

Hip-Hop and the Dilution of Resistance in the Mainstream

By

Amanda S. Wicks

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

December 15, 2018

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Ben Tran, Ph.D.

Vera Kutzinski, Ph.D

Kendrick Duckworth is just a child. On the cusp of being a pre-teen, he witnesses his first murder while visiting the burger stand in his Compton, California neighborhood. He sees the gun drawn, he hears the bullet release, he sees the body drop, and his life changes forever. Crime and poverty engulf his childhood as well as his mind. He tells the story of his teenage self succumbing to the pressures of those around him. He commits a robbery, he drowns himself in alcohol and drugs, and he starts on a path to continue the endless cycle of what happens in his hood: the good kids turn bad. To make a long story short, Kendrick breaks the cycle, but he had to find out the hard way. One day, smoking marijuana becomes a dangerous circumstance when he begins foaming at the mouth because it has been laced with cocaine. This is a turning point where he declares that the “good kid” will no longer be negatively pressured by the “mad city” and becomes an advocate for others to do the same. This is the narrative as told by Kendrick Lamar, the stage name for Kendrick Duckworth, in his sophomore album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Upon first listen, the narratives, the sonic ruptures that violently overturn the all too pervasive tales in Hip-Hop of misogyny and murder, and the declaration of freedom of self, told me that real Hip-Hop is being revived. When I sat down to write this essay, I was confident I could prove that mainstream Hip-Hop artists like Kendrick Lamar represent a shift in popular Hip-Hop. I wanted to prove that there are Hip-Hop artists that are reclaiming the genre from what some deem the “colonization of Hip-Hop.” Many Hip-Hop scholars have deemed capitalism the culprit for the negative shift of the genre. While this recurring claim is not wholly false, it does not consider the inevitable dilution of power that occurs when a counter-culture suddenly becomes mainstream.

Intervening in ongoing conversations among scholars of Hip-Hop, this essay seeks to tease out the tension between competing schools of thought regarding the state of Hip-Hop in the 21st century. Although concerns about Hip-Hop are not binary, in my research I have encountered scholarship that views Hip-Hop through two primary paradigms: on the one hand, there is a lens of nostalgia predicated upon an incessant desire for Hip-Hop to return to its roots with real — or conscious — Hip-Hop in the forefront. On the other hand, there are scholars that welcome Hip-Hop's robust transition towards the mainstream while maintaining its foundational value of being a form of expression meant to promote social and political change. Upfront, I admit that initially I belonged to the latter school of thought, however, I propose a more nuanced stance on mainstream's impact on Hip-Hop that problematizes and expands both perspectives. Kendrick Lamar's body of work as a Hip-Hop artist coupled with his mainstream success makes him the ideal candidate for this intervention. A close examination of his lyrics and visuals reveals a complex relationship between real Hip-Hop and mainstreaming that has yet to be uncovered in this manner. I will define the origins of Hip-Hop music, examine the transition that Hip-Hop made from being counter-cultural to mainstream, and use Kendrick's lyrics and performance to uncover how the opposing schools of thought are not fully engaging with the negative impact of mass-consumption of real Hip-Hop. Using Saidiya Hartman and bell hooks' scholarship, I probe the idea of the dilution of resistance (or, the real) when met with mainstream success, specifically through the lens of Kendrick Lamar.

What's the Real Deal?: Defining Hip-Hop

In order to understand the sentiments of the nostalgic scholars of Hip-Hop, one must understand Hip-Hop's beginnings. Hip-Hop was birthed out of a radical desire to express the realities of Black life in urban spaces. Since its inception in the late 1970s, there has been a notable shift away from rhymes about hanging with friends, being the best MC, and the struggles of poverty, for example, towards a more overtly violent and self-denigrating narrative. Nostalgic scholars are in search of a homecoming. At its core, Hip-Hop integrates expression through movement (break-dancing), expression through art (graffiti), expression through words (MCing), and expression through the manipulation of sound (DJing). Evidence of the influence of Hip-Hop culture can be found worldwide, but the pervasive nature of Hip-Hop has only heightened the culture's vulnerability to scrutiny. While most of the elements of Hip-Hop fly under the radar in regards to harsh criticism, MCing has been the focal point of debate. Hip-Hop fans have noted a negative shift in the content of the rhymes from the time of Hip-Hop's inception to now. In the beginnings of Hip-Hop, MCs, or rappers, sought to dismantle the oppressive nature of white America by speaking out—over a beat. In an effort not to misconstrue the origins of Hip-Hop music by only acknowledging the radical side of the culture, one must make note of the performance and entertainment aspects of Hip-Hop and how that was the sole purpose of the music's beginning. Eventually, MCs began to use that entertaining quality of the upbeat rhythms to present a message. "The ongoing crack epidemic, the 1992 L.A. riots, inner-city gang warfare have all been passionately analyzed and discussed through rap music. Small wonder that Public Enemy's Chuck D memorably referred to rap as 'black America's CNN,' an alternative news source for those shut out of mainstream discourse," exclaims author of *Other People's Property*:

A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America, Jason Tanz. What's important to note here is the emphasis on mainstream discourse. For years after its inception, Hip-Hop music remained at the margins of popular culture. At the time, almost all of the songs could be deemed "underground" since Hip-Hop music was not mass-marketed or mass-consumed. It was predominantly for the people, by the people. The fusion of fun, education, criticism of politics, and personal expression proved to be a soundboard for the seemingly voiceless people of the Black community in the 1980s. As the culture began to crawl its way to the surface of American culture, a shift in the production of the music itself occurred. The consequences of mass-consumption began to rear its ugly head.

