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Natalie Wilson

Pop Culture Intersections

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Rap Music as a Positive Influence on Black Youth and American Politics

As a university student in my 20's, it is quite obvious that hip hop music has become one of the most popular music genres in the last few years. Music enthusiasts and pop culture followers alike constantly see the Top 100 charts filled with hits from rap stars Drake, Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino, and Beyoncé as well as up and coming rappers Post Malone, Travis Scott, and Migos. Rap music consumption has increased immensely in the United States. In their "2017 U.S. Music Year-End Report", Nielsen analytics reported that hip hop/R&B became, for the first time ever, the most dominant genre, accounting for 24.5 percent of all music consumed as well as seven out of ten most consumed albums from the year.

As popularity of rap music has increased in the U.S., so has its influence on consumers. So what exactly is the influence of rap music on American listeners? A common belief held by those opposed to hip hop music as an entire genre is that rap and R&B artists support violence, drug use, and gang membership and therefore argue that the genre has a negative influence on consumers. Though, the case is actually quite the opposite. Rap artists write songs about their own life experiences, just like any other musician. The main difference in content comes from the drastic difference in the life experiences of Black Americans and non-Black artists. The majority of Black Americans grow up in a culture of guns, drugs, and gangs, therefore this experience ends up being the content of their writing. When listened to leisurely, it is easy to just hear profanity, harsh tones, and keywords referring to violence and drugs, but when one listens closer with a critical ear, they will hear heavy stories of growing up impoverished in inner cities.

I argue that rap music has a positive influence on Black American youth as it serves as an outlet, both for listeners and artists, for understanding the hardships of growing up within the struggles of inner city life caused by institutional racism. Rap artists who became famous and escaped inner city life understand first hand the sufferings that Black Americans face and are an inspiration for Black youth to also escape the inner city. Rap artists also use their celebrity influence as a voice for other Black Americans to promote social and political change. This is demonstrated most recently in performances and music videos by artists such as Kendrick Lamar.

Some of the first notable instances of political activism in rap music occurred in NWA's 1988 track "Fuck tha Police," and Ice-T's 1987 track "Squeeze the Trigger". These songs address police brutality in their lyrics which we will see become a common theme in rap songs throughout the past three decades. In addition to these two songs, I will analyze the lyrics of Tupac Shakur's "I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto," and Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," and "The Blacker the Berry." Despite the time passed, all artists share similar experiences with police brutality and write about it in multiple songs, making clear not only the influence the rappers had on one another's music, but that the issue of police brutality has been consistent over at least the last 30 years. Thus, my argument regarding rap's influence on political change will be narrowed to focus only on the issue of police brutality and I will use race as my theoretical approach. Since I will be analyzing rap from as early as the late 1980's, I will give a background on Black American history and the beginning of hip hop.

Background:

Beginning in the 17th century, enslavement of Africans by English settlers endured until its abolition by the 13th amendment in 1865. Black Americans were then continually

discriminated against, “through economic exploitation, disenfranchisement, and acts of violence, as well as through the legally and socially enforced system of racial segregation” (Pyatak, 2011, p. 50). The system of racial segregation, which promised “separate but equal” facilities and services for Black and White Americans, yet fell short of equality, was enacted in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* of 1896 but later overturned in the case *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. Racial segregation became the main focus of the civil rights movement which began in the 1950’s and continued through the end of the 20th century and advocated for equality and civil rights for all Americans. Several legal protections were passed during the civil rights movement including the ban of segregation in schools, public places, and employment, the outlaw of discriminatory voting practices, and the prohibition of housing discrimination.

Even with these advancements, Black Americans still face racist practices which preserve Whites having more power than them. These racist practices with the goal to keep the “status quo” of inequality have contributed to the development of the inner cities providing Black Americans and other racial minority groups with limited educational and economic opportunities. What we call the inner city refers to the phenomenon of a concentration of Black Americans and other minority groups in the urban core with White Americans living in the surrounding suburban areas. A prominent example of this city structure for our topic of rap music is the concentration of Black Americans in South Los Angeles who were confined by Whites to this area through violence, laws, and loopholes which allowed for discriminatory housing practices.

