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How the “Greatest Rapper Alive” Returned Hip Hop to its Political Roots

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By Meeran Karim

Rapper Kendrick Lamar has been lavished with praise since the release of his first studio album, Section 80 in 2011. He’s been called the “Hip Hop Messiah” by The New York Times, praised effusively by his peers, and hailed for his lyrical dexterity and unapologetic honesty on everything from the gang violence in black communities to institutionalized racism.

But even though he has been crowned the “greatest rapper alive”, he’s more than just a talented artist. Lamar’s stories of pathos, grief, and anger strike at the root of American consciousness with true-to-life testimonials, recollections, and news stories interwoven across his music. Through his powerful depiction of the black experience and his own personal struggles, Lamar is not merely a skilled lyricist at the top of his game, but also one of the most important storytellers of this time.

Since its inception forty years ago in the Bronx, hip hop has been populated with rappers speaking candidly about black life. These so-called street poets shined light — often controversial and sometimes inflammatory — on the dark recesses of life and society for black Americans. Groups like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Public Enemy, N.W.A. and Outkast addressed issues faced by black and inner city communities. Although criticized for glorifying gang membership and violence, various hip hop artists throughout the years have used the medium to talk of their own personal struggles and the toxic environment around them. In their song Murder to Excellence from their album Watch The Throne, prominent rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West talked about emerging from childhood poverty and crime to finding success in the music industry.

Nonetheless, a quick browse of rap music trending on the Billboard Hot 100 reveals that most hip hop artists today are detached from the struggles once etched into the genre. As today’s rappers become more and more obsessed with materialism in their music, the ins-and-outs of what it means to be living in the present socio-political moment goes largely unaddressed. Lamar, who sits on top of the same charts and music streams, is an exception.

The rapper, who grew up in Compton and still writes about the strife there, is a rare example of how potent lyricism and authenticity can still dominate record sales in a market that has been overwhelmed in recent years by machismo and inflated characters. Lamar’s six studio albums, including the 2015 jazz-infused To Pimp a Butterfly and his most recent DAMN, which hit the double-platinum mark only a few weeks after its release, have produced a vivid portrait of the American black experience. His music takes listeners through a journey across his native Compton, walking them through incidents of police brutality, senseless violence, and exposing the lives of those confronted with these realities.
The criminal justice system that has incarcerated and brutalized men and women of color at shockingly disproportionate numbers is a central focus of Lamar’s lyrics. On *Blood*, the opening track from his latest, *DAMN*, he presents his encounter with a blind woman who he approaches to help but who kills him in return.

So I was takin’ a walk the other day  
And I seen a woman, a blind woman  
Pacin’ up and down the sidewalk  
She seemed to be a bit frustrated  
As if she had dropped somethin’ and  
Havin’ a hard time findin’ it  
So after watchin’ her struggle for a while  
I decide to go over and lend a helping hand, you know?  
“Hello, ma’am, can I be of any assistance?  
It seems to me that you have lost something  
I would like to help you find it”  
She replied  
“Oh yes, you have lost something, you’ve lost your life”  
(Gunshots)

The blind woman here represents Lady Justice, her blindfold symbolizing impartiality, the idea that justice should be applied without regard to wealth, power, or race. Here the rapper seems to ask whether she’s actually blind to injustice, a question that’s been underlined by headlines for years, with the deaths of unarmed black men and women including Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Sandra Bland, which have all gone unpunished. The *American Journal of Health* in its study published in 2016 revealed that black men are nearly three times as likely to be killed by law enforcement than white men.

While right-wing media pundits blast the rapper for his anti-police lyrics, Lamar studies how people may turn to violence out of the desperate circumstances that oppression and poverty create. On XXX from *DAMN*, Lamar paints the state of mind of young black men whose lethal environment has made them more ruthless than sharks.

Throw a steak off the ark  
To a pool full of sharks, he’ll take it  
Leave him in the wilderness  
With a sworn nemesis, he’ll make it  
Take the gratitude from him  
I bet he’ll show you somethin’, whoa

The “ark” in Lamar’s lyrics possibly refers to *Noah’s Ark* in the *Old Testament*. In the story, god gave instructions to Noah to build the ark so that his family and animals of the earth could survive an apocalyptic flood. Anyone who was on the ark survived the flood, while everyone
else left died. Lamar’s use of this metaphor however looks at how upper classes of society are able to escape the flood of violence and crime in rough inner-city neighborhoods like Compton, which he refers to as "a pool full of sharks." To "throw a steak off the ark" into the pool of sharks can be interpreted as giving someone less fortunate a chance at success. Lamar seems to suggest that if someone from the upper echelons of society were to give anyone in the lower classes a chance at improving their lives, that person would snatch it up as fast as a shark snaps up a steak.

In the same song, the rapper shows how it can be difficult to rise above the madness and adhere to his Christian faith. In it, he receives a call from a friend asking for spiritual counsel following his son’s death. The rapper is hard-pressed to muster a positive response. Faith no longer provides an adequate answer and when the moral compass of a person is thrown aside, all hell tends to break loose.

_He said: _“K-Dot, can you pray for me?
It been a fucked up day for me
I know that you anointed, show me how to overcome.”
_He was lookin’ for some closure
Hopin’ I could bring him closer
To the spiritual, my spirit do know better, but I told him
“I can’t sugarcoat the answer for you, this is how I feel:
If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin’ killed.”

Lamar condemns an America that inspires such episodes of violence.

