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Black Voices in the 20th Century

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Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry": Rap's Ability to Influence Social and Political
Activism

No contemporary art form evokes more visceral controversy than rap. Passionate artists, authors, and experts vehemently debate how it shapes the identity of the African American community. The critics of rap mainly point to its glorification of, as bell hooks enumerated in 1994, "sexis[m], misogyn[y], and patriarchal ways of thinking." Coming from the perspective of a Black feminist, hooks sees rap as a "plantation ... sustained by [the] white supremacist capitalist patriarchy ... to serve as an ideological anti-feminist backlash" (26). While hooks' damning condemnation of rap may appear persuasive, in reality, rap plays a more valuable social role than she describes; in a 2007 interview with NPR, noted author Michael Eric Dyson boldly affirmed that rap is "at its best ... [a] voice [for marginalized] black youth we are not used to hearing from." Furthermore, he condemns academics who "overlook ... enlightened aspects of hip hop [because they] are out to satisfy a grudge against black youth culture and are too angry or self-righteous to listen and learn." No artist more clearly demonstrates the "enlightened aspects of hip hop" than the multi-Grammy- and Pulitzer Prize-winning rapper, Kendrick Lamar. His third studio album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, addresses the ongoing systemic issues that African Americans face on a daily basis: police brutality, unemployment, and organized crime. Yet, Lamar refreshingly approaches these issues with an optimistic disposition, often reinforcing that Black power and self-love can, along with major socio-economic policy changes, help African Americans realize equality. In particular, the thirteenth song on the album, "The Blacker the Berry" (originally released as a single a month before the album dropped) recaps almost every issue previously mentioned in the album,

but Lamar approaches these topics in an aggressive, perplexing, and, at times, hypocritical fashion. “The Blacker the Berry” exemplifies how rap music promotes social and political activism through its uplifting of Black pride, discussion of double-consciousness in the Black community, and condemnation of White supremacy.

Rap’s Legacy of Activism

While some academics try to segregate rap into different genres based on the contents of the song, all rap has socially and politically conscious elements because it acts as the successor to the modern civil rights movement. In the years immediately following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the fight for Black liberation became disorganized and leaderless. Violent riots only further perpetuated stereotypes of the African American community as violent and ill-intentioned, and the successful integration of African Americans appeared unlikely, especially in the context of a global recession. But, as the 1970s closed, “Frustration, anger, and discontent with the political and social system in the United States” led to the emergence of rap (Bonnette 59). In essence, rap, as a part of the “Hip-Hop Movement” carried on the legacy of activism set by the Civil Rights Movement by channeling that “frustration” into an expressive and productive form. According to Dr. Reiland Rabaka, a professor of African American Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder:

Whether or not we are willing to acknowledge it, in its own off-kilter and extremely unorthodox way the Hip Hop Movement builds on the good ... of the Civil Rights Movement. Hence, those who quickly quip that invoking a “Hip Hop Movement” is quite simply “hogwash” should bear in mind that the Hip Hop Generation is not the first generation of black youth to not only note the political nature of black popular culture, but also to earnestly attempt to use the politics and social visions embedded in black popular culture in the interest of political activism and social organization. (2-3)

Therefore, to a certain extent, all rap music contains elements of social and political activism because of its legacy in the context of the Civil Rights Movement.

Jay-Z's *4:44* helped promote a unifying sense of Black pride in American society. Using his status as an extraordinarily successful entrepreneur and a highly-regarded figure in the African American community, he wanted to inspire other African Americans to achieve greatness. On his hit song "The Story of O.J.," the chorus consists of Jay-Z monotonously listing, "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga/Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga/Still nigga, still nigga" (00:00:29-00:00:40). While Black people come from such diverse backgrounds, Jay-Z lets them know that they are "still nigga[s]." Through this, he hopes to rouse a sense of unity among such different people; historical examples, from "the Black Power movement to the Nation of Islam and beyond," successfully diffuses the idea of Black Pride through a unifying principle (Serwer). Although some pushed back against the album, many listeners and critics, like *The Atlantic's* Adam Serwer, received the message very well. Now, Black Pride is a near-universally admired belief, and Jay-Z is recognized as one of its most prominent supporters.