Soul'd Out: Consequences of Mass Consumption

All these white folks chanting when I asked 'em where my niggas at?
Goin' crazy, got me goin' crazy, I can't get wit' that
Wonder if they know, I know they won't go where we kick it at
Ho, this shit ain't Gryffindor, we really killin', kickin' doors
Fight between my conscious, and the skin that's on my body
Man, I need to fight the power, but I need that new Ferrari
- "Lift Me Up," Vince Staples

The lyrics by Vince Staples serve as the epitome of the unsuspecting negative impact of the mainstreaming of Hip-Hop. The stories that once reflected the harsh realities of the rappers have been packaged and sold to the point that *all* demographics of the consumers of the genre feel as if they identify with the content whether it is a reflection of their own life or not. Here, Vince is expressing this sentiment as he points to the fact that his white fans, specifically, will attend his concerts and repeat his lyrics, down to the use of the n-word, despite not knowing much about the life he leads. Furthermore, Vince expresses the tension between wanting to be a

conscious rapper and potentially not making his ideal amount of money, or “selling out,” and doing what he needs to do for a few additional dollars because he “needs that new Ferrari.” Like Vince, many Hip-Hop artists were born and raised in incredibly crime and drug ridden communities. A prime example rests in the story of the most successful Hip-Hop artist, Jay-Z. His narrative began in the streets of Brooklyn as he grew up in the Marcy Projects and later became a drug dealer for the sake of financial stability. Today, Jay-Z is a millionaire businessman. The rags-to-riches stories of Hip-Hop artists in the past have heavily influenced newer artists as they strive to get to the status of someone like Jay-Z. The downfall of that goal, though, rests in the fact that countless rap artists succumb to mainstream media’s thirst for demeaning subject matters. Unfortunately, the feeding of the media as well as the artists’ bank accounts comes at the expense of an entire culture as the more overt violence and misogyny in Hip-Hop lyrics, even if they are birthed from real-life experience, has come to negatively shape the way that many people view the Black community as a whole. These effects of selling out are at the core of arguments made by scholars who believe that Hip-Hop has strayed too far from home. This school of thought believes that the monetary gain that artists are offered by becoming mainstream has led to the glorification of the money but the degradation of a people.

The influence of record labels are inevitable for any artist within any genre of music. Record label executives are hired to ensure that maximum profit is made from the careers of the artists. Simply stated, artists are commodities. That aspect is not a little known fact; however, for Hip-Hop artists, the artist-executive relationship seems to be more vital than ever. In the 1980s, during the early years of Hip-Hop, many artists could not get signed to a major record label. The major labels were not confident in the longevity of the genre. Consequently, artists, or other

businessmen and women in the community, were forced to market themselves. As Hip-Hop began to be noticed as a thriving, growing culture, other labels tried to monopolize the Hip-Hop music industry to profit from the genre's increasing popularity. "David Troop describes eager middle-aged entrepreneurs...who heard rap and, despite their disconnection from the core activities of the scene itself, were ideally positioned to witness its effects and gauge its commercial potential," says Forman (112). These eager men had no interest in maintaining authenticity. The primary goal was to make money. Although the dictation of the content of rap lyrics did not immediately happen as soon as the genre was discovered as a major opportunity for financial gain, the transfer from labels owned by the people who understood the culture to the labels owned by people who only understood the industry marked the beginning of the demise of authentic MCing. The record industry, driven by the aims of capitalism, can certainly be deemed as the puppet master in the downward spiral that Hip-Hop has experienced since the genre's more humble beginnings.

Consequently, the transfer of power has had countless adverse effects on the state of Hip-Hop. As previously stated, Hip-Hop was birthed for the sake of entertainment and blossomed into being a voice for the Black community. If the shifting focus towards glamour and money didn't kill Hip-Hop, it certainly put it on life support. For many, real Hip-Hop began to die the moment major record labels began to call the shots. While artists are able to bask in their riches because of their immense mainstream popularity, some of the same artists are degrading Hip-Hop's mother, the Black community, on the journey to wealth. In *The Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose eloquently sums up the current state of Hip-Hop by declaring, "HIP HOP IS IN A TERRIBLE CRISIS. Although its overall fortunes have risen sharply, the most commercially promoted and

financially successful hip hop—what has dominated mass-media outlets such as television, film, radio, and recording industries for a dozen years or so—has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangstas, pimps, and hoes” (1). The “caricature” that has been created is a gross representation of all that is within the Black community. What is being uplifted are the negative aspects of the community, and those representations of hypermasculinity, homophobia, hypersexuality, and violence seem to be what sells. Consequently, “what sells” is what many artists are willing to represent in exchange for monetary gain, which ultimately leads to the degradation of their own people.