The deindustrialization of America as well as discriminatory hiring practices have been key contributing factors to the loss of employment opportunities for Black Americans. With

minimal employment opportunity and restricted mobility, inner city citizens have reached a state of occupational deprivation, “in which many are precluded from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual or the community as a whole” (Pyatak, 2011, p. 51). This situation has led to numerous social problems that disproportionately affect Black Americans which include higher rates of illicit drug use, higher likeliness to die from HIV/AIDS, stroke, heart disease, and cancer, and to be a victim of domestic violence. Additionally, homicide is the leading cause of death for Black American males between ages 15-24 years and ages 30-34 have the highest prison incarceration rate of all Americans.

While the origins of rap music can be traced back several centuries to, “West African griot traditions of delivering stories over drumbeats and scant instrumentation” (Pyatak, 2011, p. 51), most historians credit the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City in the mid-1970’s with the birth of modern hip hop street culture. This culture comprises of rap music, graffiti art, DJing, and b-boying. MCs evolved their acts into rapping at house or street parties where it was their job to entertain the crowd by introducing the DJ and speaking between songs. MCs began incorporating short rhymes in their performances which over time became rapping. This early form of rap was geographically contained to New York City, as the lyrics were context-specific to their audience and MCs and DJs would have performances for as long as three hours rather than three to five minute songs which could be played on the radio.

National audiences were introduced to rap music by the release of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979. The song was originally 15 minutes but a 5-minute version was released for radio play which lead to its popularity—it was the first rap music single to reach the Billboard Top 40 chart. As hip hop culture has evolved over the past 4 decades, it has served as a

mode by which Black Americans can, “call attention to the political, social, and economic conditions faced by their communities and the postcolonial racist practices that serve to sustain these conditions” (Pyatak, 2011, p. 51).

The late 1980’s brought the birth of gangsta rap in Los Angeles. This form of rap became overtly politicized and served as an outlet for inner city youth to share their experiences and perspectives on gang violence, drug use, and criminal activity. Elizabeth Pyatak and Linda Muccitelli write in their article “Rap Music as Resistive Occupation” that, “the appeal of gangsta rap came from its honesty about life in the inner city and the underlying causes of problems within the Black American community” (Pyatak, 2011, p. 52). Many critics believe that the use of violent language and profanity in rap music encourages listeners to take part in violence, drug use, and gang activity. However, looking beyond the harsh language reveals powerful stories of “exclusion, invalidation, and disenfranchisement” (Pyatak, 2011, p. 53). The stories told and images produced in rap music become ways in which Black youth can resist the negative stereotypes cast upon them and understand their position within their culture as well as the social world around them.

Rap as a Positive Influence on Black Youth:

Kendrick Lamar’s second studio album and major label debut titled *good kid, m.A.A.d city* tells the story of his journey trying to escape Compton and the bad influences surrounding him, yet always being pulled back. In the fourth track, “The Art of Peer Pressure”, Lamar tells the story of committing a home invasion when he was about 16 years old with his “homies”. Woven into the bridge and verses are references to “the homies” and certain activities he partakes in only when he is with them. Lamar raps:

*Smokin’ on the finest dope,
Drank until I can’t no mo’,*

*Really I'm a sober soul
But I'm with the homies right now.*

...
Usually I'm drug-free, but, shit, I'm with the homies.

...
*That's ironic, 'cause I've never been violent
Until I'm with the homies.*

...
*I shoulda told her I'm probably 'bout to catch my first offense
With the homies. (Lamar, 2012)*

He describes the actions of drug use, violence, and criminal activity as being things he wouldn't normally do unless with his friends. The title of the song being "The Art of Peer Pressure" reveals to us that Lamar was pressured into taking part in this lifestyle by his friends. This is an experience that other Black American youth can relate to and find understanding in. Similar stories are told throughout the album as Lamar expresses his personal experience and provides for Black youth who are listening an alternative to the violence and drug use of their neighborhood.

