

Will Fulton
Meanings of the “Banner” In and Through Times of War
ABSTRACT

This low-stakes assignment will be used in HUM 210 American Music, a Creative Expression option in the Pathways Flexible Core. While some Liberal Arts Music Option and Music Recording Technology students take the course, there are generally a students in a range of various programs in each section fulfilling their Pathways requirements. There is no Competency or Ability assessed for this assignment. This assignment is expected to take 3-5 hours, and is “low-stakes” (intended for 4% of final grade). This assignment was inspired by readings and discussion in the NEH-funded “Meanings of War” 2018-19 seminar, and developed for and workshopped in seminar meetings. Feedback from colleagues at Meanings of War meetings prompted revisions to the assignment, such as the inclusion of a recent performance of the “Star Spangled Banner” in which Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel, prompting a national debate.

Meanings of the “Banner” In and Through Times of War
HUM 210 AMERICAN MUSIC: ASSIGNMENT
Instructor: Will Fulton

“The urgency and importance of political performance through the anthem stands in stark contrast to ‘The Star Spangled Banner,’ which attempted to document a community already made. Its lyrics, which draw our attention to the war-making that characterized the nation’s birth, highlight a ‘we’ that is only selectively imagined.”

Shana Redmond, “Indivisible: The Nation and Its Anthem in Black Musical Performance,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2015

As discussed in class, “The Star Spangled Banner” has been performed in many different contexts, and in many different ways. Consider the following versions:

1) “Star Spangled Banner” (lyrics: Francis Scott Key, music: John Stafford Smith), 1814 version (performed in 2013 in the style of an 1814 performance)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvVtFD9Na0I>

Context of writing: War of 1812, “Battle of Baltimore,” Francis Scott Key’s poem “The Defence of Fort McHenry” as lyrics

2) “Star-Spangled Banner,” performed by the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Woodstock Music & Arts Festival, 1969

[“https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKAwPA14Ni4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKAwPA14Ni4)

and Jimi Hendrix speaking to Dick Cavett about the performance:

<https://bestclassicbands.com/jimi-hendrix-dick-cavett-anthem-12-27-155/>

Context: Viet Nam War, “counterculture” movements in United States

3) “Star Spangled Banner,” performed by Whitney Houston at the 1991 Super Bowl

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_ICmBvYMRs

and Whitney Houston speaking about the performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-1MqUIum8w>

Context: Persian Gulf War (sometimes referred to as “Operation Desert Storm,” Super Bowl performance

These three very different contexts and very different performances of the same song can inform us about the importance of where and when a song is performed. These three performance contexts related to a specific war, but as discussed in class, each war and performance occurred in very different times for the country.

In a 300-400 word essay, discuss the different meanings you hear and see, both in the performances and in the audience’s reactions (for the Houston and Hendrix performance). Your essay should consider the following: What do these performances tell us about the “mood” of the country (or at least of the audiences present) during these different wars? What strikes you about Houston’s and Hendrix’s statements about their own performances? How does Shana Redmond’s statements that the “Banner” draws attention to the “war-making... characterized the nation’s birth” but a “‘we’ that is only selectively imagined” seem like a description of one of these performances? Why?

You may also consider incorporating the recent debate about the “Banner” surrounding Colin Kaepernick and other NFL player’s decision to “take the knee” during the performance of the “Banner,” as discussed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBdoDOXMWkg>