references they made to history, politics, and current events in their lyrics and messages, as well as in their comments and dialogue during poetry workshops and performance events. This study did not allow me to assess how much of this knowledge was constructed during Workshop events versus outside of the programme.

### ***Illustrative example: Shy’An G***

Shy’An G (artist name) was 19 years old when I interviewed her for this study. She could often be found at a computer wearing large headphones, working on her music. In the recording studio, she was a perfectionist, with a clear vision of the final product she wanted to produce. I observed Shy’An G during an individual recording session, as well as two poetry night events, one live performance event, and one writing workshop. The rap lyrics that I analysed most closely were from a song called ‘Aftershock’. Shy’An G told me that this composition was about witnessing her friend get assaulted by police, and not being able to do stop it. She said, ‘I felt that the only thing I could do at that moment was pull out my camera phone and record’ (Interview, 29 October 2015). In describing the incident, she said, ‘It made me so angry and full of rage’, and then later, ‘I’m still angry about it.’ The word ‘rage’ occurred often in her interview:

My initial thought behind making [Aftershock] the title is like you know there’s just this overwhelming-ness, this earthquake of all this violence coming in from people who are supposed to help regulate civilization in our community but they don’t. Because they’re just like us you know, we all have that rage inside of us, but it’s like who is strong enough to keep their professionalism, who is strong enough to stand their ground and fulfill whatever purpose that

they're supposed to fulfill in order to keep a community as stable as possible. (Interview, 29 October 2015)

In this statement, Shy'An G used her emotions to make sense of morally relevant actions that she witnessed in her community – an example of what Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) would call constructing moral agency. The rage that she felt allowed her to know that police officers must have felt that rage too. Yet, she still held them to a professional standard, up against which they fell short.

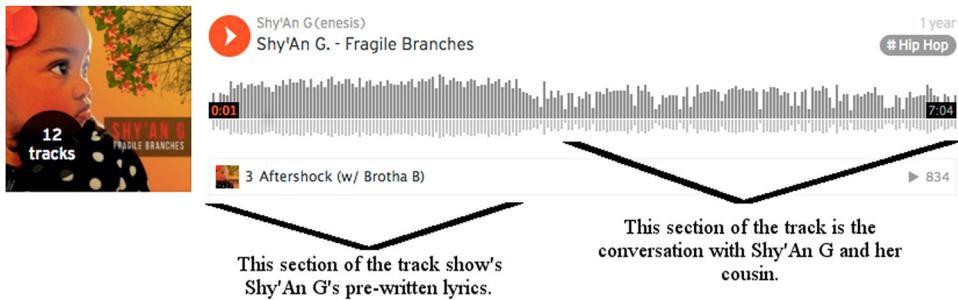
The act of recording the assault with her camera phone was a powerful act of citizen journalism, and she told me she was using that footage to be a witness to obtain justice for her friend. However, it is apparent that she was frustrated that she could not have done more in the moment. She appeared troubled by what she considered to be *inaction*. Her lyrics, therefore, powerfully claim what she *will* do going forward. Her lyrics state, 'And the legacy continues, and as long as it does I'll be passing the word through venues', alluding to her determination to continue producing music about social justice. In fact, she claims that nothing will stop her: 'There's nothing you can do – grab my foot and make me hop, pin my face to the ground thinkin' that'll make me stop' (Shy'An G, 2016, Track 3: Aftershock). She was wrestling with the fact that in the moment of watching police brutality, her hands were tied. She reconciled her own actions with the suffering of her friend, by owning her role as a witness and an artist. This is just one example of how Shy'An G's composition demonstrates the construction of moral agency.

Shy'An G wrote the lyrics to 'Aftershock' in her journal, which she kept with her at all times. She also made the beat to which she rapped her lyrics and included digital sound effects in her audio track. By examining the different modes and formats that she utilised in this single track, we get a complicated, nuanced picture of her reasoning about the community's relationship with the police.