In the album's seventh track, "good kid", Kendrick Lamar shares his experience with gang violence. Although Lamar was never affiliated with a gang himself, he was had friends and hung around those who affiliated with both the Bloods and the Crips, the rival gangs of Compton. The color red represents the Bloods and the color blue represents the Crips. In verse one, he rhymes:

*But what am I 'posed to do when the topic is red or blue
And you understand that I ain't
But know I'm accustomed to just a couple that look for trouble
And live in the street with rank
No better picture to paint than me walkin' from bible study
And called his homies because he had said he noticed my face
From a function that tooken place, they was wonderin' if I bang
Step on my neck and get blood on your Nike checks
I don't mind 'cause one day you'll respect
The good kid, m.A.A.d city. (Lamar, 2012)*

Lamar recounts memories of being jumped by gang members despite his disaffiliation. He is self-described as a good kid, one who stays out of trouble and attends bible study. Yet, Lamar is still the victim of gang violence from both sides because he is associated with friends on both sides who “look for trouble”. When recognized by the wrong person, he is jumped simply for the faults of his friends. Lamar perseveres because he knows who he is—a good kid trapped in a mad city. He makes a subtle reference to both gangs in the last 3 lines. In the second to last line, he chooses “’cause” rather than “because” as “Cuz” is a common Crips salutation. In the third to last line, he refers to the Bloods more obviously. With these references, Lamar claims that one day when he has made it out of Compton, gang members from both sides will respect him.

In the second verse of “good kid”, Lamar describes the common experience of racial profiling by police as well as the feelings that Los Angeles police hold towards the black youth of Compton. He now uses the colors of red and blue to represent the colors of flashing police lights. Lamar writes:

*Every time you clock in the morning, I feel you just want to kill
 All my innocence while ignorin’ my purpose to persevere
 As a better person; I know you heard this and probably in fear
 But what am I ‘posed to do when the blinkin’ of red and blue
 Flash from the top of your roof and your dog has to say woof
 And you ask: “Lift up your shirt,” because you wonder if a tattoo
 Of affiliation can make it a pleasure to put me through
 Gang files, but that don’t matter because the matter is racial profile
 I heard ‘em chatter: “He’s prob’ly young, but I know that he’s down
 Step on his neck as hard as your bullet-proof vest
 He don’t mind, he know we’ll never respect
 The good kid, m.A.A.d city.” (Lamar, 2012)*

Kendrick Lamar accuses the police of killing his innocence and ignoring the fact that there are Black Americans in Compton are persevering with the goal of escaping inner-city life because they fear that all black youth are gang members. He then describes being told to lift up his shirt because the police assume, and hope, that he will have a tattoo confirming his gang affiliation.

However, the cops still assume he is a gang member despite him looking young and not having such tattoo. Lamar labels this as racial profiling and accuses the police of never respecting, nor believing there could even exist, a good kid in the mad city of Compton.

Both verses describe situations that any young Black American growing up in an inner-city could relate to. Like in “The Art of Peer Pressure”, Lamar describes these personal experiences in such depth and with such detail that other black youth can seek solace in his words and know that there are others out there experiencing the same hardships as them. Furthermore, Kendrick Lamar becomes a positive role model to black youth across the U.S. as he persevered as a good kid and eventually escaped the mad city.

Rap Lyrics as a Political Force Against Police Brutality:

As I introduced before, rappers since the late 1980’s have been discussing police brutality in their music. Similar to Kendrick Lamar in “good kid”, some of the first gangsta rappers of South Los Angeles addressed boldly the trend of black youth being killed by police officers. Ice-T writes about the deadly relationship between inner city youth and police in his song titled “Squeeze the Trigger”. He raps:

*Cops hate kids, kids hate cops.
Cops kill kids with warnin’ shots.
What is crime and what is not?
What is justice? I think I forgot. (Ice-T, 1987)*

