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Abstract: This essay deals with the current, and at times problematic, nature of the Hip Hop music genre and how it can be changed through the leadership of impactful artists such as Kendrick Lamar in his role as a positive and healthy leader in not only the African American community, but the music industry as well. Exploring this topic meant researching the hardships faced by the African American community, their causes and effects, and how Hip Hop has the ability to both heal and hurt this community by how it conveys ideas of leadership, the treatment of women, materialism, and masculinity.

Key Words: Music; African American Culture; Masculinity; Mental Health; Stereotypes

At the end of his most recent album, Damn, rapper Kendrick Lamar’s opening track, “BLOOD”, ends with the audio from a news clip about the lyrics of one of Lamar’s past songs, “Alright”, in which the male broadcaster says the following: “Lamar stated his views on police brutality with that line in the song, quote: ‘And we hate the popo, wanna kill us in the street fo’ sho’,” to which his female co-host replied with disgust, “Oh please, ugh, I don’t like it”.

Hip Hop, especially Rap, has an image problem. When the general public of Canada, the United States, and the rest of Western society thinks of this genre of music, their thoughts usually turn to scenes of violence, misogyny, hyper-masculinity, and illegal behaviour that goes against the values that the majority of them hold. The news clip played in “BLOOD”, originally from the notoriously conservative FOX News, provides evidence on this subject. Lamar uses an audio clip from the same news segment in the sequential song “DNA”: “This is why I say that Hip Hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years”.

In reality, however, this is not what Hip Hop is. Hip Hop, or more specifically Rap music, “is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America” (Rose 1994, 2). Tricia Rose goes on to elaborate on the origins of Rap music, explaining that it arose in the 1980s from “technology, economic forces, and race, gender, and class relations,” and provides “an experimental and collective space where contemporary issues and ancestral forces are worked through simultaneously” (Ibid. 61, 59). Rose’s description of this musical genre makes the criticism it receives in the clips played in Lamar’s songs seem unwarranted; however, this is not entirely the case, and Rose knows this.

Early in her book, Black Noise, she cites several ways in which Hip Hop and its artists are both problematic and contradictory. Firstly, she states that “some rappers
defend the work of gangster rappers and at the same time consider it a negative influence on black youths” (Ibid. 2). She continues by adding that:

Rappers who criticize America for its perpetuation of racial and economic discrimination also share conservative ideas about personal responsibility, call for self-improvement strategies in the black community that focus heavily on personal behaviour as the cause and solution for crime, drugs, and community instability (Ibid.).

What can be taken from Rose’s discussion of Hip Hop is that it has great potential for positive change and influence in the black community; however, its delivery and the behaviour of those who represent it can lead to its being counter-productive. Hip hop suffers from an imbalance that can only be rectified by using its positive potential while rejecting the negative aspects it all too often entails. An artist who has proven himself willing and able to do so is Kendrick Lamar. Through his music, Lamar presents himself not only as a talented musician, but also as the remedy to Rose’s concerns regarding Hip Hop; in short, Kendrick Lamar provides the perfect mold of a rapper that can help bring out the best in the genre.

Lamar’s abilities and willingness allow him to successfully maximize the positive potential of Hip Hop because of his popularity as an artist. It is because of this popularity that his message can reach the widest possible audience. It is necessary for him to possess the title of both Rap artist and pop artist. The reason this is essential is because pop singers are idolized, and the idolizing of them involves what Amiram Raviv calls worship and modeling (Raviv 1996, 632): “Worship refers to an unusually intense admiration and reverence of an idol” (Ibid.), while “modeling refers to the desire to be like an idol,” to the point of copying their “behavioural patterns” (Ibid). This last point is the most important, as it shows that since Lamar portrays himself as healthy and positive in his music and behaviour, this would lead to a following of suit by his community and fans, especially on the part of the younger audience (Ibid.). Unfortunately, in Rap music, it is difficult to find stars who balance impactful lyricism, positive behavioural patterns and the required popular appeal, making Kendrick Lamar a rare figure indeed. However, the prominent artist from Compton, California is using his voice to its fullest potential, and reaping real change as a result.

According to bell hooks, an African American author and social activist, the genre of rap, “began as a form of ‘testimony’ for the underclass. It has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice, as a group of young black men told me, a ‘common literacy.’ Rap projects a critical voice, explaining, demanding, urging” (hooks 1990). What bell hooks is engaging with in this quote is the critical voice that Rap allows its performer to command. For a Rap artist to be effective, and in turn a positive influencer through their music, they must use this voice with skill. This skill is most frequently demonstrated through the artists’ lyricism. Lamar is no exception to this, as he prides himself in his ability to write insightful and provocative lyrics. This style of writing has become a part of his brand, and he is aware of this. On the remix of fellow rapper, Future’s, mega hit “Mask Off”, Lamar asks his listeners: “How y’all let a
conscious n**** go commercial/While only makin' conscious albums?” He asks this because rappers who focus on the message of their music rarely obtain the mainstream status that he has managed to achieve. In consequence, Lamar’s style of music is not conducive to him attaining the level of popularity needed to reach a wide enough audience to incite meaningful change. This is why the reputation of Hip Hop, and more specifically Rap, has been trapped in this negative light: most of the artists who reach the heights of popularity do so by writing music in the style that will make them the most money. This is music that appeals to the capitalist markets of clubs and online sales and streaming services, often at the sacrifice of high-quality lyricism. The lyrics are often reduced to simple boastings of wealth, social superiority, or the possession of women; the very negative aspects that need to be avoided in order to use Rap to its full potential.