One has to ask, though, why are the negative images more in demand than the positive? In an examination of the top consumers of Hip-Hop music, predominately young white males, the root of the demand can be uncovered. Forman sites the onset of the crossover of the genre when he declares, “Despite—or, perhaps more accurately, because of—exploitative tendencies among entertainment industry executives in this [1980s] period, the media diffusion of break-dancing and rap helped to establish new audiences in far-flung and, importantly, non-urban regions across the nation, further facilitating the music’s crossover” (146). Rap music had become accessible to any and everyone. The genre was no longer exclusive to the New York street corners. The young, middle-class, white males became able to tap into the culture without ever leaving the comfort of their suburban homes. In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, author Michael Kimmel conducts an extensive examination of the influences on males in their most formative years. In the chapter “Boys and Their Toys: Guyland’s Media,” Kimmel pinpoints the trends in the consumerism of young white males and their desire to be removed from the sanitized nature of their suburban lives. In an effort to transcend those barriers,

these males attempt to identify with a more marginalized group through Hip-Hop music. A young man is quoted as saying, “We spend out entire days trying to fit into a perfect little bubble. The perfect \$500,000 house. The perfect overscheduled kids... We love life, but we hate our lives. And so I think we identify more with hip-hop’s passion, anger and frustration than we do this dream world” (164). A statement that may be startling to some was not startling to Kimmel as he proceeds to support the young man’s statement with a few statistics. “According to researchers and music impresarios, between 70 percent and 80 percent of hip-hop consumers are white,” explains Kimmel (164). While these statistics may have changed since the publication of *Guyland* in 2008, white males nevertheless can be attributed to the rise of the music industry’s interest in pushing artists towards a more grimy expression of their lives.

It would be remiss of me to ignore the previously cited quote regarding the white male’s interest in Hip-Hop as it reveals more details about why the industry is in its current state and why the white male consumers’ “identification” with the music is problematic. Kimmel cites several top critics of the Hip-Hop industry in an explication of the issues surrounding this identification:

While young white guys also buy the majority of hard rock and heavy metal CDs, those same young white guys are in rather scarce supply at hip-hop concerts. Consumption of the inner city stops at the borders of the ghetto. As media critic Kevin Powell puts it, white fascination with hip-hop is ‘just a cultural safari for white people.’ It’s safe because you ‘can take it off. White hip-hop kids can turn their caps around, put a belt in their pants and go to the mall without being followed. (164)

This quote reveals the deeply rooted issue of the Hip-Hop industry. The white male's range of movement allows them to circumvent their position in what they claim to be bland suburban lives, become engulfed in a more lively subculture, and return as if nothing has occurred.

Listening to rap music is like losing oneself in a great novel. While the top consumers' desires to escape reality does not seem threatening to the Black community, one has to be reminded of the way that capitalism operates. The idea of supply and demand is in play here. The more these young white males desire to "identify" with the violence, misogyny, and hypermasculinity of Hip-Hop music, the more the record executives have to promote that type of music—all for the love of money.

The Hip-Hop industry is a billion dollar industry because of the commodification of the artists and the narratives that they often opt to present in their songs and supporting visuals. With that, Hip-Hop artists are often presented with ultimatums that leave them in extremely compromising positions. Present the type of music that sells, or be cut from the roster. Rose states, "As more profits are generated from various 'takes' on the black gangsta, hustler, and pimp, more artists are encouraged to redefine themselves to fit these molds" (143). Eric Watt refers to the idea of "spectacular consumption" as he further's Rose's claims of how the artist succumbs to the pressures of presenting a super macho, rag-to-riches story. Watts declares:

American popular culture is today constitutive of the vigorous exchange relations of spectacular consumption—an intensely overblown interactive consumer network where some black (and white) folk gladly sell their "souls" for a thrill ride towards ultimate juice and "manhood." Meanwhile, on the streets of the "United States Ghetto" rap artistry is celebrated as the profit-making industry that

it most assuredly is and hailed for allowing brothers and sisters in the ‘hood to share in the dissing of society’s repressive institutions and leadership...And so, perhaps it’s more meaningful to say that gangsta rap is neither fact, fiction, nor some exotic combination, but part of an *overdose of commercialized reality*...

(602)

Realities of the rapper from an impoverished urban culture were no longer asked to be presented in a way that could guide people down a more positive path. Instead, the request was for a “redefining” of who that artist is and what artist represents for the sake of contributing to the gains of the industry. The counterculture that sought to make public the degradation of the black community either has to “crossover” to meet the needs of the consumer as requested by the label, or starve. Ultimately, many consumers of Hip-Hop would agree that the culture that was birthed out of the need to rise above their subjugation through artistic expression has “sold out” to tend to the needs of their oppressor.

Ultimately, there is much at stake with the relinquishing of the power of the artist when confronted with the decision to uplift his or her people or put them down in an effort to make a dollar. For the rapper, what is at stake is their financial success. “They [record companies] want to sell records, and thus they promote, tailor, encourage, discourage, sign, and release artists based on two crucial factors: what they think will sell as many copies as possible and what they think won’t cause too much negative attention,” says Rose (143). Therefore, the artist, with hopes of gaining mass amounts of money and fame, must adhere to those requests or be dropped from the label. The words of Rose present a paradox, however. The record companies seek to release music that “won’t cause too much negative attention” but they are only sparing

themselves from said negative attention. What is ultimately released causes most of the negative attention to be placed on the community that is represented by those Hip-Hop artists—the Black community. What is *truly* at stake is the identity of that community.

