IJHS, e-ISSN 2597-4718, p-ISSN 2597-470X, Vol. 7, No. 2, March 2024, pp. 249-258

International Journal of Humanity Studies
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/IJHS
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION SEEN THROUGH LYRICS IN RICH BRIAN AND NIKI'S SONGS

Diana Puspitarini
Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia
correspondence: dianapuspitarini21@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v7i2.6759
received 29 June 2023; accepted 27 March 2024

Abstract
Music is not only used as a tool to entertain people but also could be used as a medium to express the ideas of the songwriter or the singer. They could deliver the arguments that they are trying to tell not only to their fans but also to the other people. In this research, the writer wants to see the ideas that Rich Brian and NIKI are trying to express through their songs. The writer uses semiotics to get the data from Rich Brian and NIKI's songs, especially the lyrics. In this research, the writer finds that Rich Brian and NIKI are expressing their arguments about issues that are still happening now. They are delivering their opinion through their lyrics to remind people. However, the writer also sees that through the lyrics, Rich Brian and NIKI are also trying to show their support for the issues that still happen.

Keywords: issues, lyrics, NIKI, Rich Brian

Introduction
It could be found from a long time ago. However, the purpose is not only for entertaining but also for certain rituals. It is used as a medium to communicate with the spirits and gods. It is the tool that is used by humans for communicating with the spirits and gods to invite them to join in the rituals (Sumardjo, 2000, p.237). Nowadays, music has another meaning for humans. It is also used to express what people think and feel through the elements of music such as the melody, harmony, and expression as part of the song itself (Jamalus, 1998, pp. 1-2). It is clear why now it can be found that there are many types of music which have various expressions. It can express their feelings when they are falling in love, feeling blessed, broken-hearted, or even when they are feeling like they are at their lowest point and drowning in sadness.

As it mentioned before, music is one of the tools that could be used to express feelings and ideas. Freedom of expression could be found in the Black music genre also known as African-American music. Through music, they are expressing things that they could not deliver directly and infrequently being heard. During the slavery era, music was one of the most important things for Blacks to express their thoughts and feelings (Levine, 1977, p. 191). It is also mentioned that through music they were trying to depict the freedom that they always dream of. This statement is also mentioned by Burton W Perreti in his book entitled *Lift*

This work is licensed under CC BY-SA.
Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Every Voice, The History of African American Music that Black musicians were expressing their feelings and hope to be recognized and felt freedom through music that they were made (2009, p. 48). Many of them also describe their suffering as slaves, for example, there is a song called *Juba*. Until now, in America, African-American music genres, such as Jazz, Hip-hop, and R&B, are music genres that still could be used to express their ideas or feelings freely. Rich Brian and NIKI are two of several Indonesian musicians who were signed by American music labels *88Rising* and eventually can go to America. Through their music, they often express their arguments about certain issues. They succeeded in becoming Hip-hop singers in America, received awards, and were often invited to many radio, television shows, and YouTube for American music channels because their works are considered outstanding works. Through their songs, they are freely expressing their arguments and opinions about issues that happen.

Exploring the other research that also used Rich Brian and NIKI's songs as their object, the writer could find journals that are using them as their research material. One of the researches is written by Intan Tia Ajeng Ariyanti entitled *African American Vernacular English (AAVE) Used by Rich Brian: A Sociolinguistic Investigation*. In this research, Ariyanti is trying to investigate the use of AAVE by Rich Brian in his rap song lyrics which is aimed to identify the grammatical features of AAVE in the *Amen* album. She found 7 out of AAVE's 13 grammatical features in Rich Brian's song lyrics. She also argues that Brian got the causal effect on the use of AAVE by the environment or neighborhoods where he grew up. This makes Brian obtain AAVE's native-like control. Another research entitled *Yellow in Black and White: Representasi Identitas Asia oleh Rich Brian dalam Musik Hip-Hop di Amerika Serikat* is written by Nokia Putri Andika Lainsyamputty. This study aims to uncover how Brian represented his identity in US hip-hop music. The researcher is using Stuart Hall's circuit of culture theory for her analysis. She found that Brian did not cover his background and poisoned himself on the spectrum of social identity. This then affects his songs, including his argument about identity and stereotypes of the Asian race. He also depicts the struggles of Asians who are part of minority groups in the United States.

The writer also found that several journals discuss NIKI's songs. The first journal is written by Wenny Alfiani. In her journal entitled *Type and Meaning of Figurative Language Found in NIKI's Selected Songs Lyrics*, she mentioned that the research aims to analyze the figurative language in NIKI's songs *Lose, Indigo, and La La Lost You*. The researcher found that there were seven types of figurative, such as metaphor, hyperbole, repetition, simile, apostrophe, paradox, and allegory. She also argues that the figurative language that is used in this song could teach poetry that can give positive and full attention to learning and also improve memory and imagination. The second article journal that is found is entitled *Figurative Language in the Niki Zefanya Every Summertime Song* by Chintia Handayani. The researcher wants to find the type of figurative language in Niki Zefanya's song, Every Summertime. To analyze the data, the researcher is using Perrine's theory which explains the various forms of figurative language. The researcher found allegory, hyperbole, personification, synecdoche, metaphor, and metonymy in the song.

Based on the related studies that are mentioned above, it can be seen that this research is different from the previous research that was found by the writer. This research wants to find the argument, opinion, or maybe the idea that Rich Brian and NIKI deliver in their songs' lyrics. To find that, in this research, the writer is using semiotics theory that focuses on the message that is trying to deliver. The writer wants to see if there are any other messages that Rich Brian and NIKI are trying to deliver through their songs' lyrics related to certain issues that happen.

Method

In collecting the data to reveal the phenomenon, the writer decided to use qualitative analysis. This method lets the writer make interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2008, p. 3). The phenomenon that is selected can be solved using the qualitative research method through the process of deep understanding of the phenomenon itself. In this research, the writer used semiotics which is stated by Roland Barthes. He stated that what the researcher should be researching is the audio and visual, the background of the language itself, and the use of the language to interpret the text (Pembayun, 2013, p. 32). Barthes tries to explore how language functions and its relation to ideology. In using the Semiotics approach from Roland Barthes, it is explained that Barthes has two main concepts in using this approach (Wibowo, 2013, pp. 21-23). It explains that Barthes identified a sign as a system containing an expression or signifier that has a relation with the content or signified. Thus, a primary sign system could be an element of a sign system that has a more complete or comprehensive meaning compared to the previous meaning. Barthes got a lot of influence from Saussure in analyzing the meanings of signs, so this is what guided Barthes in developing the idea of two orders of signification (Sobur, 2003). The significance of the two stages refers to the system of denotation and connotation. Barthes explained that denotative is the most real meaning of a sign (Barthes, 1957, p. 122). Moreover, Barthes uses connotative science to show the second stage, where the denotative sign interacts with cultural values and meets feelings and emotions.

Findings and Discussion

Based on Rich Brian and NIKI's song, the writer is finding the argument and opinion that they are trying to deliver. The writer would divide it into certain issues that are mentioned in their song.

Expressing about racism issue

Racism in America is still an issue that has often been discussed. Even though there are people who believe that every American is equal, there are also people who feel superior towards other races. One of the examples is racism towards Asian Americans. According to an article written by Nicole Chung in *Time*, on a survey that Chung found, there are 37% of white Americans did not know about the spike in attacks on Asian Americans and 42% of respondents could not mention a single prominent Asian American (Chung, 2021, para. 2). Other than that, Chung also stated that Asian women were becoming targets for the victim's gender and the majority of the perpetrators were white and male. These are only a few of the reasons why racism still happens in America and

