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Abstract

This paper provides a context and then analysis of Kendrick Lamar's albums as they relate to advocating and affecting social change. The purpose is to show through example how hip-hop (and music in general) can act as an avenue towards creating positive change for oppressed peoples.

Keywords

Kendrick Lamar, Hip-hop, Rap, Social justice, Music, Africana studies

Disciplines

African American Studies | Ethnomusicology | Musicology | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

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In 1982 Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released their single “The Message.” This would be the first time that the public would be introduced to the idea of hip-hop music being used as a political and social device towards cultural change. Previously, rap had lived largely as a music for partying, with lyrics focused on parties and boasting. However, the release of “The Message,” while seeming outdated now (especially considering the strong homophobic undertones), would inspire many groups and individuals, creating the idea of the conscious rapper (Miyakawa, 2017). This archetype within rap has been taken on by many great artists, such as Public Enemy, Common, Mos Def, Immortal Technique, Talib Kweli, and others. These themes have also found their way into the work of more mainstream artists such as Tupac Shakur, Eminem, and Kanye West as well (White, 2011). Kendrick Lamar, a rapper who has been rising in prominence since 2010, is a continuation of this lineage of conscious rappers, taking his music into new directions and forms, expanding the genre as a whole (Faraji, 2016).

There are a number of vital aspects of Lamar’s music that this paper will address, but most prominent among them, and core to his music, is his striking use of narrative that likens his music to many great literary works through his use of allegory and parable across short and extended narrative arcs (Faraji, 2016). Lamar has also, especially in his newer releases, made music that pays homage to the heritage on which he builds his message, using the motifs and sounds of jazz, funk, fusion and soul to create a sound palate from which his music is drawn

from. Most relevant of all, however, is the messages that Lamar shares with his music and performances (often through introspection) and how they fit into the historical and contemporary narrative of black American culture and social action.

Before addressing these topics, it is still necessary to present a more complete background: hip-hop as a genre came into being during the 1970s, first as a type of dance music made at house parties in New York. DJs would play the “break” section of earlier funk tunes, where the instrumentation would usually be cut down to just the drums and bass (the groove of the music) for a section. These DJs would play the record back so that the break would be extended for people to dance to (hence the term break-dancing); as time went on, the DJ and other party-goers started talking over this section, making their speech more rhythmic and rhyme heavy over time until that became a key feature of the music itself (Miyakawa, 2017).

This music eventually made its way out of dance parties and was recorded and distributed, leading to a greater codification of the genre and its eventual growth into the mainstream during the 1980s (Miyakawa, 2017). This growth also led to the establishment of many different sub-genres (such as the aforementioned conscious/political rap), the most dominant of which was “gangsta rap,” a style at the forefront of the mainstream hip-hop sound throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. This sound was mainly established in the west coast by groups such as N.W.A., based in Compton, who would draw their material from their own lives and surroundings to create semi-fictional depictions of their realities (Jeffries, 2011). A large portion of this music then, just by virtue of its creation and sometimes through purposeful choice, included heavy social and political messages often protesting police violence and the treatment of impoverished peoples in the United States.

The greatest distinction that can be drawn between this music and political rap lies in the intention of creation- while gangsta rap was often produced in order to portray the realities that people faced, political rap was more explicitly meant to say something *about* those realities and what should be done to alleviate them (Krims, 2000). However, this line becomes quite blurry with many artists such as Tupac Shakur that would often include strongly politicized messages, even in songs that were not meant for that purpose on a surface level. An aspect of this music that has diminished greatly through the past decades is the glorification of violence and gang life, and the necessary boastfulness inherent to this glorification- with rare exception, artists today are not releasing music similar in nature to Tupac's "Hit 'Em Up." Though beefs and feuds obviously still exist, the nature of conflict has largely moved away from threats of violence (in large part due to the tragic deaths of many artists such as Tupac, The Notorious B.I.G., Proof, and others), which is important to setting the stage of Kendrick Lamar's growth as an artist (White, 2011).

Kendrick Lamar has worked as a sort of out-growth of the gangsta rap scene of Compton's past, re-invigorating the classic west coast sound, which would seem natural considering that he grew up in Compton. However, he combines these elements with quite a few of the more East coast political and social elements, creating a music that traces its lineage strongly in both the history of conscious rappers (Common, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Lauryn Hill, etc.) and that of the west coast gangsta rap scene (Tupac, Snoop Dogg, N.W.A., etc.) which he is using in an effort to raise social awareness within his community and to help those on the outside better understand the forces that created the environment that he grew up in (Dover & Pozdol, 2016). A large part of doing this for Lamar was that he needed to make personal changes in order to realize his value as a role model for positivity with his growing fame. It is clear looking at the

progression of Lamar's material that he has made purposeful decisions to affect the ethos of his music and further emphasize the importance of black culture and history in his music to create music that affirms the value of black Americans and their culture.

