

Clap Along if You Feel Like a Genre without a Roof: Genre Remediation and Social Justice in Pharrell Williams's "Happy"

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How can one song be popular and widely praised in one genre but controversial in another? How does a song's meaning change between its music video and a live performance? Looking at Pharrell Williams's song "Happy," Bryanna Tidmarsh uses trajectory, distribution, and reception to explore how music and remediation can be powerful tools for delivering messages of social justice.

I'm not one to tune into award shows, but after the 2015 Grammys, the internet was abuzz with talk of Pharrell Williams's controversial performance of his song "Happy." The official music video won a Grammy for Best Music Video at the 2015 awards, and it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Song. Yet, previous performances and music videos of the song were not considered controversial, so why had the audience's reception changed? In order to understand this, we need to situate ourselves in the context of "Happy" and trace its trajectory across remediations. But first, a warning: if you don't want this song in your head for the rest of the day, you may want to stop reading here. If you are interested in how a popular song can shift in meaning, though, stay with me.

The Song

Using **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)** to analyze the song, we see that it has a very complex history. CHAT is a theory that we can use "to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in

the world,” and, in this case, the genre is music and musical performances (isuwriting.com). Now, the complexity of this genre and of the song “Happy” in particular is due in part to **remediation**, which is the process in which a text is altered for a new purpose, allowing it a new trajectory or situating it within a different activity system (isuwriting.com). “Happy” is remediated several times in song, film, music videos, fan videos, advertisements, and live performances. Each remediation reshapes the song’s meaning based on the musical arrangement, lighting, costumes, and so much more. Initially, before all of the remediations, Pharrell Williams was tasked with writing a song for Universal Studios’ *Despicable Me 2* after having worked on the first film’s score with Heitor Pereira and Hans Zimmer. It took him ten tries to write a song that the film folks would accept (SwaysUniverse)—which I suppose makes me feel better about how many revisions I made to this *Grassroots* article. Finally, Williams arrived at the version of “Happy” that we know today, which was a #1 single in 24 countries, selling and streaming 13.9 million times in 2014 (SongFacts).

It will come as no surprise to you that this catchy song is designed to make us feel joy (even if you’re still sick of constantly hearing it on the radio). Part of this comes from the lyrics, but it’s also in the construction of the song: the F-major key, Williams’s falsetto voice, and the tempo (156 beats per minute) are rhetorically designed to lift our spirits and get our bodies moving. Plus, the imperative statement “clap along” asks us to become participants in the musical artifact. This almost feels like a forced kind of joy, though; the way you try to stay positive the morning of a big test or shrug off a bad breakup by saying you’re too good for your ex. After all, doesn’t the mere act of saying “Can’t nothing... bring me down” imply there is something in the speaker’s life *trying* to bring him down? And it could be any number of things of various degrees, from a job he hates to a lived experience of oppression. This is reinforced further in the same verse when he says, “Well, give me all you got, don’t hold it back (Yeah!) / Well, I should probably warn ya, I’ll be just fine.” The speaker seems to be facing unspecified adversity, and the song might be his way of trying to overcome it with a positive attitude. It’s worth noting that the phrase “I’m Happy” recurs 56 times (I counted!)—as if the speaker is trying to convince both his audience and himself of his positive disposition. To what subject is he asserting his happiness, though? Who or what is he telling not to hold back? These details are purposely left ambiguous.

This is because the more general the lyrics, the more flexible they are for variety in their meaning-making and the easier they are to later remediate. When Williams sings, “Here comes bad news talking this and that,” the lyrics could represent a variety of negative experiences. For me, the song

could apply to the anxiety I feel writing my academic essays, my struggles being a mother and a young professional, the seemingly impossible monthly task of paying the rent, or the adversity I've faced as a queer woman in a new professional space. For Williams, the lyrics might apply to his lived experience as a person of color. The vague “bad news” and “this and that” keep it relatable to a wide audience, allowing both the artist and the audience listening to interpret it in a way that fits their own life. So, while this is a positive, uplifting song, part of the **representation** (or planning) of the song involved coming up with lyrics that fit a variety of life experiences. This results in the potential for diverse **uptake** by different audiences and audience members. One of the ways that the idea of uptake is used by the ISU Writing Program is to refer to how audiences interpret, make sense of, and use new information. In the case of “Happy,” the ambiguous lyrics allow audiences to take up the song in many different ways, which helps the audience to be receptive to the song. It also makes the song malleable for remediation, opening up the possibility for the song to deliver messages of social justice.

