



MTO 25.1 Examples: Attas, Music Theory as Social Justice

(Note: audio, video, and other interactive examples are only available online)

<http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.19.25.1/mto.19.25.1.attas.html>

Example 1. *To Pimp a Butterfly* in the music theory core

Theory I (Rudiments, The Elements of Music, Species Counterpoint)

“For Free (Interlude)”

The musical score: Explore different types of musical score by asking students to transcribe the line “You lookin’ at me like it ain’t a receipt/Like I never made ends meet/Eatin’ your leftovers and raw meat.” See [Example 2](#) for a full lesson plan that incorporates this suggestion.

“King Kunta”

Compound melody: Discuss whether Lamar’s alternation between a higher register rapped flow and the lower register “King Kunta” interjections could be seen as a version of compound melody.

Interval singing and recognition: Have students sing and compare the descending P5 and m6 at (1:15).

“Alright”

Rhythmic density: Ask students to compare the beginning to the section beginning around (2:00).

Musical texture and musical form: Discuss the importance of musical texture as a compositional strategy (e.g., consider the abrupt change at 3:14).

“Momma”

Rhythmic transcription: Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Western rhythmic notation by asking students to individually transcribe the rhythm of a short excerpt (ca. 20 seconds) and then comparing their transcriptions.

Theory II (Diatonic Harmony and Voice Leading, Small Forms)

“For Free (Interlude)”

Form: What musical elements create form, sections, or climax? In this song, instrumentation and rhythmic density play a stronger role than harmony.

“King Kunta”

Multi-layered melodic dictation: Ask students to transcribe the Auto-tuned “Oh why” line at (1:56): simple in terms of pitch, but difficult to pick out of the surrounding texture.

“Alright”

Harmonic rhythm: Consider how the section at (0:25) with the “dah” vocal harmonies creates harmonic rhythm.

Cadences: Discuss cadences as more than just harmonic strategies by exploring what makes phrase endings in this song (e.g., compare the endings at 0:06, 0:19, and 0:40) See [Example 3](#) for a full lesson plan that incorporates this suggestion.

“Momma”

Tendency/Resolution tones: Transcribe the harmonies in the groove, and discuss whether or not they have tendency tones that need resolving.

Tonic and dominant function: At (2:06) there is an oscillation between two chords where the hierarchical relationship between the two chords is ambiguous. Discuss the ways in which each harmony might be heard as more important (structural), or whether such determination is even relevant. How does the relationship between these harmonies compare with the relationship between tonic and dominant? Between a tonic harmony and a neighbor 6/4 chord?

Theory III (Chromatic Harmony and Voice Leading, Large Forms)

All songs

Music-text interaction: Compare the interaction of voice and accompaniment in any of these songs to compositional strategies in German *Lieder*. However, note that, just as in German *Lieder*, a thorough discussion of music-text interaction in Lamar’s music requires a deep knowledge of that text and its possible meanings, which might be beyond an instructor’s abilities and could lead to complicated classroom discussions.

“For Free (Interlude)”

Motivic analysis: Are there recurring lines in the track that might be heard as similar to and different from a motive? More broadly, is a hook in pop music the same thing as a motive in Classical music?

Form: How is our determination of formal sections influenced by temporal placement (the opening “gospel chord” could potentially be the end of a gospel piece, but is the beginning of this song)?

“King Kunta”

Form: How does the break at (2:05) connect to formal strategies in sonata form (e.g., medial caesura, standing on the dominant, beginning of the recapitulation) See [Example 4](#) for a full lesson plan that incorporates this suggestion.

“Alright”

Form: Compare the buildup/accumulative form in this song to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

“Momma”

Motivic analysis: Does Lamar use the accompaniment's persistent three-sixteenth motive [one instance from (0:08) is below] in a way similar to or different from the motivic transformations typical of common practice art music?

Theory IV (Post-Tonal Theory and Analysis)

"For Free (Interlude)"

Vocal strategies: How does Lamar's use of different vocal pitches in his rap share similarities with, or differ from, Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme*? From Steve Reich's use of source interviews in *Different Trains*?

"King Kunta"

Compositional processes: How does the accumulative form ([Spicer 2004](#)) in this song create a process of rhythmic saturation? How might that compare to minimalist processes?