In many conversations on the topic of Hip-Hop music, one of the most problematic attributes of Hip-Hop music is the overt misogyny that often permeate the lyrics. There are countless articles and books on Hip-Hop's relationship with misogyny and this is due to the fact that lyrics that demean women are not difficult to find within Hip-Hop and this has been the case for many years. Joan Morgan penned an incredibly passionate plea to Black women to stop accepting the title of “bitch” and “hoe” that are delivered through rap lyrics and music videos in her article “Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes.” Morgan deemed rap music as being “essential to the struggle against sexism because it takes us straight to the battlefield,” but, admittedly, Morgan neglects to acknowledge how misogynistic titles that have been placed on women, *all* women, have reached far beyond the realm of rap. At any given time of day, one can turn on the television and hear someone calling someone else a bitch. The term has become synonymous with “woman,” “friend,” “girl,” and “wife” among a host of other titles. There is no line drawn between any of these terms and it is being perpetuated in the media. While the widespread popularity of such rap lyrics may be a minor impetus for this onset, the desensitization of our society as a whole has become a major culprit. Still, Hip-Hop is taking much of the blame because of the pervasiveness of misogynistic lyrics, which does not help the case for the culture one day being reclaimed.

Aside from the false representations as perceived by those outside of the culture as well as the presentations of violence and misogyny, what is at stake is also the identity formations for

those who are consumers of the culture and have been overexposed to the negative images to the point that those images are internalized. The young Black boy sees the rapper with guns and money and has desires of achieving that same status. The little Black girl sees the girls in the video scantily clad and starts to believe that that is the way it is *supposed* to be. Unfortunately, those images are what young Black children rely on to shape their identity and their reality because there are almost no positive images, in which they can see their reflection, that are as salient as the negative images that are presented through Hip-Hop. Juan Williams speaks of the degradation of Hip-Hop music and states:

The consequence of black leaders failing to speak out against the corruption of rap for all those years resulted in real damage to the most vulnerable of black America—poor children, boys and girls often from broken homes. As a group, they were desperately searching for black pride in the sea of images being thrown at them on TV, on the radio, on the Internet, and in advertising. What those children found was a larger-than-life rapper who was materialistic, sexist, and violent, and used the word *nigger* as a casual description of all black people. (133)

Too much exposure to any one thing has a tendency to shape how someone thinks. Undeniably, any child that actively partakes in the consumption of Hip-Hop has been exposed to the negative portrayals of themselves, their fathers, their mothers, their brothers, and their sisters. The reality is that for every one Black child that has the luxury of having alternative positive role models in his or her life, there are potentially twenty other Black children that are forced to base their reality on what is presented to them. The implications of some Hip-Hop artists' negative

decisions span further than their personal success; they extend into the communities that they seek to uplift but have managed to degrade.

Because of the shift that occurred when Hip-Hop became popular, the differentiation between what is real Hip-Hop and what is not has become a necessity for many scholars. The overt declarations of misogyny and violence don't have a place in that category according to the nostalgic scholars. Today, on any given day, one can peruse social media and uncover the seemingly never-ending debate about what is allowed to be called real. Very often, declarations of Hip-Hop's death reverberate through scholarly articles and think-pieces. In defense of Hip-Hop's honor, many scholars, artists, and consumers of the music consistently attempt to resuscitate Hip-Hop by differentiating between what is popular and what is real. When they speak of real Hip-Hop, they often speak nostalgically of what they have deemed as the "better days." But what exactly *is* real Hip-Hop? In *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism*, Charise Cheney points to the "golden age of hip hop." She notes that during that time (the 1980s and early 1990s) the work by "raptivists" (defined as artists who fuse music and politics) could be seriously investigated and one could easily uncover strivings for inspiration and empowerment for Black youth. Cheney reflects on the scholarship about rap music that precedes her work:

I look beyond uncritical, superficial, and apologist scholarship to place rap music in its proper historical context, addressing it as both a black American and a diasporic cultural and political phenomenon...as such, rap music is a valuable tool that enables the scholar or African American popular/political culture to observe and assess some of the beliefs, values, worldview, and aspirations of post-Civil

Rights black youth. This is especially true for the golden age of rap nationalism, a period in hip-hop history that preceded the mass commodification of rap music.

Cheney first defines what she deems as real, then reminds the reader that it can't be found in mass-consumed Hip-Hop. According to Cheney, real Hip-Hop music has the potential to truly make a positive impact on Black youth, but it would be nearly impossible to discover that type of rap music in the mainstream. Here, crying out for the glory days of the genre is coupled with a sense of disdain for its present. Quite frankly, for Cheney, real Hip-Hop doesn't live on the radio and her sentiments are not rare. Despite the "selling out" of artists being pervasive, there are outliers who actively seek to counteract this narrative by presenting a more well-rounded, honest depiction of their realities. Kendrick Lamar is one.