On the one hand, her lyrics are powerful and aggressive, and her sound effects are chilling. For instance, in the first few bars of the composition, Shy'An G includes the sound of a gunshot, followed by a pause. In her interview, she told me that this gunshot represented two things: solidarity with other youth who have encountered police abuse, but also a message to authorities that youth are ready to retaliate. She was also reproducing a sound that is symbolic of violence and co-opting it for her own purposes.

Her lyrics include phrases like: 'screw the law' and she calls police 'cyborgs' that are missing their human organs. The beginning of her track directly questions police abuse of power: 'What's the definition of authority? Is it the power of the authors who can abuse the rules that they claim to create?' (Shy'An G, 2016, Track 3: Aftershock). In this verse, she critiques the social system she lives in, and the 'rules of the game' that she claims have been perverted. Her final verse is: 'We got spooks sittin' by the door to call and knock the hinges off.' She is threatening retaliation by force.

Then, on the same track, she switches genres of expression – after her recitation of pre-written lyrics, she engages in an impromptu conversation with her cousin, who she invited into the recording studio as a guest. She moves from a monological genre to a dialogical one on the same audio track. [Figure 2](#) shows the sound waves of the 'Aftershock' track as they appear on the online audio platform SoundCloud. The left section of the sound waves is Shy'An G's pre-written lyrics. The right section, which shows a more varied sound pattern, is her conversation with her cousin.



**Figure 2.** This figure shows the sound waves for 'Aftershock' as they appear on Soundcloud.com.

Shy'An G's cousin was a community activist and a source of inspiration for her. Her cousin began their conversation in the studio by commenting on her lyrics and he affirmed her message about fighting back. He said, 'Hip hop has always been rooted in that revolutionary spirit, and I just hear that in your soul.' Then, he recited a poem that he wrote about the mistreatment of black people by cops. At the end, Shy'An G said: 'We can't really make change unless we stop killing each other' (2016, Track 3: Aftershock). This conversation was a contemplative reflection about uniting their community in order to fight back against an oppressive and racist system.

Shy'An G complicated the part of her message that advocates retaliation by switching genres and calling for an end to violence, in addition to reform, on the part of police authorities. She makes a notable linguistic change as well. Shy'An G uses the pronoun 'I' eight times throughout the piece – twice as many times as she uses the pronoun 'we'. In the next section of her track, she literally brings in another voice to transform the 'I' to 'We'. In her statement: unless *we* stop killing each other, she is appealing even to the larger *we* – the audience listening to her song. One sees a progression from being focused on the self, to turning her attention outwards. This progression is a signal that the self-reflection that Shy'An G does while composing her lyrics, prepared for opening up to a larger dialogue, and further still to the external world and beyond.

Shy'An G composed 'Aftershock' as part of a bigger compilation of songs to be released as a mix tape album online. The album is called *Fragile Branches*, which was inspired by the Billy Holiday song, 'Strange Fruit' and a spin-off song by Emcee Lupe Fiasco called 'Strange Fruition'. Shy'An G told me in her interview that her own album, *Fragile Branches*, alluded to hidden conflicts in the family lineages of people who faced and continue to face violence:

It made me think of young people today and their connections with people who grew up back in the days you know facing adversity and controversy and discrimination ... not only do fragile branches come from broken bonds, it also comes from you know the heaviness and overwhelmed-ness of thinking about what happened in the past when your ancestors were lynched. (Interview, 29 October 2015)

Shy'An G drew inspiration for her verses not only from personal experiences, but also from existing genres of music and a deep knowledge of racial discrimination and history. In choosing this title, she positioned herself as a descendent of great musicians, joining a lineage not based on blood, but on art and struggle. This is a further broadening out of her message, reinforcing connections between her own ideas and those of previous

artists and activists. Shy’An G’s ‘Aftershock’ is an example of a multimodal composition that reveals complex reasoning about a complex issue: police brutality. Her evaluation and judgement of the issue was clear: it must stop. As she transitioned from pen and paper to the digital, from the interpersonal perspective to the communal, from the monological to the dialogical, and from gunshots in the background to silence, Shy’An G provided her audience with a powerful tool for starting conversations about this issue and demonstrated a moral evaluation that goes beyond a simple desire for revenge.