"Alright"

Form in popular music: Discuss chorus features in a range of pop examples, including this one.

"Momma"

Tempo and metric modulation: Compare the tempo shift at (3:39) to Carter's metric modulation in terms of both compositional technique and musical effect. See [Example 5](#) for a full lesson plan that incorporates this suggestion.

Example 2. “For Free (Interlude)” in a lesson plan on musical scores

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- compare the strengths and weaknesses of several types of musical score
- discuss the cultural biases involved in score creation and transcription
- evaluate the use of particular notation styles for particular activities

5 min. Introductory think-pair-share activity¹

Ask students to write individually for one minute, answering the question “What are the components of a musical score?”

For two minutes (one minute for each student), students share their ideas with the person sitting next to them.

For the remaining three minutes, students share their ideas with the whole class.

15 min. Components of musical scores

Distribute a handout including excerpts from various types of musical score. These might include an orchestral score, a sound waveform from an audio track, TUBS notation ([Koetting 1970](#)), Chinese jianpu notation, a jazz lead sheet, medieval neumes, an easy piano score, etc.

Ask students to consider what each score includes and what it leaves out. You might assign each score to an individual student or create small groups in the class to work on all or some of the examples.

Discuss each example as a class, compiling a list of the components of a musical score on the board as you go along.

10 min. Creating a musical score

Tell students to transcribe the line “You lookin’ at me like it ain’t a receipt/Like I never made ends meet/Eatin’ your leftovers and raw meat.”

Deliberately do not give them any other instructions. Play the passage on a loop, and alternate sections of playing it with sections of silence. While students are transcribing, observe their work and look for similarities and differences in transcription style and process.

5 min. Partner sharing

Ask students to share their work with a partner, explaining both their transcription and the process they used to create it.

10 min. Class discussion

Lead a class discussion about different transcription styles, using your observations of the class and partner discussions.

10 min. Concluding thoughts

Connect this work to the larger repertoires you will be covering in the semester. For instance, discuss the elements of music that Western notation and art music scores privilege; connect the diversity of transcription styles for the Kendrick example to the diversity of notation styles in Western art music outside of the common-practice period; discuss the performance practices of hip hop performers and how they differ from Western art music in terms of the use of scores. (Some of this discussion might begin earlier in the class; for instance, during the “Components of Musical Scores” segment.)

1 The think-pair-share method originates in [Lyman 1987](#) and has been widely adopted and adapted across the disciplines and in both post-secondary and K–12 educational contexts.

Example 3. "Alright" in a lesson plan on cadences

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- list the musical features that create a sense of rest
- analyze a passage of music to identify moments of rest and the musical features that create them

5 min. Listening, "Er Ist Gekommen," Clara Schumann, Op.12, No.1

Play as much as you have time for (perhaps play the whole work before class, and then just the first three lines again once class begins).

Ask the class to consider the question "what broke that passage up into smaller units?" (the final answer being "cadences").

5 min. What is a musical cadence?

Define *cadence* for your class.

List several features that create cadences (e.g., counterpoint, rhythm, pitch, harmony, dynamics).

20 min. Listening for cadences in hip hop

Play the class three excerpts from Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." Ask them to write down how points of rest are created in each excerpt. Then, discuss whether the points of rest in each excerpt are all equal, or, if like punctuation, some are more restful than others.

Excerpt 1 (0:00–0:14): This excerpt features silence (opening dabs); a change from one pitch to another and shorter pitches to longer; the articulation of "fight" at a higher tone, louder dynamic, and a timbre closer to yelling.

Excerpt 2 (0:15–0:19): This excerpt features repetition ("fucked up"), meter (ending on the beat), a drum fill pushing towards an ending, a vocal slide in "Alright," and changes in texture.

Excerpt 3 (0:37–0:45): This excerpt features meter (voice ends on downbeats), rhyme or assonance, rhythm (use of longer durations), silence, and the vocal utterance "uh."

Play the whole passage containing these excerpts and ask if these moments create cadences and smaller units of music, in the same ways that smaller units were created in the example by Clara Schumann.

15 min. Defining a cadence harmonically

Explain how a cadence is defined harmonically in Western European art music and define as many of the harmonic cadence types (perfect authentic, imperfect authentic, half, etc.) as makes sense for your course.

