

## On Strike: The Rhetorical Anatomy of a Contemporary Protest Song

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### **Introduction**

The study of music's rhetorical or persuasive properties occupies a unique space in the field of communication research. Distinct from music's nature as a means of communication is the way in which it transcends the modes of transfer and perception common among other media such as literature, film, or television. Popular song form is (though not exclusively) a composite of abstract language (the lyrics) and sensory (auditory) stimuli devoid of an inherent visual component. This has led communication professionals to approach the study of songs in a communication context to draw on several analytic strategies in order to determine how music as a means of communication should be studied, as well as how and when the results of such research should be applied. Music's pervasive role in modern mass culture has, like other forms of art and media, allowed it to assume a significant presence in dissident political and social movements throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Songs of this nature—with contextually specific narratives—were written, composed, and performed with varying but unifying rhetorical strategies and persuasive methods. Communication scholars Richard Gregg and Charles Stewart used earlier rhetorical studies to develop analytical criterion specifically for this, describing it as the ego-function and self-persuasion, respectively. While many of these songs are now somewhat regarded as cultural artifacts due to their association with opposition to norms now seen as antiquated, they have retained a certain degree of relevance due to the enduring legacy of structural forms of oppression. As such, the purpose of this study is to apply these and other modes of analysis to determine the function of self-persuasion as it pertains to a contemporary example of dissident protest behavior in the form of a protest song.

Historically, labor strikes have, not unlike other dissident movements, employed song in order to reinforce an atmosphere of solidarity among intergroup members. In keeping with this trend, a review of literature has proven that in protest music studied in communication as an academic discipline, a sort of self-persuasion prevails as the primary behavioral dynamic in the power construct-protestor dynamic. In light of the recent United Auto Worker's strike against General Motors in October of 2019 on behalf of temporary and part-time employees, Detroit-based rapper and former auto worker GmacCash released a track, "On Strike." The music video has recently reached nearly 30,000 views on YouTube. Despite being a brief, three-verse song, liberally employing vernacular pejoratives, "On Strike" is nonetheless a declaration of solidarity with the nearly 50,000 UAW workers on strike demanding a fairer salary for starting employees, demanding GM expedite the eight-year period it takes for new hires to reach the maximum \$13 an hour. Therefore, the analysis here aims to take the discursive and non-discursive attributes of the rap (its lyrics and beat, respectively) into account and will assess how the attempts at self-persuasion might be characterized and what that implies.

A synthesis of foundational communication theses regarding persuasive strategies and the communicative values of protest music reveals that selected literature details the framework on rhetoric and persuasion, along with the uses and gratifications perspective on the motives for seeking out particular mediums of media in order to justify this particular theoretical context. In what follows, I will use that theoretical foundation to provide a close textual analysis of the lyrics of protest music. Finally, communication research focused specifically protest music is included to detail the ways in which these analyses are combined and applied.

### **Foundational Framework: Rhetoric and Persuasion**

As the means by which groups or individuals are persuaded, it is necessary to understand the concept of the rhetorical situation, the circumstances which allow for the process of persuasion to occur at all. Because this study will seek to understand the persuasive rhetorical nature of

a contemporary protest song, an overview of this concept, which undergirds the analysis is included. Contributions by rhetoricians Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz established that rhetorical devices and modes of analysis can contextualize the concept of rhetoric and persuasion in the communication field and represent opposing interpretations, while some reconciliation between the two is not impossible. Both, however, deal with the “situation” phenomenon. Bitzer characterizes the rhetorical situation as defined by circumstances unrelated to the rhetoric itself. When persuasive behavior or speech does take place, it is stipulated under the influence of the specific situation, or “exigence.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, rhetoric is deployed as an agent of change in response to a situation so that the conditions brought on by the situation can be changed or used in some way. Some rhetorical behaviors are impeded by the interference of “constraints;” other people or other circumstances which the rhetor can sometimes circumvent either by in order to persuade.<sup>2</sup> These rhetorical situations are “real.”<sup>3</sup> Vatz’s refutation of Bitzer posits that rhetoric itself stipulates Bitzer’s exigences, claiming that the former perspective absolves the rhetor of their moral agency<sup>4</sup>. The rhetorical situation is not just defined but created by rhetoric by assigning “salience” to specific variables within social environments, thereby allowing the rhetor to manipulate their audience’s attention and perception one way or the other.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Ego-Function**

According to Richard Gregg, the normative “rhetorical transaction” takes place when speakers and listeners are both consensually engaged in “psychological interdependence” wherein the speaker assumes a listener’s ability to comprehend messages.<sup>6</sup> For protestors, the phrase *ego-function* refers to the opposite dynamic. First, the rhetor’s audience is the rhetor

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Bitzer. (1968). “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 5

<sup>2</sup> Bitzer, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Bitzer, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Vatz. (1973). “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6, no. 3 (1973): 158.