Resisting the Narrative: Kendrick's Pushback

If I told you that a flower bloomed in a dark room, would you trust it?
I mean, you need to hear this
Love is not just a verb, it's you lookin' in the mirror
Love is not just a verb, it's you lookin' for it, maybe
Call me crazy, we can both be insane
A fatal attraction is common, and what we have common is pain
- "Poetic Justice," Kendrick Lamar

These lyrics are about Sherane, Kendrick's love interest in the plot of *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Sherane was birthed into pain and suffering, just as Kendrick had been. She was from the same mad city and it manifests itself in this song. Sherane's outward beauty and all that she presented to the world simply masked the ugliness of her life's story. She managed to "bloom in a dark room," but had no self-love, as she had little to no light poured into her life. He wants to assure her that she can overcome. In the analysis of the lyrics of this song on genius.com,

Kendrick declares, “I don’t want it to be one-sided. I want you to feel my perspective but at the same time know where she is coming from. She may come from a broken home where she wasn’t taught actual home training and dealing with men...I never wanted to completely slander her all the way down.” Kendrick’s intentionality with regards to showing both his perspective and Sherane’s demonstrates a shift in the representation of women in mainstream Hip-Hop music. “Poetic Justice,” a song about a scarred woman facing her past and going forth to actively love herself, witnessed widespread commercial success. He could have chosen to share Sherene’s story by only presenting her negative actions but he chose to explore the forces behind her actions as well. This is Hip-Hop. This is Kendrick’s reinforcement of a shift away from presentations of misogyny that have been deemed as a norm across the genre. While there are countless Hip-Hop artists who have expressed similar, very real representations of women in their songs, only a select few of those songs have graduated to a level of success that can be considered widespread. This is just one example of how the commercial success of *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* seemingly destabilizes impressions of violence and misogyny when mainstream Hip-Hop is referenced, as well as destabilizes the perpetuation of the negative stereotypes of the Black community that tend to follow those impressions. Kendrick’s body of work lends to the latter school of thought, reflecting the possibility of being both mainstream and real.

Kendrick’s second studio album *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* sold over one million copies to-date. What is essential to know about Kendrick, however, is that his success occurred before he was able to get his music distributed by major record label Interscope Records. While *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* was distributed by Interscope and proved to be far more successful than his previous studio album, *Section.80*, that success can undeniably be attributed to the buzz that he

created as an artist among the consumers of Hip-Hop music with his mixtapes and independently distributed first studio album. *Section.80* is steeped with words that challenge the psyche of any listener as he speaks out about the evils of abusive relationships, poverty, and the man's struggle to *be* a man against all of life's adversities. One of the album's top songs was "HiiiPower." Kendrick speaks of rising above the current state of the Black community and advises people to write their own stories. Kendrick declares, "And everything on TV just a figment of imagination/ I don't want plastic nation, dread like a Haitian/ While you mothafuckas waiting, I be off the slave ship/ Building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs" ("HiiiPower"). These lines represent the current struggle of the Black community and the solution to that problem. He advocates for writing one's own history and rejecting the narratives that have been constructed for them. He advocates for the real. Kendrick speaks candidly but positively. His second album, *good kid. m.A.A.d. city*, continues his trajectory of presenting more conscious messages than his counterparts in the industry. With these releases, he solidifies himself as an artist who resists and transcends the historically negative demands of the mainstream.

In the article "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music," Crystal Belle questions if there will ever be a world where conscious rappers can have their cake and eat it, too. She points to the lack of mainstream success for somewhat the underground rap group Dead Prez (who would be considered "conscious" rappers), as she posits:

Ideally, there is room within mainstream hip-hop for voices like Dead Prez, but that is not always proven to be the case. How can mainstream and underground hip-hop merge for the betterment of Black communities and a more inclusive

understanding of Black masculinity that does not sexualize and degrade women and indict gay men? The answer to this question is vital for moving forward with a more positive depiction of hip-hop that can potentially promote social, economic, and racial change in this nation. (299)

Artists like Kendrick Lamar seem to be the answer to her question. Not only has Kendrick sold millions of albums (repeatedly), but he has become the first non jazz or classical artist to receive the Pulitzer Prize for his album *DAMN*. Belle had not yet witnessed the bridging of the authenticity of the underground with the mass-marketed impact. What is important to note about Belle's dream of this marriage, however, is that she views this coupling as a way to promote "racial change in this [United States] nation." This dream, while seemingly being manifested through Kendrick Lamar, is met with a naïveté when conversations about the potential impact of the success of a conscious rapper is brought to the forefront. Is Kendrick's potential for change as a mainstream conscious rapper as powerful as one may believe?

Concerts and Red Flags: Dilution of Resistance

I am an avid concert-goer, so when I attend any concert, I arrive anticipating moments that I wouldn't be able to achieve alone in my room. There's a magical feeling that comes over me when my favorite lines of a song are being repeated in unison by thousands of people. When I attended Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN*. Tour in Los Angeles, I was ecstatic to hear the lyrics from his song "m.A.A.d. city" shouted from the rooftop. I was disappointed when the background music stopped to allow for an unobstructed rapping of the words "Where you from, my nigga?" and the sea of white people happily sang along. That highly anticipated moment ultimately made

me uncomfortable, but it forced me to wonder if the primary consumers of his music ever actually *listen* to what he's saying. Or, has Kendrick's music been reduced to bass drops and cool chants? This conundrum led me to question the true impact of his "consciousness" within the mainstream, ultimately questioning the negative inevitabilities of mainstream success.

Considering the reception and dissemination of Kendrick's work, a more nuanced understanding of Hip-Hop's mainstream transition will be revealed, complicating the arguments made by both schools of thought.