### **Illustrative example: Tay**

Tay (artist name) was 19 years old when I interviewed him, and a veteran of the Workshop. Tay stood out in a room – although not the tallest person, his perfect posture, calm and collected tone of voice, and business-like strut gained him the respect of peers and adults alike.

The poem Tay recited to me was about the commonplace usage of the terms ‘light-skinned’ or ‘dark-skinned’ within the African American community, which included his peers and popular media. His poem begins: ‘All I hear is light skin, dark skin, and brown skin this – categories as if black wasn’t a part of all our mix.’ When he performed this poem at poetry nights and other performance events, he would read the poem quickly and fluidly from his smartphone – playing with dramatic silences as he asked the audience to imagine the world differently.

Tay explained in an interview that the inspiration for writing came from the realisation that everyone in his community made assumptions based on skin tone. He reflected, ‘Because you see someone that is darker skin, you assume **this**. Because you see someone with lighter skin, you assume **this**’ (bolded text signifies vocal stress; Interview, 7 October 2015). He was frustrated with the way his friends applied these terms to him. He said in his interview,

And I used to have to tell people like, ‘Bruh, I’m orange. Don’t compare me.’ Just ‘cus my favorite color is orange so I used to tell people like, ‘Bruh, I’m orange. Don’t compare me to dark or light,’ I hate that. (Interview, 7 October 2015)

Tay identified a social norm that he was dissatisfied with, but also one that was so pervasive that he admitted to being a perpetrator of it himself in both his interview and his poem. He said,

We’re all cursed by our tone, our skin tones, and it’s sad like it comes with so much stereotypes and territory, you feel like, ‘Damn. Am I really a part of this, or am I just listening, feeding into all the BS?’ Like, ‘Is this really me?’ (Interview, 7 October 2015)

From the perspective of narrative moral agency, Tay used his beliefs about harmful social comparisons and his emotions of frustration in order to make sense of his past actions and the actions of his peers. In addition to including these thoughts in his interview, he even admits his complicity in his poem: ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m a part of the movement. Yeah it’s been a point when I said, “Light-skins would do this”’ (Tay, ‘Embrace the Melanin’).

Tay recited this poem to me in an interview, and I transcribed it. As a result, I do not know how he separated his verses and phrases on the page. I interpreted pauses in his recitation as indicators of where verses were separated. Tay wrote all his poetry in digital formats, using applications like Google Docs or Microsoft Word, and devices like his

smartphone or computer. One result of using digital media to compose and draft his poetry is that it allowed him to draw material from popular culture references and remix it into his own lyrics instantaneously. He told me about two celebrity rappers who were feuding back and forth over Twitter and using dark and light-skinned as insults. In this poem, Tay calls them out:

Celebs are cool I ain't trying to diss 'em

Wait – they get too much props for being regular f\*\*\*\*n' humans

But the point is we got brains and we don't want to use 'em

I said the point is our color is picked and we want to choose them. (Tay, 'Embrace the Melanin')

Tay is holding celebrities accountable, but also reproaching his peers for glorifying their way of life. By referencing celebrity drama he complicated his moral message by acknowledging that this practice was mainstream, as if anticipating the argument: If our role models do it, why shouldn't we?