Another superb example of rap's ability to shape social and political activism is through the theme of double-consciousness in J. Cole's *4 Your Eyez Only*. As defined by noted sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois in the early 20th century, "double-consciousness" named an internal conflict within the Black community, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (11). Cole was born in Germany on a military base to a Black father and a White mother, and he endured a difficult childhood. At a young age, his father abandoned them, and, out of necessity, his mother brought her son back to her hometown of Fayetteville, NC. In an overwhelmingly White and middle-class town, Cole felt tokenized and isolated by both friends and family, feelings that were further exacerbated by his mother's substance abuse issues. While he was recording the album, a S.W.A.T. team conducted a narcotics raid on Cole's studio in Fayetteville because the neighbors tipped off the

police. The police found no evidence of any narcotics, and Cole used this incident as inspiration for his hit song “Neighbors”; in particular, Cole specifically articulates his feeling of isolation when he says “I can’t sleep cause I’m paranoid/Black in a white man territory” (00:02:08-00:02:11). Even though he lived in this town for virtually his whole life, he still cannot be accepted because he is “black in a white [man’s] territory.” So, the neighbors will try to do anything to get rid of Cole, even stooping so low as to employ the Black drug dealer stereotype. Fans loved his new brazen defiance because, as writer for *The Guardian* Sheldon Pearce puts it, “Cole was among the first responders to the cause [of activism], heeding the call from fans looking to anoint a new generation of visible advocates.” Cole not only used his platform to promote social and political activism, but he also grew into the civil rights leader that so many had wished he would become earlier in his career.

Akin to Cole, Kanye West also developed into a civil rights leader as he matured as an artist. One of the clearest examples of a rap album accomplishing fantastic social and political work for the African American community through condemnation of White supremacist culture is *Yeezus*, by Kanye West. In a way that only a genius of West’s level could achieve, he blends futuristic, industrial, and distorted sounds to create a scathing critique of White supremacist culture. West drew on the rejection he received in the fashion industry because he was a “rapper,” clearly a racial dog whistle (“Kanye West” 00:03:24). On the iconic track “New Slaves,” West speaks from the perspective of a racist White person talking about wealthy African Americans, asking “What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?/All you blacks want all the same things” (00:00:32-00:00:38). Obviously, the monolithic perception that “all ... blacks want ... the same things” rests on presumptions of ignorant racism; just like another race, every Black individual is unique and therefore has unique desires. Even more concerning is the materialistic undertones of the quote. This view illustrates Black men as consumed by “Bentley[s], Fur coat[s], and] diamond chain[s]” which dehumanizes them into selfish and greedy monsters. After *Yeezus*’ release, an outpouring of support began for West and for his message of frustration and disillusionment. Many believe the

album energized music and society like a bolt of “lightning.” In fact, Lamar often cites *Yeezus*, particularly West’s rejection of “watered-down tactics” in the rap industry, as one of the major influences for *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Lamar, “Kendrick Lamar Talks about Kanye West ‘Yeezus’ Album”).

Black Pride in “The Blacker the Berry”

Lamar’s references to Black history communicate a sensation of pride, and his use of Black history has become widespread in the realm of activism. The pre-chorus of the song consists almost entirely of the repetition of one phrase: “The blacker the berry/the sweeter the juice” (00:01:38-00:01:41). Lamar unmistakably alludes to Wallace Thurman’s 1929 novel, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life*. The novel chronicles how the protagonist Emma Lou overcomes society’s rejection of her very dark skin and learns the importance of self-love. A new wave of resistance against colorism is part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. More than ever before, dark-skinned Black people, particularly women, speak out against the constant abuse they suffer, skin bleaching, hair straightening, and many other cruel forms of rejection. Lamar is a well-known “founding father” of BLM, and many activists view *To Pimp a Butterfly* as an album dedicated to the movement. Thus, Lamar heavily influenced BLM’s fight against colorism, especially through “The Blacker the Berry.” Another example of Lamar’s employment of Black history is in the chorus, where Assassin, who is featured on the song, recounts in thick patois, “All them say we doomed from the start, cah’ we black/Remember this, every race start from the block, jus ’member dat” (00:02:05-00:02:11). While many experts maintain wildly different interpretations of these two bars, the most common interpretation is that the words “block/black” (in patois, the words are phonetically identical) act as a double entendre. Humanity originated from the “block,” a colloquialism (especially in African American dialects) for a hometown, and in this instance, it refers to Africa (“Note that”). Therefore, Lamar wants everyone to recognize that the differences among all humans are only skin deep.

