

Kendrick Lamar's Hypocrisy

A Racial Identity within 'The Blacker The Berry' (2015)

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Abstract

The concepts authenticity and identity frequently recur in academic debates on hip hop culture. However, the specific connection between representation of racial identity and the genre of gangsta rap remains under-researched. Existing academic literature discusses the concepts authenticity, representation, (Black) identity, race and postcolonial theory in a hip hop framework, however, (mostly) individually. In this thesis, I aim to fill this gap. I attempt to show how these individual concepts can intersect within the gangsta rap genre, with Kendrick Lamar's 'The Blacker The Berry' as case study. That is why the main aim of this thesis is to determine in what way Kendrick Lamar represents his racial identity in the song 'The Blacker The Berry' from the album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015). By analysing 'The Blacker The Berry', which so far has escaped scholarly discussion, in this thesis I explore whether this song conforms to the general discussion about Lamar's self-love ethic and the larger concerns about authenticity in hip hop culture and the gangsta rap genre. This analysis will be based on lyrical, musical and performative level and it will show how Lamar criticises on both the Black and white community and represents his own racial identity in 'The Blacker The Berry', even though he comprehends the Black culture is flawed, too.

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Introduction

It's not me pointing at my community; it's me pointing at myself. I don't talk about these things if I haven't lived them, and I've hurt people in my life. It's something I still have to think about when I sleep at night. The message I'm sending to myself – I can't change the world until I change myself first.

- Kendrick Lamar.¹

Compton-based rapper Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, stage name Kendrick Lamar, has become one of the best-known (gangsta) rappers within the hip hop genre during the last decade due to his lyrical abilities and play of words.² Lamar's debut album was released in 2012, named *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*.³ In the following eight years, he has released four studio albums. One of these albums is *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015). Originally, Lamar wanted to name the album *Tu Pimp A Caterpillar*, Tu.P.A.C. as abbreviation, with respect to artist 2Pac's influence on his life.⁴ However, Lamar decided to name it *Butterfly* anyway, as the album has to both represent the present brightness beside the aggression of modern-day life and indicate Lamar's personal growth.⁵ In *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Lamar talks, among other things, about his depression, the present violence in Compton, the death of close friends, and race and politics in society. That is why this album is discussed, by both musicologists and fans, as one of his most progressive and fascinating albums, for it has both a critically political and a self-loving message for (presumably) Black people.⁶

¹ This quote comes from an interview about *To Pimp A Butterfly*. It is a response to the shootings of Black people, Lamar's feelings towards these events and the reason why he has written 'The Blacker The Berry'. NPR, 'Kendrick Lamar: "I Can't Change The World Until I Change Myself First"', published December 29, 2015, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/29/461129966/kendrick-lamar-i-cant-change-the-world-until-i-change-myself-first?t=1607597586812>.

² Soren Baker, *The History of Gangster Rap: From Scoolly D to Kendrick Lamar, The Rise of a Great American Art Form* (New York: Abrams Image, 2018), 217.

³ Vanessa E. Vaughn, 'Kendrick Lamar', *Contemporary Musicians* 78 (2014): 97.

⁴ The last song of the album, 'Mortal Man', discloses that the entire album is a poem written to 2Pac. Genius, 'To Pimp A Butterfly,' accessed January 6, 2021, <https://genius.com/albums/Kendrick-lamar/To-pimp-a-butterfly>.

⁵ Rob Markman, 'Kendrick Lamar Reveals To Pimp A Butterfly's Original Title and Its Tupac Connection,' MTV, published March 31, 2015, accessed January 6, 2021, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2120689/kendrick-lamar-tu-pimp-a-caterpillar-tupac/>.

⁶ Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning* (London: Routledge, 2019), 175.

The direction of The New York Times has decided to capitalise 'Black'. This verdict was made after realising that black is the meaning of the colour and a culture simultaneously. To differentiate these matters, the culture's name should be capitalised according to this direction, as it is an influential change for the people of this culture. That is why every reference to the African American culture or society, the word Black will be capitalised in this thesis. Nancy Coleman, 'Why We're Capitalizing Black,' *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020, accessed November 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.

Several songs from the *To Pimp A Butterfly* album, for instance ‘i’ and ‘Alright’, have been researched various times in academic literature.⁷ According to theologian Darrius D. Hills, these specific songs contribute to the explanation of Lamar’s self-love ethic.⁸ By analysing ‘The Blacker The Berry’, which so far has escaped scholarly discussion, in this thesis I explore whether this song conforms to the general discussion about Lamar’s self-love ethic and the larger concerns about authenticity in hip hop and gangsta rap. Furthermore, the song also offers a window onto how Lamar represents Black and white people’s behaviour in his music and why he chooses to focus on this topic in his song, rather than more traditional ones, like childhood for example. That is why this thesis seeks to answer the question: How does Kendrick Lamar represent his racial identity in ‘The Blacker The Berry’?

Before analysing Kendrick Lamar’s expression of his racial identity in a predominantly white-oriented society of the United States in ‘The Blacker The Berry’, the first chapter will discuss the importance of race and (racial) identity in the context of hip hop culture and the gangsta rap genre and how this is related to authenticity, postcolonial critique and representation. This chapter will only contain the theorisation of the concepts, serving as a stepping stone for the next chapter. Although identity and authenticity are concepts which have existed in hip hop since the beginning of the 1970s, Lamar has only been in the hip hop scene for a decade, so it is interesting to determine how Lamar represents his identity and in what way he is perceived as an authentic rapper. That is why, in the second chapter, these five concepts will be used to analyse the song ‘The Blacker The Berry’ from a textual, musical and performative perspective. With this study upon Lamar’s representation of racial identity in ‘The Blacker The Berry’, this thesis attempts to unravel Lamar’s message in this song, which could lead to more research on authenticity and (racial) identity within Lamar’s music, gangsta rap in particular or the hip hop genre as a whole.⁹

⁷ Driscoll, Miller and Pinn, *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, 176.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹ I am aware of the fact that ‘intentional fallacy’ can happen, as musicologists can interpret the song’s meaning in a different way than the artist’s intention. After almost six years since the release of the song, it is presumable that Kendrick Lamar has changed his thoughts on the original intention of the song, for example. In this thesis, I have tried to explain, in the best way I can, how Lamar presents his racial identity according to the sources published since the time of release and my own ideas about the song and Lamar’s intentions. For more information on this phenomenon see, among others, W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, ‘The Intentional Fallacy,’ *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 469-470.