The lyrics in this snippet of the song are blunt—cops kill kids. The overtness of the first two lines is chilling. The language he uses is simple yet hearing the words, “cops kill kids” is shocking nonetheless; it leaves no room for interpretation and creates a feeling of discomfort since this this a phrase we instinctively know should not exist. Ice-T then addresses the blurred lines of our criminal justice system which shows racial bias, charging Black Americans for crimes they did not commit yet not incarcerating officers who murder those same Black

Americans by using excessive force. NWA addresses the same issue in their famous song “Fuck tha Police”. They write:

*Fuck the police, comin' straight from the underground.
A young nigger got it bad 'cause I'm brown,
And not the other color, so police think,
They have the authority to kill a minority.
...
Searchin' my car looking for the product,
Thinking every nigger is sellin' narcotic. (NWA, 1988)*

The rap group takes a similar approach to Ice-T in their blunt lyrics. There is no questioning their words as they clearly state that black youth face hardships, including racial profiling and unnecessary stop-and-frisks, simply because of their skin color. Additionally, NWA uses internal rhyme in the fourth line to emphasize the tragic killings that happen too often. Clarence Lusane sums up the feelings of the Los Angeles Police department well in his article “Rap, Race, and Power Politics”. He writes that the LAPD, “viewed young blacks as unredemptive urban terrorists who were best kept locked up, contained, or eliminated” (Lusane, 1993, p. 40). This is exactly the message that Ice-T and NWA are trying to convey in their lyrics, and furthermore, that these feelings held by the police cause them to not value Black American lives and see them as disposable.

The pattern of blatancy and theme of addressing police brutality continues with Tupac Shakur in his song “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto” in which he states:

*When they ask me, “When will the violence cease”
When your troops stop shootin' niggas down in the street. (Shakur, 1997)*

Tupac uses irony to his advantage in these two lines. He calls out White Americans who ask when violence will end, claiming that they are the ones who in fact are causing it. He says in little words that if Black Americans are given any chance to succeed, violence in inner-cities will

cease. In “Soulja’s Story”, Tupac raises a critical question that Black Americans may face when confronted by police. He raps:

*Keep my shit cocked, cause the cops got a Glock too.
What the fuck would you do? Drop them or let ‘em drop you?* (Shakur, 1991)

The situation he describes is a lose-lose one as the choices are to either be killed or be incarcerated for killing an officer. In both cases, Tupac is challenging his listeners to think about police brutality and is expressing to White Americans, specifically police officers and political leaders, the lethal relationship Blacks have with cops. In the scenario he describes, someone is dying no matter but the key difference between the deaths is the skin color of the killer. If the black man shoots, he will face a lifetime in prison but if the white cop shoots, he will likely get off the hook. We can see the influence Tupac takes from rappers before him such as NWA and Ice-T and how he attempts to reemphasize the message regarding police brutality by using irony and incorporating threats of violence into his writing.

Kendrick Lamar has spoken about the influence Tupac Shakur has on his own writing and has proven it by constructing his third studio album *To Pimp A Butterfly* around a narrative poem he is reading to Tupac. In the poem, Lamar describes his journey once he escaped Compton and became famous, speaking about the temptations of capitalism and learning to use his new-found influence for social and political good. Along the way, he too addresses issues of police brutality just like his predecessors. In the album’s single “Alright”, Lamar raps in the chorus:

*Nigga, and we hate po-po,
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho’.
Nigga, I’m at the preacher’s door
My knees gettin’ weak and my gun my blow
But we gon’ be alright.* (Lamar, 2015)

These lines have become controversial as many conservative leaders spoke out about it inciting violence and being an attack on the police. On the contrary, Lamar meant for the song to be a hopeful one, giving power to the black community and encouraging them to fight for their rights and confront police brutality. Despite the controversy over these lines, the single has become an anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement and the line “we gon’ be alright” is often chanted at the movement’s rallies around the nation. Again, like his predecessors, Lamar addresses the issue of police brutality headstrong and doesn’t dance around the point that police kill Black Americans. As the song has garnered attention from both the Black Lives Matter movement and news outlets, it has created a conversation about the relationship between police and minorities, just as Lamar intended.