Another way Lamar successfully encourages Black pride is through the technique of reappropriating racial stereotypes and pejoratives. One of the most obvious demonstrations of reappropriation in the song is the frequent use of “nigga,” a word that many linguists deem the most hideous in the entire English language. According to research, the reappropriation of the word “nigger” has had a tremendously positive imprint on the Black community because “the self-referential use of [this] derogatory [label]... suggest[s] that the [group] felt more powerful which facilitated the self-labeling with the derogatory group [term]” (Galinsky et al. 2013). No force impacted the reappropriation of the word “nigger” more than rap, where its general utility in a variety of narrative and rhyming situations made it an excellent tool in the arsenal of rappers. In addition, Lamar lists racist stereotypes of African Americans throughout the song, like saying “[His] hair is nappy, [his] dick is big, [his] nose is round and wide,” or “[celebrating] February like it’s [his] B-Day/Or [eating] watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays/Or [jumping] high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements” (00:01:13-00:01:16, 00:04:17-00:04:24). However, instead of degrading African Americans through these stereotypes, Lamar highlights the positive elements of Black culture. The Black community values its legacy of producing great athletes like “Michael Jordan,” respecting their heritage through celebrations like Black History Month (which occurs during February), and valuing family and community, often observed in large family gatherings full of delicious food like “watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid.”

Double-Consciousness in “The Blacker the Berry”

Thomas Chatterton Williams, in a discussion about race in America, has written that “in the conversations about the deaths of Brown, Peace and numerous others who have commanded public attention in the US over the past year, there’s often a tension between the desire to attribute responsibility for actions to those who undertake them and the protective urge to downplay those same people’s responsibility for their actions.” Lamar mirrors these exact sentiments when he

admits “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015” at the beginning of every verse (00:0:54-00:00:57).

Eventually, Lamar justifies his statement in the last verse:

It’s funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war
 Two tribal armies that wanna build and destroy
 Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that live next door
 Beefin’ with Pirus, only death settle the score

.....

So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
 When gang-banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
 Hypocrite! (4:00-4:11, 4:27-4:33).

Here, Lamar implies that protesting the murder of Trevon Martin is hypocritical when he personally participated in “gang-banging.” In both instances, the result of the action is the same, a young Black man dies. If African Americans really want to incur permanent change, they need to shed this hypocritical mindset and hold themselves accountable for the damage they inflict upon their own community. Instead of receiving widespread praise, like most of the ideas and beliefs Lamar talks about on the album, this part of the song unleashed a tidal wave of backlash. Many fans saw it as Lamar’s betrayal of BLM and his acceptance of ideas typically associated with the largely despised Black conservatives. But this interpretation of Lamar’s ending lines is shallow and incomplete. By comparing “Compton Crip gangs” and “Pirus” (Bloods) to the “Zulu and Xhosa,” two tribes that had a heated rivalry that the British exploited to colonize Southern Africa, Lamar demonstrates how White supremacists actually instigate conflicts among African Americans only to exploit them for their own benefit. Beyond the lyrics, Lamar also weaves the theme of hypocrisy into the structure of the song.

In general, the song structure of “The Blacker the Berry,” situated on the theme of hypocrisy, challenged the tropes of most contemporary rap. The beat, produced by Boi-1da & Koz,

can be divided into two segments: the primary boom bap segment and the secondary Parliament-Funkadelic segment. Boom bap is, as producer Michail Exarchos defines it, “the prominence of sampled drum sounds programmed over sparse and heavily syncopated instrumentation” which gives the song a “gritty, lo-fi audio [quality]” (32, 34). In perfect contrast to the earthy, “in your face” effects of the boom bap part of the beat, Boi-1da & Koz beautifully blend Parliament-Funkadelic qualities into the beat. Although these sounds vary wildly, the sounds used by the producers have psychedelic and lucid effects that simultaneously clash and complement the boom bap. Using his incredible technical rapping ability and unparalleled flow in his delivery of the bars, Lamar rapping creates both a disturbing and enticing effect on the listener. In the words of Jayson Greene, an editor at *Pitchfork*, “His cadence runs roughshod over the beat, hitting it the way a sprinting foot hits pavement—at angles, irregularly, and with a painful muscle-twisting sense of urgency. His lines cut through everything, abandoning his occasional tendency to fill up lines with melodious filler syllables.” Upon viewing all of the elements of the song holistically, Lamar and the producers intentionally combined these opposing sounds to create a rich and complex song that represents the beautiful and nuanced hypocrisy of the Black community. Moreover, Lamar and the producers’ stylistic choices throughout the album run against the predominant form of contemporary rap, trap music. As described by Dr. Jernej Kaluža of the University of Ljubljana, trap is a genre of rap “[characterized by] 808- kick drums and melodic synths that create an overall dark and grim, but sometimes also bright and laid-back atmosphere, [that] started entering mainstream music in general,” and he contends that it is the “‘default’ [sound]” of rap (25). Admittedly, Lamar’s music possesses some conventional features of trap music, but he combines them with more traditional rap beats, intriguing samples, and aspects of jazz and funk music to generate something completely original. In fact, some musical scholars see Lamar’s innovative style of rap as a powerful shaping force of trap music (Kaluža 24). As with every aspect of his personality, Lamar is always on the vanguard of the stylistic progression of rap.