The most prominent way that this is accomplished, as alluded to earlier, is the use of narrative in his discography. The album where this is most obviously present is his major label debut: 2012's *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, in which the whole of the album is actually a large (fictionalized) self-biographical narrative, where each song acts as an episode in the greater story. Although this album is not as strongly or directly political as later offerings, there are still many prescriptive and descriptive accounts given regarding social and political issues. One of these highlights is the song "The Art of Peer Pressure," in which Lamar gives an account of a night out with "the homies," in which his personal sense of morality and nature is eschewed when he faces the social pressures prevalent within his group of friends. This juxtaposition between what the narrator says is his normal state of being ("I'm usually drug-free," "Really I'm a peacemaker," "I never was a gangbanger") and his actions within the narrative play at the core idea of the album, where-in the "good kid" is corrupted and transformed by the "m.A.A.d. city" (Blum, 2016) (Lamar, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*, 2012).

Situations of similar ilk, of course, happen in the real world as well, and having the perspective of the "good kid" is illuminating to those who wish to help resolve these deeply rooted cultural issues that harvest violence and poverty. Thus, Lamar's work has acted as a sort of spring-board for many thoughts and theories regarding education for at-risk students, especially those who also live in districts with high levels of poverty and violence (Rashid, 2016). Teachers often utilize the music itself in the classroom so that students connect to the lyrics and understand the message that Lamar is embedding into his music, so that they may

work to better improve their situation with this knowledge (Love, 2016). Lamar himself has encouraged this through visits to schools to help students better explore and understand their own situation and strategies to work towards and reach their own personal goals. These often focus on identifying the pit-falls that lie in front of the students, so that they can avoid situations or behaviors that might set themselves up for failure (Dover & Pozdol, 2016).

This idea is expanded upon further in the track “Institutionalized” from Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* to make the point that growing up in low income communities instills people with habits that tend to have a negative impact on their ability to sustain success, even after achieving it. This demonstrates a part of the systemic oppression that hugely effects much of the black population in the United States.

“Institutionalized” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*

What money got to do with it
 When I don't know the full definition of a rap image?
 I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it
 Institutionalized, I keep runnin' back for a visit
 Hol' up
 Get it back
 I said I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it
 Institutionalized, I could still kill me a nigga, so what?

.....
 And once upon a time in a city so divine
 Called West Side Compton, there stood a little nigga
 He was 5 foot something, dazed and confused
 Talented but still under the neighborhood ruse
 You can take your boy out the hood but you can't take the hood out the homie
 Took his show money, stashed it in the mozey wozey

(Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015)

Lamar directly questions what the value of wealth is when someone does not have the background and education needed (and that, by law, is meant to be provided to everyone) in order to actually participate in society the same way that a member of the

middle or upper class normally could. This plays directly into an overarching theme in his music which is the examination of the state of black lives within the United States, referencing both the problems faced by African-Americans, what the causes of those problems are, and possible solutions- both from an individual and societal standpoint. Lamar's work addressing these topics shows how he has taken hold as a rapper whose lyrical content is strongly associated with conscious hip-hop, even while his musical aesthetic tends to lean more towards gangsta and trap. This is especially true on *Section.80* and his newest release, *DAMN.*, which both display this meshing of traditionally dissimilar aesthetic and content quite clearly (Dover & Pozdol, 2016).

Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* also drew upon and affirmed black musical history more directly within the music itself, taking strong influences from jazz and funk music in order to create fusion album that served as a large departure from his earlier sound. The album made heavy use of instruments traditionally found in jazz, with special focus on the saxophone and jazz drumming. One track in particular, "For Free? (Interlude)," in essence amounts to Lamar rapping over a jazz combo, with the lyrics focusing on the cultivation of products of black labor by the United States. Lamar also frames this through a metaphor criticizing the fetishizing of the black man, rapping "this dick ain't free" (Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015). This criticism of America appropriating the fruits of black labor to their own purposes (whether this be physical product like cotton, or cultural product such as jazz), while simultaneously affirming the heritage of black music by basing his aesthetic around the most storied form of black musicianship creates a powerful message that is present throughout much of the album and contributed to its extremely positive critical praise.

Another standout track of the album is the very first, “Wesley’s Theory” which begins with by sampling Boris Gardiner’s “Every Nigger is a Star,” from the film of the same title. This, in similar fashion, is meant as a statement of affirmation claiming that even without money or traditional success, every black person is a star and has inherent value that is worth celebration (Blum, 2016). Lamar continues this theme by providing his own personal experience as he gains fame and riches, questioning whether he will stay true to his original intentions or succumb to the temptations provided to him by this power. This question is, at heart, the thesis of *To Pimp a Butterfly*: that when a person manages to leave the “ghetto,” (breaks out of their cocoon and becomes the butterfly) are they no better if they let themselves get pimped (used by their industry for the sake of money and fame), thus perpetuating the cycle they escaped by promoting the very things (such as drugs and gang violence) that they fought against? Kendrick then goes on to proclaim that even in the process of getting pimped, one is still likely to face the consequences of oppression (“I’ll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five”), due to the systematic failings to which they are subject (the earlier mentioned institutionalization).