becomes an issue that is interesting to be discussed. Another proof that Asian Americans, especially Chinese, are still discriminated against could be seen from the pandemic that happened because of the virus COVID-19 which is believed to come from China. The speech that was delivered by Trump said that the virus COVID-19 is a Chinese virus that made Chinese who live in America discriminate from Americans. There are so many reports that the Chinese get discriminated against not only verbally but also physically abuse. They are getting physically abused, ridiculed, spat upon, and even threatened to leave America immediately for the safety of another citizen. Some of them even become afraid to go outside their house. Quoted from an article written by Didik Atmaja, it is explained that the discrimination that is happening in America because of this virus is they are ignoring the reality that discriminated Asians can become American citizens and nationalities (2020, para 4). They might even be born of Asian ethnicity that has lived for a long time, passed on from generation to generation, and regenerated. This discrimination indeed would have impacts on them. It is argued by Hsiu-Lan Cheng in his journal that COVID-19 anti-Asian xenophobia and racism will negatively contribute to Asian Americans' mental health and sense of self and identity (2020, para 4). This situation might lead some of them to melancholia and haunt them with the feeling of fear. Rich Brian through his songs is trying to deliver his experience and opinion about the racial injustice problem that happens in America and also from his own experiences. In his song entitled Chaos, he shows how he thinks that a question about race to discriminate against certain races is unnecessary. This song was released in 2018 from his album named Amen.

Cake, cake up on this belt, the day I landed in the States
Doin' one take all day and I'm just spittin' out the mace (mace)
She like sippin' out that mason jar
She a hippie, she gon' suck for some granola bars
Little freaky got me curious like I'm on Mars
Sayin', I forgot my roots, goddamn, you went too far

Based on the lyrics from the song above, Brian is telling the story of when he landed in the United States to continue his career. He explained that he worked hard and spent all day making his song. He feels that he is in a strange place like he is on Mars when he finds a culture that is different from his culture in Indonesia. In this part of the lyrics, he gives an example of his own experience. When he sees a Hippie woman eating granola bars from a mason jar, it makes him feel strange since eating granola is not a habit that usually people eat back in his hometown. When Brian alludes to his roots and the woman argues that he forgot about his roots to continue his career in America, Brian feels offended. Based on the part of the lyrics that are mentioned above, Brian has to face discrimination when he is making his song in America and he feels that he is offended by that statement. However, in the next part of his song, Brian stated

Ayy, damn you went too far
Got these people all around me, man, that treat me like a star

This part shows how people around him from the music company always support him and do not care about his roots or where he comes from. Brian is one of the artists from 88Rising music company which is also known as an American mass media company. It is stated by Miyasiro, the founder of 88Rising, in an interview with Forbes that he made this company to celebrate global Asian culture (2016, para. 2). He is trying to make a safe place for Asians and Asian-American to create songs under an American company. This explains that even though he was discriminated against by a hippie woman, he still feels accepted by the music company.

Another song that Brian used to deliver his opinion about racial injustice also could be found in his song entitled Kids. This song is one of his songs from the Sailor album that was released in 2019. The song became more famous since this song became a soundtrack from one of Universal Pictures' movies named The Invisible Man (Marhendri, 2020, para. 2). In this song Brian is delivering his argument that he does not agree with racism and even gives his support through the lyrics.

Tell these Asian kids they could do what they want
Might steal the mic at the Grammy's just to say we won
That everyone can make it, don't matter where you from

Through these lyrics, Brian is trying to encourage Asian kids that they have the right to do things that they want to do. Brian is trying to emphasize that they have the right to explore their ability and talent. They could do anything, even crazy things like Brian said in these lyrics, to steal the mic at the Grammys to celebrate their victory. In the last part of the lyrics, Brian also once again wants to deliver to people that no matter who they are and where they come from they still could achieve their goal and do things that they want. In the other part of the lyrics in this song, Brian also tells about his experience of being discriminated against when he was making his music in America.

They told me I ain't welcome, I'm here to stay, and my visa says so
Just wait and see who's songs they gon' blast up in they headphones
Come back like every couple years to destroy like tornadoes

These lyrics describe his experience directly. In the first part of the lyrics, Brian is telling how he is not being welcomed by some people in America even though he moved to America to stay and continue his career as a rapper. Even the visa that he had could not help him feel belonged in America. Even though he cannot feel comfortable and welcome, it does not make him feel sad or desperate, and even goes back to his hometown. It turns out that it determined him to prove to people who underestimate him that he can do amazing work. It is stated by Brian in an interview that he made this song to tell about his journey to achieve his dream (Bulut, 2019, para. 3). He wants to show that he is not ashamed of being Asian and wants to talk about it. In this song, he also wants to explain the atmosphere that he felt when he first came to L.A.