This is what makes Lamar so special: he has achieved his star status without having to completely rely on these tropes. This is, in part, due to the quality of his lyricism. A prominent example of this is in his first hit, “Hiii Power” from his first studio album, Section 80. In this track, he exemplifies what Rose refers to as a “hidden transcript”, which is “cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities” (Rose 1994, 100). This is best demonstrated in his final verse in the song where he manages to relate the race struggles of African Americans to the trappings of wealth that often consume rappers, tying it all up with an allusion to the conspiracy that the government killed famed rapper and activist Tupac Shakur:

"Last time I checked we was racing with Marcus Garvey/On the freeway to Africa 'til I wreck my Audi/And I want everybody to view my autopsy/So you can see exactly where the government had shot me" (Lamar, “Hiii Power”).

He goes on to lament the struggles of fame, saying that he can now relate to Kurt Cobain and Lauren Hill, two musicians who famously exited the industry, albeit in very different ways. However, he ends the verse with a message of hope for African American communities: “Cause we've been off them slave ships/Got our own pyramids, write our own hieroglyphs” (Ibid.). His comparison of their new culture to that of ancient Egypt is notable because it was a great empire founded in the continent of Africa. This empire is distinct and, therefore, alien to those of the West, just as Kendrick wishes for black culture to be in the future. In addition, the reference to hieroglyphs instantiates Rose’s idea of a hidden transcript in Rap.

Lamar’s ability to add deep meaning to his lyrics is only part of why his “conscious” music became popular. Another significant factor in his success is how eloquent he is with his verses. He frequently changes the tone of his voice in different parts of his songs, especially between the chorus and full verses. However, his ability to be clearly understood by his listener remains. This clarity of speech is significant to his mass appeal not only because it allows the listener to be more engaged with the material, but because it helps him appeal to a wider, more diverse audience.
Now that it is understood why Lamar is so popular, we must also examine why his popularity is so important, and why the person he is allows him to be the champion of Rap that Tricia Rose desires. The first detail to be examined is his often mentioned message. He does not have a singular one, but instead uses individual songs, and even whole albums as a continuous narrative to speak on a variety of issues. These include, but are not limited to: race relations, institutionalized inequalities, economic anxiety, police brutality, and hyper-masculinity. Using his platform, he is able to bring these issues to the forefront of pop music. However, he is obviously not the only artist to do this. What makes him unique is how he breaks stereotypes while doing so. Lamar presents himself as a positive role model for his community and contemporaries, dispelling Rose’s initial problems with Rap artists. An example of this is in his song “Blacker The Berry”: “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015/Once I finish this witnesses will convey just what I mean”. The ending of the song he is referring to goes as follows: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street/when gang banging make me kill a n**** blacker than me?/Hypocrite!” These final lines refer to the death of black teenager Trayvon Martin and how the black community was devastated by it, yet Kendrick points out that these kinds of deaths happen daily within their community.

In addition, Kendrick Lamar raps about mental health and self-love, stigmatized topics in the hyper-masculine culture of Hip Hop. Part of this toxic culture exists due to colonialism: the bodies of black slaves became commodities subject to the White Gaze. The result was that “the Black body became a flesh-and-blood text upon which whites could project all of their fears, desires, and fantasies without the agony of guilt” (Yancy 2017, 154). Slaves were valued for their physical prowess. This translated into stereotypes being appropriated towards them. These stereotypes were sown into the hatred they faced in the form of racism that survived after emancipation. This translated to, “the hated body [becoming] hated, not just for the one who hates, but for the one who is hated” (Ahmed 2001, 358). Fast-forward to modern day, and African Americans, especially men, suffer from a culture of hyper-masculinity: “Prowess in sports, physical achievement in general and musicality are emphasized inordinately. Common role models depicted by the media such as Rap or Hip Hop stars and basketball players imply limited life choices” (Donaldson 2015).

As one of the few role models available to the youth in his community, Lamar sees a responsibility to be a positive role model. In “i”, he frequently repeats the line “I love myself” as a sort of fragmented hook. The song in general is about self-love, but he advocates more than that. He encourages his listeners to smile in spite of the whatever unstable environment they may be in. In addition, he makes himself vulnerable by talking about his own mental health issues: “I went to war last night (Night, night, night, night)/I've been dealing with depression ever since an adolescent”. This acknowledgment of the struggle of mental health is significant for black listeners, as mental health has long been stigmatized due by their hyper masculine communities. This is especially important for youth listeners, as this is their idol, after whom they can mold themselves, letting them know that anyone can suffer from these issues. As Lamar states earlier in the song, “Everybody lack confidence”.
Lamar has turned himself into an effective role model for his community, and the effects are tangible. Lamar has won eleven Grammys and achieved commercial success while remaining true to his goal of making “conscious” albums. He maintains a message in his music while quelling Tricia Rose’s fears of the problematic nature of Rap. His musical style paired with his abilities and his courage to speak on neglected subjects are what make him such an important figure in Rap and a balanced role model. This is not to say his lyrics never concern violence, money, or women, but what is important is that he is able to be critical of his community, and himself. That is what Rose was hoping to see from Rap: a conscious effort towards balance. Through his music Kendrick Lamar is letting his fellow African American’s know that “we gon’ be alright” (“Alright”).


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