Happy, Takes One and Two: The Film

When considering how musical texts can be remediated to deliver different messages, it helps to consider the trajectory of the song. **Trajectory** helps us “understand what texts do and how they move around in the world,” and it also helps us think about how a text moves in the process of production, “but even more importantly, how texts move through institutions and spaces and in relationships among different people” (isuwriting.com).

The song “Happy” was constructed with a specific purpose: Williams was solicited to write a song for the film *Despicable Me 2*, which was released

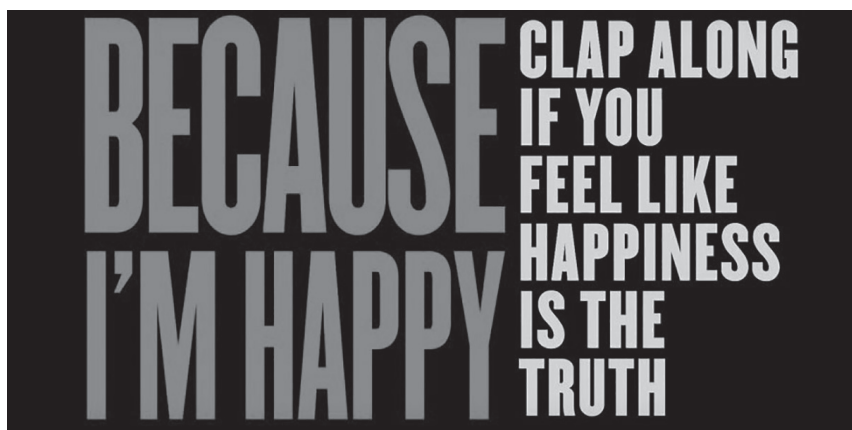


Image 1: Some of the lyrics to “Happy.”

July 3, 2013. In the film, the song “Happy” appears twice. In each film occurrence, the song seems innocuous; there are no direct political messages that I’ve found—just a cute song that conveys a message of playfulness and affirmation to a wide variety of ages, but especially to children. On YouTube, the minion music video has 38 million views. There are no negative comments immediately visible on the YouTube pages for these videos, just variations of “Because I’m happy!” and “This is my new workout song.” The audience seems receptive to its message of self-love and positivity. Maybe this is because their political ideology isn’t being challenged as it is in later remediations, or perhaps it’s because, as noted above, the lyrics can be taken up in various ways.

Happy, Takes Three and Four: The Official Music Video

While the film itself was a box office hit, Pharrell Williams claims that no one wanted to play “Happy” on the Radio because it wasn’t what people expected of radio songs. Then, four months after the release of the film, Williams released a 24-hour music video, “Happy: The World’s First 24 Hour Music Video” (<http://24hoursofhappy.com>). The version posted to YouTube has over 100 million views, and the website itself likely has more. This video greatly challenges the convention of a music video in its length, as well as in its lack of any definitive ending.

A condensed version of the 24-hour video was of course released as well. At just under four minutes, this seems to be the most well-known video remediation of the song. Both versions of the video feature people dancing to the song “Happy” with each dancer bringing something of their own

flare to the role. The videos are made up of a diverse cast of all ages, races, ethnicities, religions, abilities, genders, body types, and economic classes—even different neighborhoods and times of day. Most, if not all, of the people are regular folks, not actors or professional dancers (though there are also some famous people who make cameos, including Steve Carell, Jamie Foxx, and Jimmy Kimmel). When the song is remediated into these videos, the message of the lyrics seems to transform. The many faces of dancers in the videos makes me wonder: what does happiness mean for each of these people?



Image 2: The album cover for “Happy.”

How might the meaning of this song shift between dancers? And what kind of obstacles are each of them working to overcome in order to feel the joy they are expressing?