The color yellow is a color that has a history for Asian Americans. Yellow is used by many people in America to call Asian-American. They call them yellow because their skin is not white but also not black. This “yellow” predicate

that is given to Asian Americans makes them always considered foreigners (Lin, 2002, p.537). This inspired Brian to write his song that used yellow as the title. He explained in an interview with Kimberly Yam for Huff Post that this song expresses his own story as an immigrant in America (para. 16). It is stated that he tries to describe it through the song that starts with melancholy music that describes his struggle the first time he arrived in America. The lyrics at the beginning of the song also describe his fear of becoming no one.

How do I disappear
Without anybody knowing?
Will anybody even miss me
When I'm gone?

The purpose of going to America is to do his best work but the fear of failure also haunts him. He was afraid that he would end up with nothing and without any work that would make people know him. However, in the interview, Brian also explains that this is also made to depict his victory. At the end of the song, he explains that he is using grand orchestral swells to emphasize the message that he is trying to deliver. Even though, as seen from history, the word "yellow" is used to offend Asian Americans, Brian is using this word to give a hopeful reclamation of the term (Yam, 2019, para. 18). Brian is also using the lyrics to depict his victory.

Dinner, dessert, eat these rappers for fun (fun)
Don't give no fucks if you don't fuck with my shit
Rock fifty stages in all fifty states, bitch
I did it all without no citizenship
To show the whole world you just got to imagine

He is using the lyrics to see how now he could be calmer and feel that there are hopes. He would not listen to what people say. Through this song he also delivers how he feels blessed that has a platform that he has freedom in expressing his idea or topic that he never talked about before (Paramasivam, 2019, para. 9). He made this song also expresses how he felt in that moment and being honest of his feelings to make the listener know how vulnerable he was. He hoped that this song could depict what maybe his fans are feeling whether they are Asian or Asian American. Since he wrote this song, he feels proud of himself and proud to say that yes he is yellow.

Expressing women power

Feminism is one of the important events that have happened in American history. It is stated that the first American feminist movement happened in 1848 and fought for discontinuing discrimination based on gender (Gamble, 2001, p. 20). Cady Staton is mentioned as one of the women who had a big impact on the first wave of feminism. She was fighting for the change of divorce laws, about rights for married women's property, and the vote (p.21). Their battle to achieve the goals still could be felt now, one of the examples that women getting their right to vote. Entering the new wave, in America women were fighting for the equality of employment opportunity (p.25). Moreover, the right to get higher

education also became one of the things that had a big impact on women. The efforts by Emily Davies for the renewal period regarding educational regulations allowing women to attend schools which then also influenced America. In 1861, many colleges began in America that allowed women to get higher education in various fields, one example of which was law (Coryell, 2012, pp.239-240). This then opened a new profession for women, as a lawyer. In the 1990s, feminism entered a new phase that is also known as the Third Wave. It is explained, that in this phase most Americans approved the new things that were changed by the movement that had been fought for by the women (p. 489). It is also stated that they got their place to express their idea of having equal rights with men even though sometimes they were considered radical extremists.

On the other side, NIKI through her song is expressing her idea about women's power. The spirit of women fighting for their rights and their effort to support each other can also be found in NIKI's song lyrics. Based on the NIKI's songs, the researcher found three songs of NIKI that expressed her idea about women's power. In the first song entitled Newsflash, NIKI stated in the lyrics,

I ain't interested in being a pretty name on your list
I got dreams and aspirations with prettier lips to kiss

In the lyrics, NIKI is emphasizing that becoming a man's dream girl and being included in his list is not interesting for NIKI. She has dreams that are more important than being that girl. She also has hopes and ambitions to achieve rather than wondering if she is on the list of women a man dreams of. In this song, NIKI is trying to emphasize how she believes that life is not only about how to make a man interesting or fall in love with her but about how dreams, hope, and ambition to achieve her dream are more important. In this song, NIKI also writes

Save your intrigue and all your techniques
You think you sleek but
I'm smart and very very out of your league

She is trying to say that she is not that easy to believe with things that they would do to get her. She could recognize all their tricks or techniques. She already knows their game and she is emphasizing that she is smart to know about it.