On the surface, Kendrick is subverting the systems of power that many Hip-Hop scholars claim to be the culprit for the current negative state of Hip-Hop. Ted Swedenburg speaks of the efforts made by some conscious rappers to maintain their authenticity while operating within capitalism, which seems to accurately reflect Kendrick's position. Referring to rappers like Rakim and groups like Public Enemy, Swedenburg notes that there is a certain kind of intentionality these rappers have with regards to the content of their music. He states:

"Conscious" rappers also aren't selling out because their strategy is to deploy the market to disseminate crucial political messages to the widest possible audience....they critique mass culture from within...Rappers play on capital's insatiable demand for new, sensational, and different products, a need that is partially responsible for turning 'otherness' and 'ethnicity' into the latest hip commodities...They avoid mainstreaming, in part because the novelty and thrill of hard rap stems from its up-yours, fuck y'all attitude. Rappers' posture of menacing danger appears mysteriously cool and soulful to the white listener, while sending a chilly frisson down his/her spine; whereas for the young black,

the cold scariness of rap is merely realism. Therefore rap sells in both markets.

And because a hostile attitude is marketable and commercially successful, rappers can retain control of the message and keep it undiluted. (583)

Swedenburg suggests that if done with intentionality, Hip-Hop artists can simultaneously fulfill the record label's need to commodify their "otherness" and critique mass culture. However, one has to question who the target audience of the critique is as well as the impact of that critique when it's embedded in the same hostility that is in demand. The delivery of the message may be undiluted, but the reception of the message certainly is. The selling of the records in "both markets" is heralded by Swedenburg as an achievement. For him, it proves that rappers can live between being a part of a counter-culture and being mainstream and still be deemed successful in retaining their authenticity. This, however, is complicated by the fact that the presentation of their authentic selves, and the pain that accompanies those identities, becomes devalued when met with the nature of the mainstream.

In the 2007 article "Debating Hip-Hop: Does Gangsta Rap Harm Black Americans?," Peter Katel speaks of the few Hip-Hop artists who do not push the negative messages of violence and misogyny and points to these mainstream inevitabilities: "Other critics within the hip-hop world draw a line between mass-marketed rap and what they consider the real thing. They point to independent-label rappers who disdain the gangsta material, as well as a handful of so-called 'conscious' performers who've broken through the mainstream with songs that reject celebrations of violence and exploitations," declares Katel (532). For Katel, as long as the artists were being backed by major record labels, they had been subjected to the coercion of selling their pain. Katel also notes that there have been "conscious" rappers who have broken through

the mainstream and Kendrick Lamar fits perfectly within this classification. However, when considering not just the content and character of Kendrick but the reception of his music, one can uncover why being mass-marketed has negatively impacted Hip-Hop. When music is mass-consumed, the reception of the messages become susceptible to alternative, sometimes contradictory interpretations; the messages are often lost in the instrumentals; the artists themselves become subjugated by mainstream ideals, and potential messages of resistance become diluted due to mass dissemination. These factors contribute to the weakening of the impact of the Hip-Hop artists' work regardless of the intended message.

To dissect the tension between an artists' message and its reception, I turn to Stuart Hall's reception theory. Reception theory proposes that the sender is not solely responsible for how the encoded message is received by the audience. The audience plays an active role in the decoding of the message, thus creating a myriad of interpreted meanings of the text. In the article "Encoding/Decoding," Hall specifies three hypothetical interpretative codes, or positions, for the reader of a text: dominant reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading. Hall defines dominant reading as the audience's acceptance of the text's code and adoption of the preferred reading of the message. Negotiated reading occurs when the audience partly shares the text's code and the audience broadly accepts the preferred reading but partially resists the acceptance of the message. Lastly, oppositional reading occurs when the audience completely rejects the text's code and denies the preferred reading (114). Within these definitions, Hall speaks of a "text code." The text's code refers to the cultural position of the author of the work. When the audience shares the code of the sender, as receivers, they will be more susceptible to accepting the message. Although the codes are in terms of televisual discourse in "Encoding/Decoding,"

the foundation of the theory focuses on the interpretation of media from a cultural standpoint, thus being applicable beyond televisual communication. Through the frame of reception theory a discussion of Kendrick's music and its subsequent reception on part of the mainstream consumer sheds light on the tension between resistance and mainstreaming with Hip-Hop music.

As we begin to examine the work of Kendrick, I should first note the type of hostility that is presented by Kendrick and other "conscious" rappers is not the same hostility that is presented in the Hip-Hop music that is constantly being scrutinized for being too violent. Hostility is not only in the lyrics, but in the sound. Swedenburg observes:

Master practitioners of 'serious' rap like Public Enemy as well as 'hard' gangster rappers like Ice-T, NWA, the Geto Boys, and Schooly D, produce mixes so hard and slammin' that the listener cannot mentally pick apart their elements. One simply *feels* the razor's edge of sound, produced by a tumultuous amalgam of dentist drills, Uzi blasts, squealing tires, boomin' bass, and video game bleeps. And what one apprehends through hardcore mixes, as tactile and auditory sensation, is the din of urban hell or (to cite Public Enemy) "the hour of chaos," "the edge of panic." (581)

These words serve as an eloquent summation of the sensory impact of many Hip-Hop songs, specifically a song like "m.A.A.d. city." The song begins without an instrumental. The lyrics "If Pirus and Crips all got along/ They'd probably gun me down by the end of the song/ Seems like the whole world goes against me/ Every time I'm in the streets I hear...." The song then erupts in the yelling of "YAWK! YAWK! YAWK! YAWK!" followed by an intense bass drop. The sudden sonic rupture of the "yawk" and the bass drop are enough to grab the attention of any listener.