Suddenly, a message about happiness is complicated, and it's clear it means something different to different people. The song is also bringing people together; even when someone dances alone in their clip of the video, they are part of a collective here. This itself seems to be creating an argument that we are all trying to find our own happiness (indeed, that we all deserve it), and that we share in a collective human experience. This itself is an act of social justice—a departure from the film version, but still shy of the overt message of the 2015 Grammy performance.

Happy, Take Five: Music Fanfiction

This collective explodes with the influx of fan videos that follow (think fanfiction for music videos!). The website “We Are Happy From . . .” (<http://wearehappyfrom.com>) is formed as a database to keep track of fan videos from all over the world. In these videos, people from various countries, identities, and languages dance to the song, much like the people in Williams’s music video. When you create a text and put it out in the world, you often can’t control how others are going to take it up or redistribute it. Suddenly, anyone with a camera can participate in the meaning-making of this song based on their own cultural and historical experience. The fans are remediating the song in order to represent their own diverse identities and to feel part of a collective experience, and the website also sells t-shirts to raise money for a charity (though what charity is not specified). In this way, the website and the fan remediations themselves are shaping Williams’s text and furthering its social justice messages.

Happy, Takes Six and Seven: Live Performances and the 2015 Grammy Awards

Watching Williams’s multiple performances of “Happy,” I noticed he has several trends: the stage usually has bright, multi-colored props. He and his dancers are high-energy, and he usually opens with a statement like “Who wants to get happy?”—met with much applause. Overall, the tone matches that of the original music videos.

The previous remediations, plus his usual live performances of “Happy,” make Williams’s departure from his usual performance in the 2015 Grammy performance noteworthy. The event came at a time when the Black Lives

Matter movement—an international activist movement campaigning against systemic racism—was starting to gain more widespread recognition from celebrities. Formed after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in July 2013, Black Lives Matter grew significantly following the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown and the subsequent turbulence in Ferguson, Missouri. Interestingly, the 2015 Grammys took place a day before the six-month anniversary of Michael Brown’s death. The award show also pulled in 24.8 million viewers, which makes it an ideal place for delivering social justice messages, as there is a potential to reach a wide, diverse audience.

At the Grammys, the legendary Prince set the mood for our viewing experience, saying, “Like books and Black lives, albums still matter.” Later, three performances paid tribute to Black Lives Matter and Michael Brown: Beyoncé’s backup dancers put their hands up in reference to the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” slogan (which was adopted by protestors against police violence); John Legend and Common performed their song “Glory” from *Selma*, with Common raising his hands up like Beyoncé’s dancers; and Pharrell Williams made significant changes to “Happy,” remediating the song into a protest against police brutality. In these moments, artists who hold a great deal of wealth and power used their positions of privilege to highlight a movement and criticize a deep-rooted problem in American culture. Williams’s remediation, then, is part of a larger conversation happening in music at this time. These performances received a mix of criticism and praise. For “Happy,” though, Williams goes beyond just the raising of hands. His message is further developed through the musical arrangement, the lighting, the costuming, the dancers, the instruments, and more.

A Shift in Tone

He begins his performance quietly—a sharp contrast to his usual energy on stage—and opens with what seems to be a prayer. When he delivers the first occurrence of “because I’m happy,” he doesn’t look it; his face is serious, and the mood feels somber—even ominous. In the first music videos, we could debate whether the speaker believes these words. Here, though, there’s no doubt that Williams is complicating the original meaning of the song. Grammy show executive producer Ken Ehrlich, who invited Williams to perform at the awards, told the *LA Times*, “The idea here is that life is not happy for a lot of people. So when [Pharrell] sings this song now, he feels differently about it than he did for the two years he sang it and thought he was bringing joy to people. . . . Now we’re into social commentary.”

Gesture

Like Common and the background dancers for Beyoncé, Williams’s dancers perform the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture. They do so while wearing black hoodies in memory of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy who was shot by neighborhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman in February 2012. Shortly before the shooting, Zimmerman had called 911 upon spotting Trayvon in the neighborhood, claiming he looked like “a real suspicious guy” (Reuters). Wearing hoodies during this performance calls out the ways in which black people are stereotyped as criminals based on clothing and skin color.