Another song that NIKI wrote to show women's power is a song from her third album entitled Wide Open. In an interview, NIKI explained that this song was inspired by events that were experienced by the women around her. Many of them had bad experiences about how they are considered incapable of doing many things and are not respected. NIKI also explained how lucky she is to be able to join 88Rising where even though she works with men they really respect her and treat her well. She has never felt or had a bad experience with them. This song is indeed made by NIKI to show its support for women out there who may be at their worst rock bottom. She even emphasized that she wanted to "make an outrightly feminist statement there but in a sardonic manner". This was later proven by the lyrics of the song that give encouraging lines to show her support.

So girl don't you give in
To all of the voices around you

Saying you can spread your wings

According to the lyrics above, it can be seen how NIKI is trying to give positive influence to women who listen to the song. She is showing her support and encouraging them to be brave and not give up. Even though many people may underestimate them and doubt them, NIKI wants them to still move forward and spread their wings to achieve their dreams. NIKI wants them to believe in themselves no matter what people say. NIKI also writes

At the ready to spread the word to save their pretty face
So let these words be your saving grace
There's a much longer trail to blaze
And it's ours (so straighten up), ooh

These lyrics could also be seen as proof of how NIKI is giving her support through the song. She is spreading positive words and spreading them through her wong to save the woman's pretty face from the sadness that could grab their beautiful smile. She hopes that the lyrics could make the women rise again. She also hopes it could be used as the grace that could help them drowning from the grief. She tries to convince the women that they still have a long way to go and they have the control to make it shine.

Different from the previous song, this song is inspired by her own experience. The last example of women's power from NIKI is entitled Switchblade. She stated that this song is inspired by the beginning of her journey when she arrived in the United States for her career (Dodson, 2020, para. 3). In the lyrics of the song NIKI depicts her situation when she first came to America as explained above.

What is this place?
The skies are vast and no one's a familiar face
But I'm not afraid
Kinda feeling brave
The winds of change have nothing on this switchblade faith

NIKI describes how the United States is a completely foreign place to her. She could not find people she knew to comfort her. Even though it is described as an uncomfortable situation, NIKI is not afraid and still has a little courage. Even though the situation was indeed different from before, it did not shake her faith at all. She made this song as a reminder and a tribute to herself that she has been a woman who dared to take risks and braved to make a space for her. She stated that the problem when she has to leave music to be more serious with her education is something that might also happen with other women out there when they are required to do things that must be done by existing regulations. NIKI in her interview said that

“I see that happened a lot and I think I'm here to be like, no girl, do whatever you want to do, whether it be music or art or anything. As long as that's what you're passionate about, then just do it.” (Dodson, 2020, para. 11). She hopes that through this song many women will be inspired and be braver in taking risks to do what they love. As long as it is a good thing and can have a good influence

on their lives and happiness, then they dare to achieve what they have dreamed of. NIKI also delivers these in her lyrics

I'm running free like a child
On the crown of a mountain and I could keep goin' for miles
I don't know what's coming next, I feel a buzz in my legs
But heaven knows that I'm quick on my feet and
Good with a blade and some old-fashioned faith in a place like this
Feeling bulletproof and far from faces I don't miss
So many brand new risks to take