<sup>5</sup> Vatz, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Gregg, “The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest.” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 4, no. 2 (1971): 72.

themselves and those who share their beliefs and goals, i.e., fellow protestors. Second, rhetoric in the ego-function is “establishing, defining, and affirming one’s self-hood.”<sup>7</sup> Personhood is contingent on the ego, which, in the perspective of protestors versus aggressors, is “ignored, or damaged, or disenfranchised” in various contexts of oppression. Concurrent among protest movements is rhetoric that seeks to either expunge or correct “intense feelings of self-deprecation and ego-deprivation.”<sup>8</sup> The construction of archetypal characters (protestors and their “enemies”) is also necessary in understanding how the ego-function works; identifying who a movement is up against allows the rhetor and their allies to “ego-affirm” easily.<sup>9</sup> Implicit in this analysis and the establishment of this criteria is the premise that the central function of the rhetorically creating or identifying these “characters” or “actors” (whether it is done by means of aesthetic or linguistic design) is to reduce more complex and abstract figures or structures down to the qualities which solidify its relationship to other actors. Overall, the “symbolic control” the ego-function equips the protest-rhetor with allows some degree of persuasive advantage.<sup>10</sup>

### **Intergroup Communication**

A communication perspective on music necessitates scholarly justification for its relevance in the field. The dynamic between protest movements and their targets can be categorized as an intergroup relationship. Gallois, Giles and Watson define intergroup communication as the interactions between two or more groups which may be opposed in some way, and that historically this has been the most prominent in social and cultural movements.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, research by Jake Harwood explains music’s role as intergroup communication, which is defined by contact which occurs when the member of a group “encounters an outgroup member.”<sup>12</sup> Gallois, Giles and Watson termed members of two different groups which are adversarial to

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<sup>7</sup> Gregg, 74.

<sup>8</sup> Gregg, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Gregg, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Gregg, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Cindy Gallois, Howard Giles, B.M. Watson, “Intergroup Communication: Identities and Effective Interactions.” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 311.

<sup>12</sup> Jake Harwood, “Music and Intergroup Communication.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. (2017): 8.

each other as “interlocutors” with whom communication can be a source of conflict because the communication can take place can be conducted by one or the other to subvert the opposing group in some way.<sup>13</sup> Harwood purported that music is a form of communication because like both verbal and non-verbal communication, it is received via stimulatory reception.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, because “lyrics imply language,” lyrics can “be categorized into language groups.”<sup>15</sup> When the mode of communication is music, Harwood argued, a “humanizing effect” can occur where the preconceptions between the in and out group members can be reconciled.<sup>16</sup>

### **Music Consumption**

James Belcher and Paul Haridakis identify four “background characteristics” used to explain the music preferences of people within certain groups using the uses and gratifications theory as a theoretical touchstone. First, “Opinion Leadership” is used to describe how people tend to be drawn to peers who display easily notable opinions within their own social group. They seek their media out more frequently than non-leaders, and about “topics of personal interest.”<sup>17</sup> “Involvement” describes the nature in which people with shared media tastes discuss and build interpersonal connections with peers around this mutuality.<sup>18</sup> “Music training,” (whether or not individuals can actually play musical instruments themselves) is less significant, but the perception of peers’ musical interests are also taken into account.

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

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<sup>13</sup> Gallois, Giles and Watson, 313.

<sup>14</sup> Harwood, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Harwood, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Harwood, 10.

<sup>17</sup> James D. Belcher, Paul Haridakis, “The Role of Background Characteristics, Music-Listening Motives, and Music Selection on Music Discussion.” *Communication Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2013): 377.

<sup>18</sup> Belcher, Haridakis, 378.

Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz wrote that one particular kind of media can serve “a multiplicity” of needs or wants.<sup>19</sup> Their study questioned existing uses and gratifications material to interrogate whether the type of media affected how or why it was consumed. In their critique, they detail the concern that that media studies were confined to the belief that media only served people’s unconscious desires or vicarious activities and solely driven on what an audience or consumer wants.

### **Methodologies Developed for Analyzing Music**

The following contributions to the communication field concerning music are characterized by attempts to join the auditory stimuli and written diction of song lyrics. Walter Kirkpatrick and James Irvine distinguished “rhetorical” (written lyrics) and “expressive” (instrumental, sonic) properties of music but directly drew from Bitzer’s perspective about the rhetorical situation.<sup>20</sup> They named the audience as tacit judges of a song’s true effect and meaning. They posited that for authors of songs, the *act* of composition and an audience’s reaction both measure the impact of music but the *performative* aspect and the *content* itself are distinguished by “interaction function through familiar and/or unfamiliar variables.”<sup>21</sup> Pretexts like the shared or individual experiences, preferences, and/or biases of the listener(s) determine real meaning. Irvine and Kirkpatrick acknowledge instruments have an effect also, but argue it is not worth discussing what effect they might have unless you differentiate *what kind* of instrument, because the specific sound implies a certain potential perception; for example, electric versus acoustic instruments, etc.<sup>22</sup> G.P. Mohrmann and Eugene F. Scott provided an early example of a model for quantitatively studying music in a communication context specifically using songs in an analysis of popular songs during World War II meant to reinforce popular opinion about the United States’ role. However, they admitted that they “refer to the restricted

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<sup>19</sup> Jay G. Blumler, Elihu Katz, Elihu. “Uses and Gratifications Research.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1974): 517.

<sup>20</sup> Walter G. Kirkpatrick, James R. Irvine, “The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58, no. 3 (1972): 274.

<sup>21</sup> Kirkpatrick, Irvine, 276.

<sup>22</sup> Kirkpatrick, Irvine,

discursive potential of the popular song,” leading them to inaccurately characterize the songs as “an unsuitable medium for complex persuasive appeals.”<sup>23</sup>

Analytical approaches and nomenclature developed by Deanna and Thomas Sellnow were inspired by Kirkpatrick and Irvine and demonstrate justifications for categorizing music as communication and continue to build from the rhetorical research analysis framework. They treated lyrics and sound somewhat more equally than Kirkpatrick and Irvine and characterize the two variables as a “dynamic interaction.”<sup>24</sup> They referred to the instrumental, non-discursive makeup as “aesthetic symbolism.”<sup>25</sup> Music is meant to emulate abstractions like human emotions, their byproducts and/or expressions how they are expressed. Kirkpatrick and Irvine write that these are conveyed through “intensity-release patterns,” and “tragic” and “comic” rhythms; abstract portrayals of emotion.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the symbolic functions of each both contribute to how the message of a song is perceived; in terms of non-discursive rhetoric, rhetorical meaning is *felt* instead of understood. Kirkpatrick and Irvine make a point to say that effects of both lyrical (“linguistic”) and sonic (“aesthetic”) characteristics must be interrogated for comprehensive rhetorical analysis to be credible and holistic.<sup>27</sup> With both of these facets taken into account, the authors characterized music as a “virtual experience” that creates the “illusion of life,” (implicitly proving that music is a media medium in the sense of the uses and gratifications perspective offered by Blumler and Katz), accounting for people’s attraction to it as a means of catharsis.<sup>28</sup>

Alex Bailey synthesized Kirkpatrick and Irvine, the Sellnows, and Stewart’s work (exercising it in an analysis of “Victory Day,” a song by a now defunct white nationalist band composed of preteen twin girls, Prussian

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<sup>23</sup> G.P. Mohrmann, Eugene. F. Scott, “Popular Music and World War II: The Rhetoric of Continuation,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 146.

<sup>24</sup> Deanna Sellnow and Timothy Sellnow. “The ‘Illusion of Life’ Rhetorical Perspective: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Music as Communication.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 4, (2001): 396.

<sup>25</sup> Sellnow, Sellnow, 398.

<sup>26</sup> Sellnow, Sellnow, 398.

<sup>27</sup> Sellnow, Sellnow, 398.

<sup>28</sup> Sellnow, Sellnow, 407.