This hostility does not necessarily represent violence against Kendrick, but is a violent attack on the ears of the consumer, demanding attention. While incorporating these types of drops into songs powerfully jars and engages the listener, this practice allows the sound to potentially overshadow the message. As the hard-hitting bass and the heavy-handed melody of a violin persist throughout the song, it would be easy for one to hardly listen to the narrative of Kendrick's life-changing moments that brings him to a non-hostile place of self-awareness. With the presentation of sounds that mirror the hard-core rap that has been commodified over the years, the thirst for Kendrick's music still primarily rests in a thirst for an alternative to a standard, potentially mundane life. A problem with the intense instrumentals, however, rests in the fact that music with those hostile attributes can easily be reduced to *just* the bass and heart-pounding cadences. When considered through the lens of reception theory, many listeners may experience a negotiated reading of the music. There may be an acceptance of the message as presented by the heavy-hitting beats, but a rejection of the message provided by the lyrics. If the listener is not engaged with the music with the intent to truly listen to the words, the lyrics become nearly inconsequential and any message of resistance becomes secondary.

Furthermore, no matter the content, no matter the artist, Black performance in the mainstream is consistently vulnerable to the subjugation of Black bodies in the hands of white mainstream consumption. Kendrick Lamar as an example, his extreme mainstream success as a Black man from Compton, U.S.A. has placed him in a vulnerable position spawning from the subjugation of his being by the mainstream consumer. Although widespread success is the goal because it typically equates to accrual of wealth, the more his body is disseminated, the more subjected he becomes to co-optation and dilution of self. He becomes less of a conscious being

that can function with full autonomy and more of a commodity at the mercy of the consumer.

When Kendrick releases a song about how “all my life I has to fight” but “we gon’ be alright,” he is expressing his suffering and overcoming susceptible to subjugation on part of the people who don’t share the text’s code (“Alright”). The “we” is not collective; therefore, there is ample opportunity for complete dismissal. The consequence is an oppositional reading because the preferred message is wholly rejected. However, the song is still supported due to the entertainment value, which is sufficient for many consumers.

Saidiya Hartman’s scholarship in *Scenes of Subjection* gets to the core of this conundrum. Hartman’s notions of amusements with regards to slave owners finding joy in the drinking and dancing with the slaves inverts the idea of what would be considered “fun” for the slave, who is under the thumb of the master. While I by no means want to equate the entertainment industry to the cruelties of slavery, Hartman’s ideas shed light on the way that the white consumers and record executives dictate what is being produced as well as find a strange sense of enjoyment in the conflation of the the artists’ joy with the artists’ pain. Hartman notes, “Thus, as I have tried to suggest, the fixation on the slave’s ‘good times’ conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and black subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude” (25). The joyful acts of song and dance are solely for the consumption of the master despite the appearance of authentic jollity on part of the slave. The subject continues to dance in a joyful manner, but the joy is stripped away by their position of subjection. They are not singing and dancing because they are happy—they are singing and dancing because it is a requirement. Hartman continues, “Above all, the simulated jollity and coerced festivity of the slave trade and the instrumental recreations of plantation management document the investment in and obsession with ‘black enjoyment’ and

the significance of these orchestrated amusements as part of a larger effort to dissimulate the extreme violence of the institution and disavow the pain of captivity” (23). If one is entertaining and appears to be happy, then the pain of their livelihood becomes subdued to the master (or consumer). This phenomenon, however, is not solely for the dissimulation of the master. The slave’s fun and frolic becomes a way to cope with the pain; therefore, it is not a method of getting *over* the suffering, but a way to get *through* the suffering. Hartman’s notions of the conflation of the pain and joy of the slave can be mapped on to Kendrick Lamar’s visual for his song “Alright” and can reveal how her ideas of the master-slave relationship is similar to the manner in which real Hip-Hop can be viewed by the mainstream.

The visual for “Alright” begins with images of police brutality, drug and alcohol abuse, and complete despair. With these images at the forefront, Kendrick narrates his story of destruction and constantly having to run from the evils of Lucifer. The opening sequence concludes with a bullet from the gun of a police officer being discharged, suggesting the killing of a Black man. Quickly, the violent, hard-hitting image transitions to a view of the city of Los Angeles, quiet and still. Then, in another sudden turn, the focus becomes Kendrick and his friends in the car drinking and enjoying themselves to the sounds of Kendrick bragging about his greatness as a Hip-Hop artist. The camera zooms out to reveal four police officers carrying Kendrick’s vehicle. The transition serves as a buffer between the violence and chaos of the initial images in the video and the control and jollity that Kendrick has harnessed despite the negative experiences. At this point, the “black enjoyment” ensues. As Kendrick declares that his life has been a struggle but “we gon’ be alright,” he is doing donuts in his vehicle around three black figures dancing on top of a police car. The trajectory of the video continues on the path of

celebration and solidarity as a Black community. In the video, dancing is the primary form of this expression, which aligns with Hartman's notions of the negative implications of "black fun and frolic." The despair of the video becomes secondary at this point, not only because the song is about perseverance, but because the upbeat nature of the song commands the listener to become more upbeat and happier as well. Kendrick's joy despite his hardship may give the impression that he is dancing because he has gotten *over* his despair, but in reality, dancing is how he gets *through* his despair. Suffering is diminished and jollity is magnified.

