



Editor: Irit Back. Assistant Editor: Adi Kraut-Adler

Volume 3, Number 8, 22 January 2018

Hip hop artists as political and emotional commentators

Omer Keynan

Hip hop music began in the Bronx, New York, in the mid-1970s. From the start, hip hop gave black artists a platform and the opportunity to express the social distress faced by the African-American community.¹ By the late 1980s, hip hop groups like "N.W.A." were exploring and documenting the experience of African Americans living in impoverished neighborhoods, especially their exposure to police brutality and gangs violence; "Public Enemy," and solo artists like "Ice Cube" were using their music to expose the poor media coverage of prevailing discriminatory attitudes toward African-Americans. Despite its growing popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, it is only in recent years that hip hop has emerged as the most popular music genre in the United States. Artists like Jay-Z, Chance the Rapper and Childish Gambino have become mainstream popular music favorites, topping the Billboard charts and garnering nominations in the most prestigious categories of the annual Grammy awards.²

¹ Roderic R. Land & David O. "Stovall, Hip Hop and Social Justice Education: A Brief Introduction", Equity & Excellence in Education, Vol 42, issue 1, 2009, Pp 1-5.

² Matt Miller, "Kendrick Lamar, Jay-Z, and Childish Gambino Lead the Top Grammy 2018 Nominations", Esquire, 28 November 2017, Accessed: 2/1/2018.

Besides becoming a feature of mainstream culture, hip hop music has also gone through an evolution in its subject matter and core preoccupations. Alongside rapping about the difficulties of "street life," many hip hop artists have also turned to incorporating introspective assessments of their milieu, including the emotional tensions and moral dilemmas inherent in their music and the world it portrays. This can be seen as an act of self-exposure; but it also exposes the emotional state of much of the African-American community, given hip hop artists' positioning as prominent representatives of this community. In other words, popular contemporary hip hop artists are increasingly blurring the boundaries between the "personal" and the "social" in their music.

Good examples of this trend can be found in Jay-Z's "4:44" (2017), in which the artist explores the personal crises he experienced after being caught cheating on his wife, and in Vince Staples' "Summertime '06" (2015), in which he shares traumatic memories of growing up in his local community of Long Beach, California. It should be noted that prior to this, there have been artists, such as Tupac Shakur and Scarface, who explored social issues and personal experiences in their music. However, this trend has taken on greater prominence in recent years.

The blurring of the boundaries between the personal and the social in contemporary hip hop music will be demonstrated in this article through an analysis of the video clip and lyrics of the song "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar, arguably the most successful and popular hip hop artist of recent years. According to the Lamar's YouTube channel, the video clip for "Alright" has been viewed more than 96,000,000 times, receiving more than 49,046 comments.³

<http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a13947862/grammys-2018-nominations/>

³ Kendrick Lamar, "Alright", [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY), 30 June 2015, Accessed: 2/1/2018.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY

"Alright" also became the unofficial soundtrack to the Black Lives matter (BLM) movement, a movement that began as a hashtag #Black_Lives_Matter on social media in 2013 following the shooting of 17 years old African-American Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Today, BLM is a "global Network, chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes."⁴

By analyzing the meaning of the images in the video clip and the lyrics of the song, I aim to present the complex experience of the African-American population in the United States, from the point of view of a popular hip hop artist. I also aim to offer an explanation why this particular song became a black protest anthem.

"Lucifer was all around me"

Kendrick Lamar (real name Kendrick Duckworth), was born on June 17, 1987, in Compton, South Central Los Angeles. Across his four studio albums, Kendrick describes life in Compton as complete chaos, a world in which its residents are constantly exposed to danger.

In 2015, Kendrick released his Grammy Award-winning album "To Pimp A Butterfly." "Alright," the seventh song on the album, was accompanied by a video clip. The lyrics of the song combined the complex social circumstance of the African-American community and the personal distress of Kendrick Lamar—and, implicitly, that of other members of the community. The optimistic message that emerges from the song's chorus is that despite all the difficulties, they (the community) "gon' be all right." This message was subsequently adopted at large demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement. As reported by "Rolling Stone" magazine, the demonstrators

⁴ "About", Black lives matter, Accessed: 2/1/2018. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

chanted lines from the song:⁵ *"And we hate po-po [police]/Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho' [for sure] ... I'm at the preacher's door/My knees getting' weak and my gun might blow/But we gon' be alright."*

The video clip for "Alright" was filmed in black and white, its visuals conveying the claustrophobic experience of African-American citizens of the United States in a state of imprisonment, metaphorical and actual. Grim images appear in quick succession: a man lying on the floor motionless, police officer shooting a black man, members of a street gang beating people, a child with his face covered with blood. While these images illustrate the complex social circumstances of the African-American community, the lyrics also reveals Kendrick's emotional distress, as though his life was at the mercy of the devil (referred to as Lucifer throughout the album): *"Abusing my power full of resentment. Resentment that turned into a deep depression. Found myself screaming in the hotel room. Lucifer was all around."*

The distinction between the fragile emotional state of the artist and the collective social state of the African American community becomes even more blurred when Kendrick uses the same terms to describe the two states: *"But while my loved ones were fighting the continuous war back in the city. I was entering a new one. A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination."* "Apartheid" and "discrimination" are two terms commonly used to describe specific social situations. However, here Kendrick uses these terms in a different sense, using them to reflect on his emotional state and on dealing with depression.