This argument is most strongly shown by a simple reading of the lyrics themselves, specifically the introduction and Lamar’s second verse of the song.

“Wesley’s Theory” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*

Hit me!
 When the four corners of this cocoon collide
 You’ll slip through the cracks hopin’ that you’ll survive
 Gather your wit, take a deep look inside
 Are you really who they idolize?
 To pimp a butterfly

 What you want? You a house or a car?
 Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
 Anythin’, see, my name is Uncle Sam, I’m your dog
 Motherfucker, you can live at the mall
 I know your kind (That’s why I’m kind)

Don't have receipts (Oh, man, that's fine)
 Pay me later, wear those gators
 Cliché, then say, "Fuck your haters"
 I can see the borrow in you, I can see the dollar in you
 Little white lies, but it's no white-collar in you
 But it's whatever though because I'm still followin' you
 Because you make me live forever, baby
 Count it all together, baby
 Then hit the register and make me feel better, baby
 Your horoscope is a gemini, two sides
 So you better cop everything two times
 Two coupes, two chains, two C-notes
 Too much ain't enough, both we know
 Christmas, tell 'em what's on your wish list
 Get it all, you deserve it Kendrick
 And when you hit the White House, do you
 But remember, you ain't pass economics in school
 And everything you buy, taxes will deny
 I'll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five

(Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly, 2015)

The theme of commercialization of the artist and racist stereotypes about the way that black artists spend their money and the effects that this has on others have been referenced in the past by artists such as Kanye West (“Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” “New Slaves”) but are still an important aspect to focus on as the topic is easily generalized to the larger population. Though the large majority of the black population in the United States does not have the wealth to buy many of the specific things listed in this music, the implication is clear that black people are implicitly and explicitly encouraged to spend their money in a way that is materialistic and unsustainable. Further, this behavior has become somewhat ingrained in the minds of many African-Americans, especially those who grew up poor and may not have had the same access to resources from a young age and are thus unfamiliar with how to handle wealth, large or small.

In an interview with NPR, Kendrick Lamar noted how, in his rise to fame, he struggled with having to change himself to be a positive influence- to, as the butterfly, not be pimped

(Lamar, Kendrick Lamar: 'I Can't Change the World Until I Change Myself First', 2015). His work on *To Pimp a Butterfly* clearly displays his efforts working through this struggle, even taking on a sort of character within the album to add a degree of separation that was not present in *good kid m.A.A.d. city*. His most recent effort, *DAMN.* (released in April of 2017), shows Kendrick still struggling in this regard, as he tries to balance his desire to stay true to his goals and wish to be a positive influence with his now self-acknowledged violent and boastful tendencies. The album's tracks are largely drawn from biblical sins and virtues, and follow Lamar on his journey in trying to pacify each aspect in search of his true nature. This (as most of Kendrick Lamar's work is) is framed within a larger context of the fragility of life, the cyclical nature of the person, and how one is likely to face the same issues multiple times throughout their life. A key feature in doing this is that the album is designed to work both forward and backwards; the end is the same as the beginning. The creates a continuum of a person conquering and subsequently succumbing to their inherent character flaws, with each ultimately resulting in their death (Lamar, *Damn.*, 2017).

This newest album provides the most poignant introspection yet in Lamar's catalogue, as he now sheds any barriers between himself and the character of the music and in doing so no longer claims to be the "good kid." Instead, he fully realizes and accepts his own flaws as he tries to live with his paradoxes and hypocrisy. A prime case of this is the final track of the album, "Duckworth," in which Lamar tells the story of how a man (the titular Duckworth) working at a fast food restaurant that had been held up the year before, befriended the people who had robbed it. When the store is robbed again (by the same people), everyone except Duckworth is killed. It is then revealed that Duckworth is Lamar's father, and that the robber is Top Dawg, the founder of Kendrick Lamar's label. The track acts as a meditation on the thought that random chance

brought these two people together, and that if they had chosen different paths then he might be left without a father and no future outside of the neighborhood that he grew up in. He also acknowledges in this that a large part of his success is in part to the gang activity and violence that he advocates against in his own music (Lamar, *Damn.*, 2017).

This acknowledgement acts as the ultimate claim to Lamar's social message. The purpose of his music is self-change and hope. He affirms the value of every black individual by drawing from and publicizing black history and culture, and even directly affirms self-worth through his prominent sampling of "Every Nigger is a Star." With this empowerment, he implores that the listener reflects upon their own self and the affect that their being has on themselves and those around them by showing the listener this own process within himself. His personal struggle with his flaws and attempts to fight them so that he may affect positive change on the world acts as self-referential model for how systematic change for the state of people of color within the United States can come about. His primary claim is that everyone has the power to enact change within themselves, and that by doing this en masse despite the pressures and challenges that we all face, a greater level of change can come about that would be able to fundamentally change the cultural dynamics in which we live.

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