The “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture is the choice most contested in these Grammy performances. This references the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson. Some eye witnesses claimed Michael had his hands up in the air in an effort to surrender when Officer Wilson shot him. Commonly used in protest today, the gesture is controversial, as there is much debate over whether or not Michael Brown did, in fact, have his hands up when he was shot by Officer Wilson (Santhanam). It’s important to remember that the exact events of the shooting are irrelevant to acts of protest; the gesture has become bigger than the historical moment from which it originated, and its meaning shifts from being about Michael Brown specifically to being about the systemic oppression of all black people in the United States.

Color and Costuming

Williams himself dressed in a bellhop’s outfit with white gloves—likely a reference to Wes Anderson’s *Grand Budapest Hotel*. Anderson has been criticized in the past for rarely casting people of color, which is part of a larger critique of Hollywood films. But this is also a comment on how people of color have been historically relegated to the role of a servant in Hollywood films (and in real life). The choice to wear white gloves is significant; black servants have historically worn gloves in servant roles so they don’t dirty the belongings of white people. In Merriam-Webster, “white-glove” means service that is “marked by special care or attention.” Therefore, white gloves might also symbolize the careful way people of color must navigate American institutions, including relationships with police.

Besides the white of Williams’s gloves, the only pops of color are the yellow in his shoes and in the clothing of the gospel choir that comes on stage. This contrast between light and dark carries meaning. Perhaps in the

darkness of police brutality and oppression that people of color feel in the United States, the speaker is hoping his faith will get him through it. More than this, coming together to lift the voices of marginalized people and to dismantle these systems of oppression can create light in the darkness. Williams's performance feels quieter and darker, but it also feels like a prayer for all of us.

Distribution and Reception

Now let's consider the distribution of this performance. **Distribution** is focused on where texts go and who might take them up (isuwriting.com). The intended audience is the people sitting at the venue, as well as viewers watching the performance live. An author can't always control how their

text is distributed, though. Some at-home viewers are using televisions while others are streaming via the Internet. Some have watched all of the Grammys that night while others either saw bits and pieces or just tuned in. Then, there are people (like me) who read about the event on news sites or social networking feeds days later. All viewers have different ways of taking up this performance based on their own **antecedent knowledge** of the song. Antecedent knowledge refers to what a person already knows about a particular genre or text before they actually sit down to write a text (or receive it, in this case). Because I read an article about the performance first, I took that antecedent knowledge into my viewing experience, expecting to feel a positive reaction to the performance. I'm sure others went in with a very different predisposition. The **reception**, which refers to how an audience gets a text, of Williams's performance was divergent, which is evident from some of the comments on Pharrell Williams's own Facebook status about the event. Some of those comments are shown in Image 3.



Image 3: The comments on Pharrell Williams's public Facebook status about his 2015 Grammy performance.

So, we have everything from “Love it!” to “Stop bringing politics into award shows.” From these comments, it seems like viewers who disagree with the messages of Black Lives Matter dismiss the performance and indeed the performer himself. The performance becomes a way of continuing debate about the shooting of Michael Brown. The reception of this performance even affects certain viewers’ reception of another genre; many claim they will no longer purchase Pharrell Williams’s music or even watch *The Voice* because Williams is a judge. In terms of trajectory, a song that was once beloved for its versatility became polarizing once meaning was placed on it via tone, costuming, and choreography.

What are the effects of these comments, though? The controversy itself was newsworthy, widening the distribution of Williams’s message. It also participates in a dialogue with the other artists who made similar statements at the event. Further, Williams has firmly rooted himself in the music industry; his sales are unlikely to see much of a dip following a controversy over one performance. Indeed, his net worth was at an estimated \$80 million in 2015, and it has skyrocketed to \$150 million for 2017. Certainly Beyoncé, John Legend, and Common didn’t need to sweat over their careers. We could say that artists in positions of power have little to lose in lending their voice to a cause such as Black Lives Matter, and yet their voices are powerful. They have access to a wide distribution, and they have loyal fan bases to support and further disseminate their messages. Further, when our cultural icons are talking about issues of social justice, these concerns become part of a mainstream dialogue, and values of social justice and equality can become normalized in our cultural consciousness.