The combined social experience of the black community and personal experience of Kendrick intensifies when the inner-emotional and the external-social

⁵ Brittany Spanos and Sarah Grant, "Songs of Black Lives Matter: 22 New Protest Anthems", *Rolling Stone*, 13 July 2016, Accessed: 2/1/2018.
<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/songs-of-black-lives-matter-22-new-protest-anthems-20160713/kendrick-lamar-alright-20160713>

states change. Suddenly, images in the video present a fictional representation of reversed social relations, as Kendrick and other members of "Black Hippiess"⁶ are carried by four police officers. Kendrick, until then depressed and withdrawn in his inner world, now raps about being the greatest hip hop artist of all time.

From this point, the video clip reveals a different aspect of street life. Children dance on the roof of a police car, and Kendrick hovers over Los Angeles. The lyrics express a similar experience of transcendence, with Kendrick appealing to his listeners, "Do you feel me, we're gon' be alright." In the last segment of the song, Kendrick stands on a road sign to perform the song. The street life, previously chaotic, has now become a dance floor for the residents to show off their enjoyment of life. They dance, run, and ride skateboards, smiles on their faces and without fear of the violence that the big city can pose.

However, this picture of joy changes quickly when a police car approaches the traffic light on which Kendrick stands; a police officer emerges from the car and signals with his hand forming the shape of a gun, symbolically shooting Kendrick. Kendrick's blood spills everywhere, and he falls back into the gloomy reality of a community constantly confronted with such violence. At this point, he turns to his mentor Tupac Shakur saying:⁷

*"I remembered you was conflicted. Misusing your influence,
sometimes I did the same. Abusing my power full of resentment.
Resentment that turned into a deep depression. [...] I didn't wanna
self-destruct. The evils of Lucy [Lucifer] was all around me. So I
went running for answers."*

⁶ An American hip hop supergroup from South Los Angeles, California, composed of rappers Ab-Soul, Jay Rock, Kendrick Lamar and ScHoolboy Q

⁷ These words are taken from "Mortal Man," the last song of the album "To Pimp A Butterfly" and are directed at Tupac Shakur, a conscious rapper who operated in the 1990s.

Kendrick falls, to his death and at the same time to the depths of his consciousness, returning to a state of depression. However, in the moment of doom after he explodes on the asphalt, Kendrick looks straight into the camera and smiles. Does this smile signal that for the African-American community, liberation can only come from within? Is Kendrick suggesting that for African-Americans, the only way to improve their social condition in American society is by freeing their mind? The answer may lie in an interview conducted by the legendary music producer Rick Rubin with Lamar in GQ magazine,⁸ and a follow-on comment by a Black Lives Matter activist, DeRay Mckesson.⁹

Rubin asked Lamar if he thought, when he wrote the song, that it would become a protest song. Lamar replied: "[...] *I wanted to approach 'Alright' as more uplifting—but aggressive. Not playing the victim, but still having that We strong [...].*" After reading Lamar's answer, DeRay Mckesson stated:

"I define the act of protest as the act of telling the truth in public. In protest, we try to be uplifting by noting that we can make a better world, and also aggressive in highlighting the urgency of the work. Kendrick's song effortlessly mirrors protest. 'Alright' is a protest anthem."

Drawing from both Lamar and Mckesson's remarks, I suggest that observing difficulties from an optimistic point of view, is a necessary condition for bringing about social and personal change, and for participating in effective protest.

This song also demonstrates that contemporary hip-hop music has become a platform for the empowerment of the African-American community. While for many

⁸ Alan Gwizdowski, "Kendrick Lamar Talks to Rick Rubin About 'Alright,' Eminem, and Kendrick's Next Album", *GQ Style*, 20 October 2016, Accessed: 2/1/2018.

<https://www.gq.com/story/kendrick-lamar-rick-rubin-gq-style-cover-interview>

⁹ DeRay Mckesson, *Genius*, 20 October 2016, Accessed: 2/1/2018.

<https://genius.com/artists/Deray-mckesson>

years blacks were presented in a two-dimensional fashion, a helpless subject of racism, conscious rappers like Kendrick Lamar express a more complex experience, one with emotional depth.

Omer Keynan is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate Program in Science, Technology and Society at Bar-Ilan University. His dissertation studies the community protest movement of Israelis of Ethiopian origin on Facebook. He teaches courses at a number of institutions in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and research methods.