Although Hartman's assertions speak to a more socially and politically damaging form of co-optation than what mainstream Hip-Hop artists may undergo, when Black artists become more and more invested in mainstream success, there is a cost whether they are aware of it or not. The entertainment aspect of Hip-Hop culture has been packaged and mass-marketed above all else. The exciting narratives, the catchy dances, and the invigorating beats are drawn to the forefront while the artists' messages and humanity are suppressed. The common narratives of suffering and perseverance become secondary (at best) under the guise of being entertaining and making as much money as possible for the company and the artist. To be successful to the dominant culture is to be a part of the disavowing of your pain for the sake of financial gain.

In addition to the subjugation, the dissemination of self on part of the artist further dilutes the message that is being presented. In her essay "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," bell hooks speaks directly to the negative impact of simply being a part of the mainstream as a Black artist as she states:

All African-American engagement in the performing arts, whether through the staged performance of poetry and plays, or through rap, risks losing its power to

disrupt and engage with specific locations from which it emerges via a process of commodification that requires reproduction in a marketable package. As mass product, live performance can rarely address the local in a meaningful way, because the primacy of addressing the local is sacrificed to the desire to engage a wider audience of paying consumers. (215)

hooks believes that in order to have a true impact, one must be more localized in their efforts, not simply for the sake of proximity, but for the sake of not being subjected to co-optation by the prerequisites for mass-consumption. What is a “marketable package?” In order to be received by the masses, one must be able to relate to the masses. This may come in the form of watering down messages or a drastic change in one’s image, but generally, it means appealing to a wide range of people by adhering to current trends. Currently, the commodification of resistance has placed Kendrick’s music at the forefront. This trend has helped elevate Kendrick to a higher status than the many Hip-Hop artists that have preceded him and has even afforded him the honor of becoming the first non-classical or jazz artist to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, she expands her ideas of the dangers of the widespread dissemination of self as she notes, “Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (31). Once again referring to the moment at the Kendrick Lamar concert that left me confused and frustrated, Kendrick’s message seemed to be ahistorical to many of the concert-goers. When the non-Black consumer engages with Kendrick’s overt commentary on the Black experience, it is

often met with a lack of context because the context must be learned outside of his lyrics. For hooks, Kendrick's consciousness, while being a positive step for Hip-Hop, would not be able to engender or sustain legitimate political or social change because of his widespread reach. Not only is his music constantly being reproduced, but so is his image and his message, which ultimately dilutes its power. As more and more people purchase his ideas of resistance and freedom, as more and more people buy into the commercial packaging of his being, the messages' separation from the original sites of oppression evokes a less socially impactful response.

We Gon' Be Alright?: The Future of Resistance and Hip-Hop

It seems that Hip-Hop is inevitably at the mercy of the mainstream consumer regardless of the message that is being presented. Whether it's the real Hip-Hop with "conscious" ideals and authentic, well-rounded narratives like that of Kendrick Lamar, or it's the corporately coerced misogynistic and violent narratives, as long as Hip-Hop is considered a part of the mainstream, the resistance factor will be diluted. With the understanding that it would be nearly impossible to completely free Hip-Hop from co-optation, the question becomes, "Where do we go from here?" Hip-Hop seems to be stuck between a rock and a hard place because there is no "going back" despite people's incessant wish for the culture to return to its roots. Hip-Hop is engrained in American society as the culture can be found everywhere from commercials to high fashion. The former counter-culture is now woven into the culture of America in general. Even with artists like Kendrick Lamar who have found themselves at the center of the mainstream while still presenting a "conscious" message, there is no exemption from the negotiated or

oppositional reading of the messages via the lyrics. Scholars have placed the work of making Hip-Hop great again in the hands of the artists themselves, but there must be a realization that the current state of the genre is the result of mainstreaming. What that means for the future of Hip-Hop, I cannot say. But it does allow for a more nuanced examination of the work that Hip-Hop does, or does not do, when considering the social impact of the culture across the decades.

Works Cited

- Belle, Crystal. "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2014, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0021934714528953>. Accessed 25 April 2018.
- Cheney, Charise. *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism*. NYU, 2005.
- Forman, Murray. *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Wesleyan University, 2002.
- Hartman, Saidya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University, 1997.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. Eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980, pp. 107-116.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South Send Press, 1992.
- "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition." *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, edited by Catherine Ugwu, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1995, pp.210-221.
- "Jay-Z." *forbes.com*. Forbes, Inc., n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2014.
- Jones, D. Marvin. *Fear of A Hip-Hop Planet: America's New Dilemma*. Praeger, 2013.
- Katel, Peter. "Debating Hip-Hop: Does Gangsta Rap Harm Black Americans?" *CQ Researcher* 17.23 (2007): 529-552. Web. 1 Apr 2014.
- Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. HarperCollins, 2008.

- Lamar, Kendrick. "Alright." *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.
- "HiiiPower." *Section.80*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011.
- "m.A.A.d. city." *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012.
- "Poetic Justice." *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012.
- "Poetic Justice- Kendrick Lamar." *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-poetic-justice-lyrics>.
- Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why it Matters*. Basic Books, 2008.
- Staples, Vince. "Lift Me Up." *Summertime '06*. Def Jam, 2015.
- Swedenburg, Ted. "Homies in the 'Hood: Rap's Commodification of Insubordination." *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, Routledge, 2004, pp. 579-591.
- Tanz, Jason. *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America*. Bloomsbury, 2007.
- Williams, Juan. *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America*. Crown Publishers, 2006.