Condemnation of White Supremacy in “The Blacker the Berry”

Lamar set an important precedent for exposing and attacking performative activism in “The Blacker the Berry.” As defined by Dr. Peter Kalina, performative activism (also known as performative allyship) “refers to someone from a nonmarginalized group professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful. Worse yet, the allyship is done in a way that may actually be harmful to ‘the cause.’ The ‘ally’ is motivated by some type of reward” (478). In response to these performative allies, Lamar says “You never liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it .../You hate me don’t you? You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture/You’re fuckin’ evil” (00:01:03-00:01:05, 00:01:15-00:01:21). In these three bars, Lamar provides two reasons for why performative allyship is so dangerous to meaningful social and political activism. First, Lamar considers it “evil” because it is lying, something he utterly detests. As exemplified through his own art, Lamar values genuine artistic expression over anything else, including money. Subsequently, Lamar sees “friendship” of the performative allies to be worthless because they honestly “never liked [African Americans].” Secondly, Lamar perceives performative activism as cancerous to genuine activism because it can “terminate [Black] culture” by undermining social and political resistance to oppression. Frequently, performative activists declare a premature victory on a specific social issue when the debate becomes too costly. By declaring a premature victory, vital media attention and public donations never reach the organizations that actually accomplish social and political reform and thus “terminate [Black] culture.” Fortunately, his critique of performative activism resonated well with the public; in fact, “The Blacker the Berry” is one of the first sources to recognize performative activism. On June 2, 2020, Instagram users posted a blank black square with the caption “#blackouttuesday” to show solidarity with protestors calling for the arrest of the officers who murdered George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Along with this post, participants were supposed to donate to civil rights organizations such as bail funds, the ACLU, or the NAACP, but very few actually followed through

with this commitment. Almost immediately, actual participants slammed these performative activists for sabotaging such an important message.

Interestingly, Lamar also breaks new ground in discourse on the underlying cause of racism by revitalizing the idea of combating White supremacy with sympathy. Many of the leaders of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, especially Dr. King, firmly believed that violence would only entrench hatred for the Black community and give more credence to the racist perception of African Americans as aggressive and ill-tempered. They presumed, correctly, that a creed of non-violence and compassion would lead them to success. In “The Blacker the Berry,” Lamar speaks directly to the White supremacists and lets them know that “You hate me don’t you?/I know you hate me just as much as you hate yourself” (2:32-2:36). In a rare moment of vulnerability in the song, Lamar reveals that “[he knows]” that hatred comes from “[hating] yourself” because he personally struggles with depression. Along with being well-known for his social commentary, many dubbed Lamar, in the words of Becky Inkster and Akeem Sule, “The Street Poet of Mental Health” for his honest and eloquent discussions about his own battle with mental illness (496). Largely thanks to Lamar’s ideas, fighting bigotry with sympathy witnessed a recent resurgence. Support networks and hotlines are now better funded, due to progressive legislation; they are more aware of the correlation between bigotry and self-hatred, and more people are receiving the proper medical treatment. As a result, Lamar shows that acting with kindness can resolve a wide variety of social and political issues.

Conclusion

As shown by “The Blacker the Berry,” rap produces tremendously beneficial social and political reform, particularly for the Black community. Despite ample evidence to support this conclusion, large swaths of academics, the general public, and media outlets dismiss rap as a genuine form of artistic expression because of racist agendas. For the most part, the mainstream reaction to rap “[is] explicitly racist in that the merits of the music [are] dismissed because the

artists were Black” (Lewis 19). Furthermore, Lewis suggests that White audiences react to rap music so negatively because, in the words of author Dr. Todd Byod, they find it too “vocal ... visible... [and empowering]” for the Black community (qtd in Lewis 18). Fortunately, mainstream acceptance of rap and its messages drastically shifted in recent years, as Raisa Bruner, writer for *Time Magazine* states:

Nearly half of the songs on Jan. 27’s Billboard Hot 100 chart were rap or incorporate elements of hip-hop. Listening in the genre increased 74% on Spotify in 2017, and Drake, the Weeknd and Kendrick Lamar were three of the platform’s top five most popular artists. This is a marked change from the past 10 years, when artists like Taylor Swift, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga ruled the charts.

By continuing to preach Black empowerment, using their prominent platform to instigate lasting reforms, and making the most captivating music of any genre currently, rappers are finally overcoming decades of White supremacy in American society. Due largely to Kendrick Lamar’s trailblazing music, a new horizon appeared for rap as a widely legitimized and validated form of expression for African Americans.

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