Later on in the album, he addresses racism strongly in “The Blacker the Berry”. Lamar raps:

*You hate me don't you?
 You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture.
 ...
 This plot is bigger than me, it's generational hatred,
 It's genocism, it's grimy, little justification.
 I'm African-American, I'm African,
 I'm black as the heart of a fuckin' Aryan. (Lamar, 2015)*

Lamar compares police brutality in these lyrics to genocide. Describing police brutality as “grimy” and having “little justification” makes the lyrics reachable for those who aren’t black and hits a sore spot with his reference to the black heart of an Aryan. The way he uses the term Aryan in this context is powerful, as it refers to those in the Nazi party who committed and supported the mass genocide of everyone who was not of the Aryan race, yet it extends to the image of all Caucasians even though it is just a sub-race of the Caucasian race. Lamar supports the comparison of police brutality to genocide this imagery that White Americans are committing an act of hatred against and attempting to terminate the culture of Black Americans

just as the Nazis of Germany did to the Jews. Although less direct than the other lyrics I have examined, “The Blacker the Berry” again emphasizes police brutality and fuels the fiery conversation with its chilling metaphors and comparison.

Rap Performance as a Political Force Against Police Brutality:

The provocative lyrics that Kendrick Lamar raps have garnered lots of media attention especially when put in conjunction with performance at televised events. In our modern media world, the use of video and performance pulls an even larger reaction from viewers and garners attention from media outlets and politicians. Many other contemporary hip hop/R&B artists including Childish Gambino and Beyoncé have also taken advantage of the power of performance to ignite change, though I will focus on one specific performance from Lamar for my analysis since I have previously analyzed his music in this article.

At the 2016 Grammy Awards, Kendrick Lamar performed a rendition of “Alright” and “The Blacker the Berry”. The performance was described by Rachel Davidson and Catherine Dobris as, “a blunt appraisal of racism in America, making direct casual links between historical enslavement of people of color and contemporary violence in U.S. cities” (Davidson, 2017, p. 116). Lamar enters the stage in a chain gang with other black men following behind him and his band in jail cells surrounding. When he approaches the microphone he brings his hands around it in the spotlight, directing the audience’s attention to his handcuffs and chain as he begins rapping the first verse of “The Blacker the Berry”. Though, this version is quite different than its recording—it is a cappella for the most part with shocking bass and drum accents coordinated with bright lights flashing as Lamar twitches and a saxophone riffs in the background. He raps the following key lines:

I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015

...

I'm African-American, I'm African
I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village
Pardon my residence
Came from the bottom of mankind
 ...
You hate me don't you?
You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture
You know you're evil, I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey
 ...
You sabotage my community, makin' a killin'
You made me a killer, emancipation of a real hitta. (Lamar, 2016)

At the end of the verse, the music picks up playing the hook and Lamar breaks out of his chains and dances with the other black “criminals”. He then grabs the mic and says to the audience, “As we proceed to give you what you need, you can trap our bodies, but not our minds” (Lamar, 2016) and the band suddenly starts playing tribal-esque music. Lamar stumbles across the stage as if in a dream and is surrounded now by tribal dancers and drummers wearing what we can assume to be traditional African tribal clothing. We start hearing the mantra, “we gon’ be alright” chanted repeatedly in the background.

Once Lamar reaches a large bonfire in the middle of the stage, the music cuts and he begins rapping the first verse, chorus, and second verse of “Alright”. The most important decision he made in this section was eliminating the controversial line, “and we hate po-po wanna kill us dead in the street fo-sho” from the chorus in his performance. He instead raps, “I’m at the preacher’s door/Wanna kill us dead at the preacher’s door/We said give ‘em some mo’, this one time/Do it for the show” (Lamar, 2016). At the end of verse two, the music fades back into the eerie jazz featuring saxophone riffs which we heard in the first part of the performance as Lamar stumbles again to the left side of the stage. He is now alone on a dark stage with white lights illuminating him and begins rapping what was at the time a new song.