10 min. Listening and analyzing

Return to the Schumann example from the opening of the class. Discuss the various musical features that create cadences, and then point out the harmonic cadences used in this passage.

Example 4. “King Kunta” in a lesson plan on sonata form

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- understand how a given sonata form movement could be analyzed, following the method in [Caplin 1998](#)
- discuss how the formal elements of sonata form might have equivalents in other repertoires

35 min. Application of Caplin 1998

Spend the majority of class demonstrating how to apply the sonata form theory of [Caplin 1998](#) to a sonata movement of your choice.

15 min. Connections to other repertoires

Explore possible connections between the formal functions of sonata form sections and “King Kunta” (a chart of the song’s form is below). Possible connections to make include:

- the transposition of the groove up a minor second in verse 3, as compared to the use of a contrasting key for the subordinate theme in a Classical sonata, and the “truck-driver’s” or “pump up” modulation in pop music (see [Everett 1997](#), 151, nn. 17–18; Ricci 2000, 130–33).
- whether “King Kunta” might be heard as tripartite generally, or as a manifestation of sonata form specifically (exposition (0:00–2:04), development (2:04–2:26), recapitulation (2:26–3:04)). This connection might be made in terms of text focus, groove structure, or other musical features.
- the features of the “outro” section that are similar to codas in sonata form
- the use of silence in “King Kunta” as fulfilling a similar formal function to standing on the dominant in sonata form

Here, the point is not so much to argue for a clear correspondence between sonata form and form in “King Kunta,” but to explore possible connections and divergences, deepening student learning around musical features that create form and formal function.

“King Kunta” possible formal sections

Color is used to indicate sections that are identical (same color) or that share some features (the degree of similarity is represented by closeness of shades and/or colors on the color wheel). In some cases (verse 4, interrupted chorus), sections share some elements but not others. Form in this song is complicated, which makes for an even richer in-class discussion.

formal section	groove	track timing	lyrics
intro	steady percussion	(0:00–0:20)	“I got a bone to pick”
chorus 1	steady percussion	(0:20–0:35)	“Bitch where you when”
verse 2	percussion, emerging pitch	(0:35–1:14)	“When you got the yams”
chorus 2	pitch focused on P5–m6	(1:14–1:30)	“Bitch where you when”
verse 3	up m2 from chorus 2	(1:30–1:50)	“When you got the yams”
chorus 3	as chorus 2 with additions	(1:50–2:04)	“Bitch where you when”
break	silence	(2:04–2:06)	“You cold mouth”
bridge/verse 3	rhythmic noises	(2:06–2:26)	“I was gonna kill”
verse 4	as chorus 2	(2:25–2:44)	“Ah yeah fuck the judge”
chorus (interrupted)	silence	(2:44–2:54)	“Bitch where you when”
chorus 4	as chorus 2	(2:54–3:04)	“King Kunta”
outro/coda	guitar solo with additions	(3:04–3:50)	“We want the funk”
connection to next track	silence	(3:50–3:55)	“I remember you was conflicted”

Example 5. “Momma” in a lesson plan on metric modulation

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- define Elliott Carter’s “metric modulation” or “tempo modulation”
- calculate tempo changes in a piece by Carter where metric modulation occurs
- compare Carter’s tempo shifts to another repertoire of music where tempo shifts occur

5 min. Introductions

Provide biographical information on Elliott Carter (if not previously provided).

Define the terms *metric modulation* and *tempo modulation*.

30 min. Analyzing metric modulation in Elliott Carter

Give a demonstration of how metric modulation works, and how to calculate it, in works by Elliott Carter (e.g., [Roig-Francolí 2007](#) uses excerpts from String Quartet no.1 as examples).

5 min. Metric modulation as a listening experience

Ask students to respond to the question “What is the artistic effect of these metric modulations on you as a listener?” You might have an open discussion, or ask students to write for two minutes and then ask students to share (which gives them more time to think of a response).

10 min. Tempo modulation in “Momma”

Listen to “Momma,” either the whole song or an excerpt (2:24–4:07)

Explain to students that the tempo changes from approximately 85 bpm to 114 bpm from (3:35–3:59). Ask them to compare and contrast the artistic effect of this tempo modulation with the Carter pieces previously analyzed.