Blue), but most closely aligned with Vatz regarding rhetoric. Bailey's work is congruent with Irvine and Kirkpatrick's assertion that instrumentation and lyrics do not always share the same denotative meaning.<sup>29</sup> Juxtaposing the song lyrics, (which *discursively* extol the efforts of impending ethnic cleansing by the Aryan artists) with the aesthetic-symbolic effect of the seemingly precocious children's amateurish and endearing sound is meant to deflect attention from the lyrics' otherwise deeply offensive implications.<sup>30</sup>

### **Applications to Activist Music**

Stephen Kosokoff and Carl Carmichael (1970) hypothesized that protest songs produce "attitude change," and predicted that, coupled with other forms of activist behavior such as speeches, protest music would reinforce the efficacy of a group's intended messages.<sup>31</sup> They monitored the attitude changes of 97 students based on listening to original songs composed for the experiment about the Vietnam War, and whether they would cohere with the students' perceptions of spoken speeches which shared essentially the same diction. Kosokoff and Carmichael's contribution is unique in that it quantified the persuasive effects of the song lyrics in varying contexts; the most significant changes in opinion occurred due to the juxtaposition of songs *and* speeches. They concluded that "songs can add to the attitude change resulting from a speech of social action."<sup>32</sup> Identifying a relationship between discursion and the creation of an attitude reinforces the maxim that songs are an important component of an overall movement. They are auxiliary means of galvanizing solidarity contingent on the preexisting foundation of collective acknowledgment of a specific ideological premise.

Like Kosokoff and Carmichael, Charles J. Stewart focused solely on discursive persuasion, and applied the ego-function perspective to analyze protest songs and extracted "five points of contrast" that refer to the method of characterization protestors rely on which Gregg previously described. These

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<sup>29</sup> Alex Bailey, "The Rhetoric of Music: A Theoretical Synthesis. *Rocky Mountain Communication Review* 3, no. 1 (2006). 1-12.

<sup>30</sup> Bailey, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Kossokoff, and Carl W. Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change." *The Southern Speech Journal* 35:4 (1970): 298.

<sup>32</sup> Kossokoff, Carmichael, 301.



include “innocent versus wicked victimizer,” “powerful and brave versus separate and divided,” “important and valuable versus unimportant and worthless,” and “Virtuous and moral versus sinful and immoral.”<sup>33</sup> In a qualitative study focusing strictly on the discursive-symbolic component, Stewart performed a comprehensive rhetorical analysis of 705 songs from dissident political and social movements and documented how many times these archetypal dynamics occurred, and which were the most characteristic of which songs.<sup>34</sup> Sixty-nine percent of songs portrayed protestors as victims to some degree. Fifty-three percent referred “explicitly” to an archetypal “villain” character in the person of the oppressor.<sup>35</sup> While the prominence in lyrical representation of the other archetypes varied by movement, Stewart noted that, despite the variations, overwhelmingly, “The self appears to be the primary audience of protest music,” objectively upholding Gregg’s ego-function.<sup>36</sup>

The following scholarly discussion of communication and rhetoric in activist music suggest two dominant forms of persuasion exist. In addition to the traditional rhetor-audience dynamic of Bitzer and Vatz, Gregg and Stewart’s *self-persuasion* is also identified and examined, and the non-discursive/aesthetic value of instrumental sound is more liberally explored as a legitimate rhetorical property. Kerran Sanger (in 1995 and in 1997) and Robert Francesconi, in the context of American slavery and the civil rights movement respectively, dealt with “rhetorical self-definition” rather than strictly persuading an audience. In both instances, Sanger categorized civil rights songs and slave spirituals as not only historical relatives, but transcendent of self-expression. In both periods, the performers of the songs sought to persuade themselves of their own humanity in order to psychologically escape the dehumanized identity their material conditions had constructed for them.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Charles J. Stewart, “The Ego Function of Protest Songs: An Application of Gregg’s Theory of Protest Rhetoric.” *Communication Studies*, 42, no. 3 (1991): 241.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart, 242.

<sup>35</sup> Stewart, 243.

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, 252.

<sup>37</sup> Kerran L. Sanger, “Slave Resistance and Rhetorical Self-Definition: Spirituals as Strategy.” *Western Journal of Communication* 59, (1995): 179.