_The great American flag is wrapped and dragged with explosives
Compulsive disorder, sons and daughters
Barricaded blocks and borders
Look what you taught us!
It’s murder on my street, your street, back streets
Wall Street, corporate offices
Banks, employees, and bosses with
Homicidal thoughts; Donald Trump’s in office
We lost Barack and promised to never doubt him again
But is America honest, or do we bask in sin?
Pass the gin, I mix it with American blood

Whereas the American flag is supposed to represent the values of freedom and peace, Lamar talks of a country that inhibits people’s rights and freedoms through gun violence, police brutality, and corporate plunder. The violence in black neighborhoods, which he powerfully portrays in his lyrics, mirrors America’s dark soul. After asking whether America values sin more than honesty, he proceeds to take a shot of gin and “mix it with American blood,” an allusion to the country’s history of bloodlust.
He continues with a tirade on politicians and media personalities who single out black people as violent gang members and terrorists, even as they supply their communities with weapons and drugs.

*It’s nasty when you set us up*  
*Then roll the dice, then bet us up*  
*You overnight the big rifles, then tell Fox to be scared of us*  
*Gang members or terrorists, et cetera, et cetera*

Lamar directs blame at the American government, which has a pattern of “setting up” black people by implementing anti-drug policies disproportionately targeting black men. Politicians “*roll the dice*” and receive financial gains from their gamble on the privatization of America’s prison system, which makes mass incarceration of black men a profitable industry. This provides Fox News, according to Lamar, with perfect fodder to feed its narrative of fear and danger surrounding black people.

The rapper refuses to be stereotyped by Fox News pundits and talks back to the media that tries to pigeonhole him as an angry rapper. He sampled a clip of Fox News reporters criticizing his music on his song *DNA* from *DAMN*. Shortly after they blast him for instigating violence through his lyrics, he retorts: “*You mothafuckas can’t tell me nothin’, I’d rather die than to listen to you.*”

He catalogs the experiences and events that he witnessed in his childhood, something that might not sit well with people who don’t understand the struggles of growing up like him. He rejects the simple-minded platitudes thrown down upon him by the media.

*See, my pedigree most definitely don’t tolerate the front*  
*Shit I’ve been through prolly offend you, this is Paula’s oldest son*  
*I know murder, conviction*  
*Burners, boosters, burglars, ballers, dead, redemption*  
*Scholars, fathers dead with kids*  
*And I wish I was fed forgiveness*  
*Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, soldier’s DNA*  
*Born inside the beast, my expertise checked out in second grade*

The theme of escaping misleading stereotypes is repeated in his music video for *DNA*, in which Lamar finds himself in an interrogation room with Don Cheadle, playing the role of a criminal investigator. In one scene, Cheadle presses the button on the lie detector machine on a table before Lamar and the lie detector starts charting a graph before the rapper even speaks, showing how black people are often indicted even before anything is known about them. The room that Lamar finds himself shows how society and media have confined him. He eventually breaks free by escaping the room and joining his friends waiting outside.
His stories are enriched by the different voices he employs in his music. From one track to the next, he can jump from a high-pitched squeal to a low mumbling whisper, coloring his songs with new feeling every time he switches his tone. This works in tandem with the wide spectrum of stories told in his lyrics ranging from depression over the deaths of his friends back in Compton to his problems with representation of black people in media. The words grab listeners and frame the narrative, while the voices used help to add depth and tension to his stories.

On his song *m.A.A.d city*, Lamar employs an urgent, high-pitched voice that fits his story of being exposed to gang violence from a very young age: "seen a light-skinned nigga with his brains blown out, at the same burger stand where the crips hang out." While narrating scenes of killings and police car chases, Lamar sounds fraught with fear, and the delivery of his warnings to young black boys from his community reveal a cautionary tale of avoiding joining gangs that could guarantee their demise. His use of his vocals together with the lyrics propel the stories forward.

Lamar brings the same storytelling rigor to his music videos, sometimes relying on historical archives to provide him with a strong visual language for his hard-hitting lyrics. In his video for *Element* from DAMN, Lamar borrows heavily from the work of pioneering black photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks, whose photographs provide poignant commentary on poverty, politics, and social justice in America. While Parks photography of 1960s segregated America portrayed the realities of that time, Lamar’s lyrics and videos do the same for this present generation.

In referencing the work of Parks, Lamar continues hip hop’s tradition of paying tributes to an older generation of artists in their music. His debt to Parks is evident from the opening scene of *Element*, when a black hand slowly emerges from cool, blue water. It’s almost identical to an untitled photo taken by Gordon Parks in 1963. In the rapper’s rendering of this photo, the hand coming out of the water represents Lamar’s quest to emerge from the violence and poverty of his childhood.

Lost childhood innocence is a major theme across Lamar’s *Element*. In one scene, a boy balances a bug on his head with a single thread. That references *Boy with June Bug*, an image taken by Parks in 1963 in his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas, where segregation had terrorized his community. The young boy’s innocent serenity in the midst of racial strife is given new meaning when complemented with Lamar’s lyrics on trying to remain calm when everything around him is unruly and chaotic.

Telling tales of grief, violence, and the challenges of growing up black in America rendered in vivid, irresistible detail, Lamar has established a body of work that has made him both culturally important and commercially successful. Unlike the superficial lyrics that pervade mainstream rap music today, Lamar’s lyrics examine not only himself but a country still grappling with racism and its impact on black lives. Following in the legacy of hip hop’s unabashed storytellers, he has revitalized a genre originally known and celebrated for speaking truth to power.