In the mode of written language, Tay critiqued this linguistic norm, which he called the 'colour tone curse', in a clever and hospitable way. Firstly, by acknowledging himself as both a critic of the practice and a perpetrator of the practice, he established himself as vulnerable. Secondly, Tay's poem displayed several examples of hospitable invitations – places where he welcomes the audience into his world.<sup>2</sup> The following two phrases are excerpts from Tay's poem:

1. Now imagine if I gave you some over the top spoken word on how I feel about the color-tone curse

2. Now imagine if I said there was no way we black people on these streets will ever be anything besides wannabe celebrities

Tay used the words 'imagine if' repeatedly in order to position himself as a guide for his audience. These phrases also demonstrate how Tay tried on different identities as a social critic. He is linguistically dancing between reprimanding his audience, making fun of himself as a poet, and then rationalising the behaviour that he set out to critique.

Tay also made gestural, performative moves that emphasised the complexity of arguing against a social norm. When he performed this composition, he had a physical routine that regularly accompanied his recitation. After the first few phrases of the poem, he would pause for an uncomfortably long time. Sometimes he even walked away from the stage – leaving the audience wondering whether they should applaud. Then he would suddenly return to the stage and continue at lightning speed saying, 'Damn, it was like I just gave up.' In using this line to re-engage his audience, he drew attention to the fact that he was doing *just the opposite* – in fact, he was not giving up, but taking a stand.

By walking away and then returning, and by admitting that he is been a perpetrator of the very thing he was criticising, Tay did not let himself off the hook for this issue. He succeeded in making the point with his words and his body that he was not critiquing his audience from a place of self-righteousness. He set an example of how to identify something that needs to change, even when it was part of the status quo. Tay's moral stance on this issue was clearly critical, but also introspective and empathetic.

Like Shy'An G, Tay was also aware of the history behind his issue, in particular, stereotyping light- and dark-skinned African Americans. While Tay was explaining this phenomenon in an interview with the researcher, the director of the Workshop interjected, 'There's history behind that.' Tay immediately picked up on her cue saying, 'Yeah, the "house nigga" and the "slave nigga"' (Field notes, 7 October 2015). He went on to explain that lighter skinned African Americans were treated differently than darker skinned African Americans during slavery, and he speculated that this was why lighter skinned African Americans today have a reputation of acting in a superior manner. Tay was able to engage with history in his composition in a way that would be difficult to do in a quick conversation with friends. By choosing poetry as a genre, Tay was able to say so much more than, 'I'm orange.' He became a cutting social critic.

## Discussion

This analysis offers insight into the complex moral work that adolescents engage in through narrative and artistic compositions, and specifically, the ways in which they construct moral agency. Shy'An G added nuance to her lyrics that conveyed an emotional desire for revenge, by complementing them with a deliberative conversation about peaceful community-based solutions with her cousin. Ultimately her composition posed the moral dilemma: what is one supposed to do when confronted with police abuse? What is the best solution for resisting this abuse? Her composition as a whole is an expression of rage and a desire for revenge, filtered through beliefs about just and unjust social systems and productive conflict resolution. Tay complicated his condemnation of the colour tone curse by admitting to being a perpetrator of it. Additionally, he used his body to mimic how easy it would be to look the other way and ignore this socially accepted practice, but in the end returned to face it head on. These multimodal compositions do not attempt to conceal the process of grappling with complex moral issues. In fact, these compositions suggest that the grappling is the *whole point* – that artwork is born out of the state of being conflicted.

Ultimately, participants' design choices with regard to mode, media, format, and genre allowed them to complicate their moral stance on the event in question. Composing in multiple modes allowed participants to add nuance to their moral positioning on issues in their own lives, as did the opportunities to perform for their peers. An analysis of these participants' reflections and compositions reinforces an understanding of moral development that suggests that people are constantly coordinating multiple concerns from different domains of social knowledge (moral, conventional, and personal) in order to make judgements and decisions (Nucci 1981; Smetana, Jambon, and Ball 2014; Turiel 1983). Shy'An G is simultaneously grappling with the moral concerns of unjust police behaviour, empathy for other victims, and a concern for the welfare of future victims, with conventional concerns like abiding by laws and wielding authority responsibly. From a social domain theory perspective, she is drawing on *conventional* knowledge about how social systems are *supposed* to function, and then applying her moral judgement to expose these authorities for being unjust. Nucci (2009) calls this ability to reflect on one's own society a *critical moral perspective*. Spontaneous coordination between domains of social knowledge is a goal of moral education approaches within this theoretical framework (Nucci 2009; Nucci, Creane, and Powers 2015).