These parts of the lyrics are the same message as what NIKI stated in the interview. She feels free and it makes her feel like she could do many things more about it. Even though she does not know what will happen in the future and sometimes it makes her nervous she wants to do it anyway. She is ready and brave enough to face things that will happen next. Even though she knows that there are new problems and risks that she has to deal with and take.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that in the past maybe music or song was for a ritual tradition or only for entertainment. However, as time goes by, music could be used as a tool to express arguments, opinions, or ideas from musicians. Through music, musicians can express things that they believe. They not only could write and make songs about love and express their feelings when sad but also could discuss issues that happen around them and express their arguments, opinions, and ideas. Rich Brian and NIKI are musicians who could be used as examples. They are expressing their arguments, opinions, and ideas through the lyrics of their songs. In Brian's song, it could be found how his opinions and arguments of racism are based on the situation that happens around him. Moreover, he is also telling the story from his own experiences. On the other hand, NIKI is also using her ability to use her song to express her mind. NIKI's songs also discuss issues that still happen now. Through her song, she not only delivered her opinion and arguments, but she also showed her support to the other women to become a strong woman.

References

Alfiyani, W. (2021). Type and meaning of figurative language found in NIKI's selected songs lyrics. *Jurnal CULTURE (Culture, Language, and Literature Review)*, *8*(2), 156-169. http://dx.doi.org/10.53873/culture.v8i2.271

Aryani, I.T.A. (2020). African American vernacular English (AAVE) used by Rich Brian: A sociolinguistic investigation. *Language Circle: Journal of Language and Literature*, *15*(1), 67-72. https://doi.org/10.15294/lc.v15i1.25965

Atmaja, D. (2020, June 3). *Sentimen anti-Asia di Amerika.* Retrieved from https://news.detik.com/kolom/d-5038933/sentimen-anti-asia-di-amerika.

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bulut, S. (2019, July 26). Six things that inspired Rich Brian's new album The Sailor. Retrieved from https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/45394/1/rich-brian-the- sailor-new-album-influences-interview.

Cheng, H. (2020). Xenophobia and racism against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic: Mental health implications. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship, 3*, 1-4.

Chung, N. (2021, May 27). I'm tired of trying to educate white people about anti-Asian racism. Retrieved from https://time.com/6051948/ educating-white-people-anti- asian-racism/.

Coryell, J. L. (2012). *A history of women in America*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Dodson, C. (2020, April 2). NIKI talks new song "switchblade," identity crises, and opening for Taylor Swifturageous, optimistic outlook towards the world. Retrieved from https://www.teenvogue.com/story/niki-switchblade-release-moonchild-interview.

Gamble, S. (2001). *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism*. New York: The Routledge.

Handayani, C. (2022). Figurative language in the Niki Zefanya every summertime song. *JURNAL JUKIM, 1*(1), 25-31.

Jamalus, J. (1998). *Pengajaran musik melalui pengalaman musik.* Jakarta: Dikti Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.

Lainsyamputty, N.P.A. (2021). Yellow in black and white: Representasi identitas Asia oleh Rich Brian dalam musik hip-hop di Amerika Serikat. *Jurnal Media dan Komunikasi Indonesia, 2*(1), 4 - 21.

Levine, L. W. (1977). *Black culture & black consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lin, E. (2002). Yellow is yellow [Review of yellow: Race in America beyond black and white, by F. H. Wu]. *Yale Law & Policy Review, 20*(2), 529–543. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40239590.

Marhendri, D. (2020, March 3). 5 fakta lagu Rich Brian 'kids' yang dijadikan soundtrack film hollywood. Retrieved from https://www.merdeka.com/jabar/5-fakta-lagu-rich-brian-kids-yang-dijadikan-soundtrack-film-hollywood.html.

Pembayun, E.L. (2013). *Qualitative research methodology in communication.* Jakarta: Lentera Ilmu Cendekia.

Peretti, B. W. (2009). *Lift every voice, the history of African American music*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc.

Sobur, A. (2003). *Semiotika komunikasi*. Bandung: Rosdakarya.

Sumarjo, J. (2000). *Filsafat seni Bandung*. Bandung: ITB.

Wibowo, I.S.W. (2013). *Semiotika komunikasi - Aplikasi praktis bagi penelitian dan skripsi komunikasi*. Bogor: Mitra Wacana Media.

Yam, K. (2019, Sep 20). 88 rising's Rich Brian has grown up by reclaiming his own journey. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/88-risings-rich-brian-on-how_n_5d7fa163e4b00d69059c43b9.