The beginning of the verse talks about Trayvon Martin's death on February 26th, 2012 and Lamar states that on that day, "[he] lost [his] life too." He also asks, "Why didn't he defend himself, why couldn't he throw a punch?" and argues that this event put us back 400 years and is an example of modern day slavery. This leads into Lamar rapping the first verse of "untitled 05 | 09.21.2014.", the fifth track on *untitled unmastered.* which was released just a month after the Grammy performance. The music accelerates and becomes louder throughout the verse as the rapping also becomes more chaotic and the camera flashes between different angles on Lamar's face. USA Today writes, "By cutting over and over, showing us multiple angles of his face, he ceased to be one man and instead became the voice of many, a furious, righteous voice speaking directly into the living rooms of America" (Scott, 2016). He reaches a crescendo and then the music cuts, the lights blackout, and an image of Africa with "Compton" superimposed on it appears behind Lamar.

The performance, which was described by The New York Times as, "a vehement, multilevel blast against 'modern day slavery'" (Pareles, 2016), received widespread praise from celebrities, fans, and news sources. Pharrell, Snoop Dogg, Kobe Bryant, Piers Morgan, Katy Perry, and Ellen DeGeneres all took to twitter to congratulate Lamar. They called him brilliant and a king and said that his performance was powerful and stole the show. CNN wrote that, "The 28-year-old rapper's hue and cry was received as an authentic representation of what many black people from blighted areas, as well as those who have the means to live elsewhere, still feel: America is not for them" (McAfee, 2016). This is exactly the message Lamar was attempting to send in his writing of *To Pimp A Butterfly* and in his production of the Grammy performance. The overwhelming amount of support from celebrities as well as the correct interpretation of his production from news outlets made his performance a huge success.

While news sources CNN, USA Today, and The New York Times all posted positive online articles covering the performance, Fox News refrained from commentary unlike their reaction to Lamar's similar performance in June of 2015 at the BET Awards. In response to his performance, Geraldo Rivera claims that, "hip-hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years. This is exactly the wrong message" (Rivera, 2015). In this conversation, the Fox News reporters were focusing on the line, "and we hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street fo-sho," from Lamar's "Alright", though the news outlet seemed to have nothing to say when Lamar chose to censor that particular line in his Grammy performance. Further, the only negative responses to the performance I could find were tweets from unverified accounts which gained little activity and thus did not reach many users. LL Cool J, the host of the 2016 Grammy Awards Show, told The Wrap prior to the televised performance that, "Kendrick Lamar is going to do something very controversial. And that's what art is about. It's not about whether you agree or disagree, it's about it stimulating conversation and provoking people to have conversations about society" (LL Cool J, 2016). And he did just that and more—the positive feedback Lamar received from the loud voices of American media created a conversation. His performance made a positive impact as the many who took to Twitter challenged our political leaders to make a change and end police brutality by showing their support for Lamar.

Conclusion:

The influence of rap music until present day has been strictly positive as it provides an alternative to violence, drug use, and gang activity for Black American youth growing up in the inner city as well as a resource for understanding the discriminatory world they live in. Hip hop stars who were able to escape the inner city also use their influence as insight to what it is like to

live in the inner city and as a voice for those still living in it who don't have one by pushing for social and political change, specifically with police brutality. The sounds and styles of west coast rap may change throughout the years, but the same racial issues still exist in South Los Angeles and thus the message rappers are trying to send in their writing has stayed consistent.

Race relations and police brutality are very hot topics in politics right now and there is always chaos in the media, whether positive or negative, when celebrities speak out about these issues. While these socio-political race issues are not new nor are rap artists writing about them, rap music still holds a negative connotation for many Americans. Understanding rap music as a positive influence can be a very important step in helping our national racial issues, especially in this critical time when hip hop consumption is on the rise. I am personally a big rap music fan and listener as well as interested in U.S. racial issues which is what made me interested in researching this topic. I hope this inspires you to listen more closely the next time a rap song is playing and understand the stories artists are telling in their music.

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