## Conclusion

Young people, who face conflicts every day like those mentioned by participants in the Workshop, bring emotions like rage, frustration, and sadness into their classrooms. Schools can be emblematic of authority systems that have proven to be unfair, unjust, and often uncaring, and therefore, the school environment and the players therein can easily trigger and fuel these emotions. This study shows that these emotions are crucial to constructing moral agency, and can be assets to creating multimodal compositions that can aid in self-reflection and moral reasoning about complex social issues. Instead of encouraging students to leave their emotions behind when they enter classrooms, framing those emotions as tools for analysing the injustice and moral harm they see around them could be an important strategy for engaging in critical pedagogy and constructing moral agency.

By raising questions about why things are the way they are, these young composers transformed larger existing narratives about their communities. For instance, Shy'An G used the sound of the gunshot in her composition that ultimately conveyed a message about peace. She has created a new artefact that now can be transformed by other media consumers. Additionally, she has made the track available for free download on SoundCloud – an example of the democratic affordances of digital media. Multimodal compositions, therefore, can be tools for changing a community's narrative about an issue – be it violence or discrimination.

However, the rich semiotic work that young people are accomplishing in the Workshop is not often recognised as being academically valuable since the programme takes place in an out-of-school setting. These kinds of activities need to make their way into the normal school day so that everyone has a chance to undertake this kind of storytelling, and all students can benefit from the storytelling of their peers.

The three goals mentioned earlier: (a) aesthetic, (b) social, and (c) moral, can guide educators in thinking about how to design learning experiences that connect to students' real lives and stimulate critical moral thinking. These goals should spark related questions for teachers, such as: (a) Will students have the opportunity to choose between modes of representation and meaning making in this activity? In what ways will students be designing their texts, and drawing on their skills as experts in various modes and media? (b) What opportunities will students have to share their compositions with their peers, families, or communities? How can these compositions be catalysts for addressing bigger social issues? How will the knowledge of a future audience impact the production process? (c) Am I giving students an opportunity to address or acknowledge an injustice in their life? How are students wrestling with issue of fairness, welfare, and social norms in this activity?

At first glance Workshop compositions might be viewed as projects of mere entertainment. Many people might assume that young people who aspire to be rappers or hip-hop artists do so for the money and the glamour, and desire to imitate music that is already widely consumed. And yet, this study reveals participants who did exactly the opposite. Instead of imitating famous artists, Shy'An G spun off of the album titles of Billy Holiday and Lupe Fiasco to come up with an equally provocative title for her own work: *Fragile Branches*. Likewise, Tay explicitly called out celebrities and mainstream media for glorifying a practice he deemed harmful.

These findings suggest that young people who have been given the opportunity to engage with critical ideas about social and political history, and play with multiple modes of meaning making, are eager to tackle contradictory ideas and tease apart the different sides of moral issues before taking a moral stance. Using the information-gathering resources at hand, such as adult mentors and multimedia technologies, and their skills with different modalities, they paint an aptly complicated picture of the world around them. As this analysis has demonstrated, these complicated compositions reflected a capacity for coordinating complex moral and societal considerations (Turriel 2002) connected meaningfully within the young artists' construction of moral agency (Pasupathi and Wainryb 2010).

## Notes

1. This is a pseudonym.
2. I am drawing on the concept of hospitable practices embedded in multimedia texts as described by Hull, Stornaiuolo, and Sahni (2010).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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