Example 6. Consonance and dissonance, fifty-minute class

By the end of this class, students should be able to:

- discuss the cultural conditioning associated with notions of consonance and dissonance
- describe how consonance and dissonance could be assigned in different repertoires
- classify consonant and dissonant harmonic and melodic intervals in Western European common practice music

10 min. Consonance and dissonance in Western intervals

Begin by explaining the Western European concept of classifying intervals as pleasant (“consonant”) or unpleasant (“dissonant”), without revealing the specific interval classifications. Ask students to listen as the instructor plays each interval in turn on the piano and classify each interval as consonant or dissonant. (Other variations on this activity include playing only harmonic intervals, playing only melodic intervals, asking students to sing intervals melodically, asking students to sing intervals harmonically in pairs, and playing intervals on instruments other than a piano.)

Tally the class responses on the board, and then share the Western European common practice music classifications for both harmonic and melodic intervals.

10 min. Consonance and dissonance as culturally conditioned and contextually determined¹

Discuss with students the notion that consonance and dissonance are culturally conditioned, and also contextually determined by the particular piece. Listen to examples of this assertion as a class, and also post sound files to a course website for students to access.

Some possible examples (substitute any piece of music with a perfect fifth):

- Kendrick Lamar, “King Kunta” (1:11–1:23)
- John Williams, *Star Wars* main theme opening
- W. A. Mozart, 12 Variations in C Major on *Ah vous dirai-je, maman*, K. 265 (you might choose one of the variations rather than the theme or choose a recording of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” itself)
- Rubén Blades with Willie Colon, “Pedro Navaja” (0:40–0:43)

20 min. Analysis of consonance and dissonance

Assign students to specific examples (either individually or in groups). For each example, ask students to determine whether the perfect fifth in question is consonant or dissonant in the context of the song, and what musical features lead them to that judgement. Students can use their devices to continue listening to their assigned song.

10 min. Revised definition of consonance and dissonance

Regroup as a class. Ask students to share their work and use it to draft a class statement about consonance and dissonance in music. The instructor might choose to connect this to dissonance treatment (e.g., the idea that sevenths must resolve in some styles, but not in others), or to harmonic context (e.g., a tritone as dissonant in a melody, but consonant when included in a dominant seventh chord).

Example 7. Modules for teaching on racism with *To Pimp A Butterfly*

Pre-class activities: Ways to gauge class knowledge and beliefs

Use the course's learning management system to poll students anonymously before a class discussion on race and racism. Possible questions:

- What experiences do you have with discussing race in an academic setting (either at this institution, or elsewhere)?
- What experiences do you have with discussing race and racism outside of academic settings?
- What are you excited about as we prepare to discuss race and racism in class?
- What are you worried about as we prepare to discuss race and racism in class?

Use the course's learning management system to poll students anonymously before a class discussion on Kendrick Lamar. Possible questions:

- Have you heard of Kendrick Lamar? What do you know about him and his music?
- What's your current opinion of Kendrick Lamar and his music?
- What are you looking forward to as we prepare to discuss Lamar?
- What are you worried about as we prepare to discuss Lamar?
- Kendrick Lamar includes a lot of explicit language in his lyrics. Are you OK with hearing and seeing explicit language in his lyrics during class time, or as part of homework assignments?

Ask students to submit (anonymously or not) an informal piece of writing responding to a reading or video connected to an upcoming class discussion on race and racism.

Ask students to submit (anonymously or not) an informal piece of writing responding to a song or music video by Kendrick Lamar.

Ways to ground class discussions in evidence rather than personal opinion

Watch lectures discussing institutionalized racism (e.g., [Jones 2014](#); ask colleagues on campus for other good sources) and discuss as a class.

Assign short readings discussing race and racism (e.g., excerpts from [Tatum 1997](#); [Blum 2002](#), [Kajikawa 2015](#); ask colleagues on campus for other good sources) and discuss as a class.

Share and discuss definitions for terms such as race, racism, stereotype, the white gaze, cultural appropriation, reclaim/reclaiming, and post-racial.

Ask a representative from your campus multicultural center to give a guest lecture or workshop.

Ask a colleague in another department to give a guest lecture or workshop.