Sanger's 1997 study of music's role in the civil rights movement largely dealt with individual activists' perspectives on the role that singing songs like "We Shall Overcome" had on their morale personally and collectively.<sup>38</sup> Sanger's study aggregated written interviews and accounts with former civil rights activists, and wrote that the majority of them seemed to recount that singing in public during demonstrations and protests allowed for "generating positive emotional support for the movement," helped "manage negative emotions" and imbued them with a "sense of spiritual commitment" to the movement. Troy Murphy's analysis of "We Shall Overcome's" transformation from a slave song to the more well-known civil rights anthem concluded that the vocabulary of the lyrics changed from an individual to a more collective perspective throughout the century. For example, the word "Shall" replaced "Will" over time, because it was a more open, easier sound to sing, which made it more appealing to larger groups.<sup>39</sup>

Considering Francesconi's study of the free jazz movement (all African American artists) in the context of the civil rights movement, Bitzer would agree that the rhetorical situation of the dominant white culture having a monopoly of sorts on musical expression created the boundaries that free jazz artists sought to breach. Francesconi's broader findings established that as a social phenomenon, free jazz was also an attempt to (through the aesthetic or non-discursive symbolism per Kirkpatrick and Irvine) actively disavow white and European influences of preceding trends of bebop and swing. Rhetorically, free jazz musicians embraced a more decidedly African identity marked by the instruments and a sonic approach to improvising, an uncontrolled approach to harmonic systems as opposed to Western music.<sup>40</sup> Without coincidence, Sanger notes that slaves used spirituals to establish an "alternative definition of self that challenged white claims."<sup>41</sup> In both examples of identity, ego-function's role and self-persuasion is the dominant conceptual parallel.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Sanger, 181.

<sup>39</sup> Troy A. Murphy. "Rhetorical Invention and the Transformation of We Shall Overcome." *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 4, (2003): 4.

<sup>40</sup> Francesconi, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Sanger, 179.

<sup>42</sup> Gregg, 74.

Sheryl Hurner applied the Sellnows' discursive versus aesthetic symbolism methodology for rhetorical analysis of 31 songs associated with the women's suffrage movement in the United States. According to Hurner, suffragists actually catered to preexisting cultural notions about women to persuade.<sup>43</sup> This aligns with Bitzer's perspective on rhetoric, and Kirkpatrick and Irvine's as well. Hurner inferred that with the interests of the audience in mind, the songs would be the most effective. In this case, that audience context happened to be the gender *logos* within a patriarchal era. Hurner's analysis included a uniquely Vatz-esque characteristic of suffrage music: many songs' lyrics *and* instrumental components were meant to convey that a militant-like "victory" was near, which framed the situation to the preference of the suffragists themselves.<sup>44</sup>

### **Songs Specific to Class Struggle**

David Carter identified two central "themes": "*separation and oppression*."<sup>45</sup> Rhetorically framing for the Industrial Workers of the World's project was crucial. The Wobblies strove to erect their public image as saviors of society, not unlike the suffragists. The IWW's rhetorical approach also hinged upon their appeal; unlike the American Federation of Labor, they sought to organize both skilled and unskilled laborers.<sup>46</sup> The IWW's songs were designed to both portray worker's lives as accurately as possible, but also parody charity organizations such as the Salvation Army as not necessarily antagonistic, but inadequately aligned ideologically with the labor movement. "Solidarity Forever" was melodically adapted from "The Battle Hymn of The Republic" to portray the proletariat as responsible for the creation of wealth and the backbone of the U.S. economy. This is not unlike how Hurner discussed the way the suffragists characterized themselves through songs as being responsible for raising the men that made the U.S. a great nation in the

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<sup>43</sup> Sheryl Hurner. "Discursive Identity Formation of Suffrage Women: Reframing the Cult of True Womanhood Through Song." *Western Journal of Communication* 70, no. 3 (2006): 248.

<sup>44</sup> Hurner, 250.

<sup>45</sup> Carter, David. A. "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66. (1980): 369.

<sup>46</sup> Carter, 368.

first place, or as good Americans who were being denied the agency to fulfill their nationalistic potential.<sup>47</sup> Identifying an easily identifiable, archetypal “enemy” (the capitalist), however, was unique to the IWW’s songs, highlighting the distinction between the IWW’s aspiration to reclaim the means of production from their enemy and the suffragists’ demands to be treated as equals within the framework of the Constitution.