Conclusion

True, previous remediations of “Happy” prior to the 2015 Grammy performance don’t seem to carry any political messages, and they were positively received. Still, I’m going to say something controversial and assert that all art is, in fact, political. People have taken up this song, applied it to their own lives, and shaped it to reflect some part of their experience. Black Lives Matter tribute or not, the act of promoting the happiness of all people is itself a daring thing. When a text codes political messages rather than making them explicit, those messages become dog whistles, meaning only those who want those messages are going to hear it. That can be powerful, as it allows the song and the text’s meaning to be taken up in different ways. But that also allows those who don’t want to hear a message to just ignore it. Williams’s performance demands the attention of all kinds of viewers,

challenging our beliefs and giving voice to so many people of color who don't have such a powerful platform. Personally, when talking about my reading of these texts or my construction of my own *Grassroots* essay, I've learned to recognize that I can't separate my writing from my own beliefs. And neither could Pharrell Williams. But CHAT helps us to think critically about the texts we read and construct, a skill that stays with us beyond the classroom. The breakdown of "Happy" proves the importance of applying CHAT to our consumption of texts in the world around us, and it also highlights the potential for social justice through remediation.

APPENDIX A: Social Justice in the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*

Below are some additional articles you can find in the *Grassroots* archives that deal, at least in some part, with social justice issues. My hope is that more people will consider centering social justice and activism in their CHAT and genre analyses for future *GWRJ* issues.

- *GWRJ* 7.2, Spring 2017, Multilingual Notes as a Tool to Understand Super Dense Readings – *Su Yin Khor*
- *GWRJ* 7.2, Spring 2017, Translating the Untranslatable: Making Meaning of Idiomatic Expressions Across Languages – *Sanam Shahmiri*
- *GWRJ* 7.2, Spring 2017, Let the Dance Speak to You: How Dance Is a Cultural Artifact of Communication and Connection that Endures – *LaToya Carter*
- *GWRJ* Issue 7.1—Fall 2016, Language Variation Across Genres: Translingualism Here and There – *Cristina Sánchez-Martín*
- *GWRJ* Issue 7.1—Fall 2016, CHATting with Humans of New York – *Brigid Ackerman*
- *GWRJ* Issue 6.2—Spring 2016, Tracing the Trajectories of (The) Humans of New York – *Tharini Viswanath*
- *GWRJ* Issue 6.1—Fall 2015, I Spy with My Little i . . . The Manifestation of Power Dynamics – *Mac Scott*
- *GWRJ* Issue 4.2—Spring 2014, I'm Doing it Wrong: Political Posts on Facebook – *David J. Marshall*
- *GWRJ* Issue 4.1—Fall 2013, The Art of Sexting: Queer Theory and Identity Politics – *Eric Longfellow*

APPENDIX B: “Happy” Lyrics

It might seem crazy what I am about to say
 Sunshine she’s here, you can take a break
 I’m a hot air balloon that could go to space
 With the air, like I don’t care, baby, by the way

(Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
 (Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
 (Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
 (Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you feel like that’s what you wanna do

Here come bad news, talking this and that (Yeah!)
 Well, give me all you got, don’t hold it back (Yeah!)
 Well, I should probably warn ya, I’ll be just fine (Yeah!)
 No offense to you, don’t waste your time
 Here’s why ...

(Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
 (Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
 (Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
 (Because I’m happy)
 Clap along if you feel like that’s what you wanna do

(Happy)
 Bring me down ... can’t nothing ...
 (Happy)
 Bring me down ... my love is too high ...
 (Happy)
 Bring me down ... can’t nothing ...
 (Happy)
 Bring me down, I said

(Happy, happy, happy, happy)
 Bring me down ... can’t nothing ...
 (Happy, happy, happy, happy)
 Bring me down ... my love is too high ...

(Happy, happy, happy, happy)
Bring me down ... can't nothing ...
(Happy, happy, happy, happy)

Bring me down, I said
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do
[x2]

(Happy, happy, happy, happy)
Bring me down ... can't nothing ...
(Happy, happy, happy, happy)
Bring me down ... my love is too high ...
(Happy, happy, happy, happy)
Bring me down ... can't nothing ...
(Happy, happy, happy, happy)

Bring me down, I said
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do
[x2]

Come on!

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