Things the instructor might say or do to create a safer and more open class environment:

"Many people in the room were worried about . . . (insert answers here)"

"I recognize that talking about 'difficult' subjects may be something different for you in a music class"

"This discussion may involve risk-taking on your part"

“Get comfortable with being uncomfortable: within this discussion, it’s likely that you will feel uncomfortable, that that discomfort may not be resolved”

“In class we have a variety of visible identities (gender, race, role in the classroom) and also invisible ones (sexual orientation, nationality, social class, economic status, religion, etc.)”

“Let’s try not to assume that someone is speaking for a particular group of people just because they might share a certain identity.” (e.g., “I don’t speak for all music theorists when I say that Kendrick Lamar is the greatest living composer.”)

Suggest that everyone try to speak using “I” statements to ensure that all participants speak from their own experience and take ownership of their own feelings (e.g., “I felt angry when other students said racism doesn’t exist” rather than “You’re nuts to say that racism doesn’t exist”; “As someone who’s part of the white majority, I’ve never had to identify by my race” rather than “white people don’t have to identify by their race”)

Use group guidelines to add some structure to the class discussion, either creating them together as a class (creates more ownership among students but takes more time) or creating them in advance and asking students if these seem appropriate (creates less ownership but takes less class time).

Possible activities using *To Pimp A Butterfly*

Discuss how the text, music, and music video for “For Free? (Interlude)” engage with ideas of institutional racism in the United States. This could take many forms: students might brainstorm in small groups before a larger class discussion; the instructor might give a lecture on one section in class and ask students to analyze another section on an assignment; the instructor might assign different groups of students to address different themes or artistic elements in the song (e.g., one group analyzes the lyrics, another group analyzes the groove, another group analyzes the music video).

With any song on the album, spend a class period discussing possible text meaning, another class period discussing musical elements, and a final class period connecting the two.

With any song on the album, ask students to write prose essays analyzing the connections between text and music.

With two songs on the album, ask students to write prose essays comparing the stance on racism taken within each song, and/or the text-music connections in each song.

Ask students to write short reflective essays before and after a unit discussing institutional racism in Lamar’s work. In the pre-class essay, students might be prompted to share their prior knowledge and understanding of race and/or Lamar’s music. In the post-class essay, students might be prompted to share what they learned in the class(es), or to write about a particular moment where they had a strong emotional reaction to what was discussed.

Example 8. A few sample combinations of racism teaching modules

Low commitment (part of one class period)

Complete an analysis of a song from *To Pimp A Butterfly* in class. For the last ten minutes of class, discuss possible ways that the song engages with the topic of institutional racism.

Medium commitment (one class period)

Give a pre-class assignment asking students to research possible definitions for various terms around race and racism, giving them appropriate resources with which to do so. Spend a class period exploring those definitions and considering how they are made manifest in a song from *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

Give a pre-class assignment asking students to read about Kendrick Lamar's social advocacy, using articles from the popular press.¹

Higher commitment (2–4 class periods)²

Give a pre-assignment asking students to fill out an anonymous survey asking about their previous experiences discussing race and racism in and out of the classroom.

Take a class period for a general discussion (either as a whole class or in smaller groups) about race and racism, focused around definitions, student experiences and opinions. It is often conducive to discussion to rearrange the classroom into a circle, or into smaller discussion groups, rather than maintaining a standard lecture format.

Ask students to complete a reading or prepared analysis on a particular song for the next class. In the next class, discuss the reading and the song. Then, ask students to complete an assignment on a different piece, applying the concepts discussed in class. Finally, include at least one question on the final exam addressing this component of the course. It might be a free-form essay question, or a bonus question, but including it on the exam validates it as an important element of the course, rather than an 'extra.'

Highest commitment

Devote an entire course to the topic (probably better as an upper-year course rather than the theory core); e.g., "Music and Race"; "Music and Racism"; "Hip Hop Analysis"; "Pop Music and Social Justice" (see Stamatis 2014).

¹ See, for inspiration, [Threadgold 2015](#) and [Mooney 2015](#).

² I have followed this strategy with the music of Beyoncé: I used [McNally 2016](#) as the pre-reading; discussed Azealia Banks's song "212" with reference to the article, and then applied the theories to Beyoncé through analysis of music, text, and music videos for "Crazy In Love" and "Girls." "Girls" also appeared on the final exam.