Ralph E. Knupp examined the “patterns of thematic choice-making” in protest songs focused on a “macroscopic” overview of protest music.<sup>48</sup> Knupp’s content analysis also focused on the tendency of protest songs, particularly those from the labor movement, to forgo language concerning the concept of the past. Instead, all issues and aspirations are portrayed as ongoing struggles, fortifying a sense immediacy in an effort to maintain relevance in addition to boosting morale and solidarity.<sup>49</sup> In the same sense, Knupp characterized the lyrics as sharing a predisposition to active rather than passive behavior. Instead of simply representing an ideology, songs detailed actions. Songs identified specific solutions to presented problems.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout a mostly qualitative selection, the literature selection is marked by the prevailing facets of communicative relationships between diametrically opposed groups. The confluence of music and lyrics (sonic and discursive symbolism, respectively) is shared and draws from a diverse spectrum of historical and socio-political contexts united by the power structure-dissident relationship. In terms of rhetoric, concurrence of self-persuasion through the ego-function is equally represented in the specific examples. The literature suggests that the rhetorical framework proposed by Bitzer and Vatz are not mutually exclusive. Scholarly material on protest music implies that while the agenda-setting perspective of the latter can illustrate how situations are manipulated to support or confront a particular means to an end, the aspect of power dynamics and structure do not confine the rhetorical situation to that interpretation.

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<sup>47</sup> Hurner, 249.

<sup>48</sup> Ralph E. Knupp, “A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Rhetorical Dimensions of Protest Music.” *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 46, no. 4 (2009): 379.

<sup>49</sup> Knupp, 385.

<sup>50</sup> Knupp, 387.

## Methods

A qualitative research approach that scrutinized both the and non-discursive attributes of the rap (its lyrics and beat, respectively) was used to determine how the attempts at self-persuasion might be characterized. In practice, the following sequence of analyses was performed by listening to “On Strike,” then reading its lyrics, listening to the song again while reading the lyrics, and finally using the lyrics to extract information.

RQ1: “Which self-persuasion techniques are the most prevalent in GmacCash’s song ‘On Strike’?”

## Discursive Elements

This reading of the lyrics was done in order to pinpoint the establishment of “characters” to create a narrative. This was performed by employing criteria present in studies such as those by Hurner and Stewart, who looked specifically at *who* the rhetor was talking to and/or about. Stewart specifically noted the use of adjectives and figurative language that compared the subjects of songs to archetypal “villains” and/or “heroes,” per Knupp. I identified the number of “actors” in the hypothetical “story” (in Hurner’s terminology, “the illusion of life”) the song sets up for the listener. I employed Knupp’s practice of examining “Temporal Orientation,” and counted “references to past, present, or future actions or events.” This method was included in order to assess Cash’s outlook on the strike itself in terms of urgency and mission, questioning the reality of an explicit victory or consequence.

In order to do this, I looked at pronouns; *who* was being talked about, in *what* context, and what adjectives or actions they were coupled with. Along with this, I sought to apply Hurner’s assessment of how the broader movement was characterized by the rhetor or the performer singing the song. What responsibilities or duties does the rhetor (Cash, the rapper) identify that the strikers have as a part of the conflict with their employer? In this context, that broader movement is the conceptual archetype of the worker against the employer.

### **Non-discursive Elements**

I then assessed whether, per Irvine and Kirkpatrick, the lyrics and instrumentation of the song could be characterized as congruent, meaning that cohesion between them is such that the “intensity-release pattern” that is created is one that either punctuates or distracts from the symbolic value of the lyrics.

### *Results & Discussion*

#### **Song Structure and Pronoun Choice**

A distinct structural pattern built upon the “actors” in the song’s narrative is established. The pronouns used in the song have meanings specific to their context: the word “they” is used a total of 8 times, “we,” 4 times, and “you,” once. Notably, while a refrain of “We goin’ on strike” is used a total of 6 times to preface the first verse of the song, the title— “On Strike”— of the song itself neglects to point any fingers at a particular “actor.” Nonetheless, the narrative scheme of the song points to a stylistic strategy meant to characterize the strike itself as broadly as possible: as a multi-faceted movement with a range of causes, dynamics, and implications. The first verse of the rap refers to the strike primarily using the pronoun “we,” twice: “We goin’ on strike so you better listen/We ain’t bout to keep workin’ under these conditions.”

In the second verse of the rap, the focus shifts. Cash uses “they” to speak about the temps, whose cause the UAW strikers are fighting on behalf of, and calls out plant supervisors specifically for exploiting underpaid temp labor as a means to reach sales goals. The third and final verse of the rap, while using the pronoun “they” twice, does so in effect to detail the collective, metaphysical nature of the strike as a movement and a concept as opposed to a literal struggle or embattlement, as it does in the previous two verses where “we” and “they” are deployed as signifiers. The verse begins with the lines,

“The union gotta stick together/Do this for each other.” This has a peculiar effect in that the first phrase refers to the union as being detached from any kind of personal or humanizing qualities, but as an object that needs to retain its status as a monad. Juxtaposing it with the following line, however, gives the union a transcendental, suddenly human nature. Cash’s rapping assigns the union both human and non-human qualities, but whose non-human qualities are contingent on the cohesion and solidarity that underpin its human ones. As such, the last line of the verse implies a sense of urgency, but also one of responsibility: “*We* need a change right now or *we* ain’t goin’ further.” This implies, (but takes care not to overemphasize) the importance of the success of the strike, invoking visions of a future in which the higher wages for temps is not achieved.

In summary, this discursive approach gives the song a nuanced foresight and consciousness about the importance and relevance of the UAW-General Motors conflict. It acknowledges the structural roles of the corporation and the bargaining power of the union, while pinpointing the specific, smaller alliance and representative responsibility for which the UAW workers are tasked.

### **Archetypal “Actors:” Familial Metaphor**

While “On Strike” has two main “actors” in the narrative its lyrics create, the song’s discursive value is more accurately qualified by the relationships it portrays: the adversarial relationship between the UAW strikers and General Motors and the relationship between the strikers and each other. The primary contrast can be categorized as the difference between being a part of “the family” or not being a part, in Cash’s own “illusion of life.”

General Motors, as an “actor” in the song’s narrative, is mentioned indirectly three separate times. The company is never mentioned by name, and instead Cash relies on characterizing the dynamic both literally and metaphorically. In the first time in the first verse, Cash raps: “Working in a hot plant with no air conditioning/ And they got the nerve to tell us that there’s fair conditions.” The second mention comes in the second verse: “The supervisor don’t care if they get tired/They just trying to make sure them sales

get higher.” Lastly, in the third verse, Cash says, “Do this one for all my sisters, for my brothers/Cause they tryna treat us wrong but they say they love us.” The initial two references invoke the imagery of unfair working conditions, but they are only a literal description of what goes on day-to-day while working at the plant. The final mention, however, re-introduces the concept of familial love, and it is here that Carter’s mention of separation and oppression can be identified. This is a figurative rhetorical stylistic choice Cash uses in order to emphasize the emotional and empathic degree of “separation” between GM and the UAW strikers. The temps—who are their own separate actors in Cash’s illusion and who the strikers are seeking to protect and fight on behalf of—and the union members are characterized as a family. The phrase “they tryna treat us wrong but they say they love us,” invokes the image of a gaslighting or abusive “family” member; a deceitful fraud whose superficial gestures mask cynical ulterior goals. Cash’s use of an accessible, easy-to-relate to abstraction illustrates the “oppression” the strike is happening in response to.

The use of ad-libbed lyrics which complement Cash’s rapped verses is a distinct feature of the song, used at specific junctures. Much like the repeated refrain of “We goin’ on strike,” in the beginning of the song, this is done to serve as a rallying cry and capitalize on the collective, familial nature of the strike that Cash seeks to establish in the song. It allows the rap to take the form of an imagined conversation, echoing the call-and-response form of former iterations of protest music. The initial refrain is met with disembodied exclamations of “Yeah!” and “For real!” This can be interpreted as an effort by Cash to imbue the song with a collaborative authorship. In effect, he is not the only rhetor in this rhetorical setup. Rather, true to self-persuasion fashion, the communal group of the strikers themselves share the rhetor status.

### **Tense: Temporal Orientation**

“On Strike” overwhelmingly relies on the present tense and current, ongoing actions or events. Cash relies on specific, declarative phrases in reference to very specific actions, and the present tense is used a total of 15 times. As Knupp established, this creates a sense of urgency and immediacy,



rather than seeking to simply tell or recount. The manner in which these actions are phrased (“We *goin* on strike,” “The union *gotta* stick together,” “*Do this* for each other,”) allow the listener to immediately and indiscriminately associate what they are hearing with the actions Cash is describing; the act of striking and the sudden scrutiny and vulnerability to which you become subject. The verses are terse and punctuated by exclamatory, direct diction. A future event is only implied once, at the closing of the song with the final line, “We need a change right now or we ain’t goin’ further.” However, this dissents slightly from the categorization provided by Knupp, as it refers to no specific outcome or goal. Instead, the demands are made implicitly, through the conversation Cash is initiating by rapping to other strikers. This “conversation” is less of an exchange between the rhetor and the audience in the traditional sense and supports the in-group focus characteristic of self-persuasion analysis.

### **Non-Discursive Elements: Intensity-Release Pattern**

Juxtaposition of the sonic and “On Strike” lyrical elements denotes an obvious congruity between the two. The lyrics of “On Strike” are rapped over a mid-tempo yet upbeat synthetic instrumental track. The beat is a typical trap-style midi hi-hat percussive sound, and has a repetitive, hypnotic meter that is significantly subdued beneath Cash’s rapping. This allows the listener’s primary focus to be the lyrics and Cash’s delivery. His tone is equally measured but noticeably louder in volume, just behind the beat of the song. A simple 6-note synthetic piano hook is used throughout the verses. The hook is also softer in volume, subdued behind the beat and Cash’s voice. However, the beat fades out when Cash begins the second verse: “If they don’t work their ass off, they’re gonna get fired/Temps workin’ like slaves and don’t get hired.” The subtle, yet abrupt change in the non-discursive makeup draws immediate attention to the verse: the listener is left hearing the soft, high-pitched, simplistic piano hook as Cash raps. Then, the beat suddenly comes back in when the chorus of “We goin’ on strike” resumes before the next verse. Implicitly, this is Cash’s way of exploiting Irvine & Kirkpatrick’s concept of the intensity-release pattern. He emphasizes the meaning of that specific verse by

coupling it with an arresting sonic quality. This in turn, highlights the discursive value the aforementioned familial role of the temps occupy in the rhetorical dynamic Cash uses to illustrate the struggle.

## **Conclusion**

Primarily, the analysis established that rhetorical strategies found form the bedrock of the discursive strategy Gmac Cash used in composing and performing “On Strike.” An overarching summary of the rhetorical makeup apparent in “On Strike” can be framed using Knupp’s criterion for the qualities shared by the majority of labor songs: they are “(1) reactive (2) simplistic (2) expressive [sic].” Interestingly, in line with Knupp’s analysis, is the “goals” of the song and the strike are the extent to which self-persuasion is apparent in the “Simplistic portrayal of the world for rhetorical advantage,” but arguably, Cash’s song cannot be described as “simplistic” alone. Despite the song’s brevity and relatively simple diction, the preceding analysis proves that “On Strike” is an exercise in the potency of language and its ability to function outside traditional conceptions of “sophisticated” language; therein lies the key to Cash’s rhetorical efficacy of self-persuasion. The song manages to capture the broad, structural significance of a labor strike and the power of a union, demonstrating an acute awareness regarding the value and social capital feelings of solidarity depend on, and acknowledge the success of the strike

It can be argued that the analysis is limited by some aspects of this paper’s design. Notably, a more nuanced and comprehensive study would require a wider variety of songs, and perhaps abide by a more rigidly structured set of criteria for analysis (although “On Strike” is unique in being a semi-high profile labor strike related song in the 21<sup>st</sup> century). While this study focused on a qualitative, rhetorical analysis, many previous communication studies interrogated their song lyric data quantitatively in order to more precisely identify trends, frequencies, and develop more concrete, informed conclusions. With regard to the non-discursive aspects of “On Strike,” musical professionals or those versed in independent music production should probably be counseled in order to provide a more informed

judgement on the value and rhetorical effects of the stylistic choices the artists make. Hurner, for example, relied on transcriptions of suffrage songs by a professional musician, and had songs too old to have been recorded performed and taped in order to analyze them.

The performance of future analyses related to the topic of self-persuasion are incumbent on the resurgence of material like “On Strike,” which in turn depend on the socio-economic contexts which allow them to develop. In the event that such material maintains relevance, its standing in the field of communication will demand thorough attention.