Chapter 1: Racial identity in hip hop

Hip hop culture (and movement) originates from the Bronx in New York City. This part of the city is Black-oriented since the 1950s, as it had been white-oriented until then.¹⁰ DJ Kool Herc introduced the break, a short percussive part which he called ‘Merry-Go-Round’ when several breaks (from different records) were put after one another to create a ‘new’ song, and that is when, from 1972, Black people from the streets started to make music, rap and dance to escape from the life in the ghetto and communicate their feelings about this Black oppressed culture.¹¹ In the 1980s in Southern California, the gangsta rap genre emerged and is understood as the verbal tool to express one’s feelings towards specific circumstances, from drugs related situations to the shooting of one’s best friend, any situation which was in the Black culture’s disadvantage.¹² If the artist is forthright about the conditions and experiences in his/her life, they are seen as an authentic rapper, in the opinion of fellow rappers and fans.¹³

Even though the concept of a racial identity within hip hop is significant for this thesis, it is rather important to understand hip hop as a culture where the artist’s authenticity is most valuable. Sociologist Michael P. Jeffries argues that authenticity is part of the hip hop genre, as the represented lyrics and therefore music has to associate with the real life of the rapper.¹⁴ This ‘keepin’ it real’ attitude within the hip hop genre influences songs, but also entire albums and the private and musical career of the artist, as they have to be able to live up to the ghetto type or have to have experienced the struggles they are talking about.¹⁵ This artist’s authenticity is constructed within the hip hop genre, for the specific rules to become a rapper are not written down, but generally known to people within the hip hop community. That is why the definition of authenticity can change again and again, as the opinion(s), from

¹⁰ Mostly due to the white people who were going away from the Bronx to live in other parts of NYC, a phenomenon called ‘white flight’, this neighbourhood had become Black-oriented since the 1950s. Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1.

¹¹ Will Hermes, ‘All Rise For The National Anthem of Hip-Hop,’ *New York Times*, published October 29, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/29/arts/music/29herm.html>; Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement: From R & B and the Civil Rights Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Generation* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 272.

¹² The gangsta rap genre is different from the Bronx rap style, though it is emerged from this genre. Gangsta rap includes subjects which are not spoken about in the popular music from that time. This differentiation between genres is relevant, as Kendrick Lamar is perceived as a gangsta rapper, while not being part of a gang. Baker, *The History of Gangster Rap*, 6.

¹³ Laura Speers, *Hip-Hop Authenticity and the London Scene: Living Out Authenticity in Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2017), 12-13.

¹⁴ Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 118-119; Speers, *Hip-Hop Authenticity*, 12.

¹⁵ Jeffries, *Thug Life*, 120; Term ‘keepin’ it real’ comes from Speers, *Hip-Hop Authenticity*, 12.

either academics or artists and fans, about hip hop, authenticity and ‘keepin’ it real’ can shift.¹⁶

When discussing representation, it is important to keep in mind its multiplicity of meanings. According to Stuart Hall, representation has two principal definitions.¹⁷ First, representation is to ‘stand for’ something; for example, one Black man who ‘symbolises’ the Black community.¹⁸ In Lamar’s ‘The Blacker The Berry’, this political approach is then part of one’s identity, as he talks about ‘our’ culture. Second, representation can be interpreted as to illustrate or characterise something.¹⁹ That is to say, Lamar presents himself to the audience in a certain way, both in recordings, interviews included, and in live performances. Philip Auslander would call this the ‘performance persona’, which will be discussed in this thesis at a later stage.²⁰ The latter is, too, a political approximation, because Lamar represents himself as the individual he is. Although this thesis will not take a specific political approach to Lamar’s music, it is rather important to clarify that representation is a political statement, as will also become clear in the analysis of Lamar’s song.

Representation is part of one’s identity, as a person can represent oneself in a certain way. Although different authors have suggested different definitions of identity, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay have made an important distinction between identity and identification.²¹ According to Hall, identification is most commonly considered as finding a common origin between people or groups of people.²² The composition of these groups or the common origin can change every now and then, which is the reason why identification is a never-ending process.²³ One’s identity is related to the individual identification with a specific culture or group of people, based upon a common origin or shared characteristics between one and the other. To link this concept to hip hop and authenticity, it is necessary for a rapper to represent his/her identity (as ‘performance persona’) as ‘authentically’ belonging to the ghetto. After all, both the rappers and listeners are identifying to this culture because they have the same ghetto roots and experience the

¹⁶ Jeffries, *Thug Life*, 132.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Philip Auslander, ‘Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto,’ *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 6.

²¹ Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 1996), 2; For the approaches to and definitions of identity see among others J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), 22.

²² Hall and du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 2.

²³ Ibid.

same difficulties of this state of living. If one raps about it, the listener most likely feels a connection because he/she experienced similar things.

Besides shared characteristics, both Hall and Judith Butler have argued that difference (in)forms identity.²⁴ Sociologist Manuel Castells agrees with this, claiming that the representative content of a collective identity decides who identifies themselves with this identity and who does not.²⁵ That is, the concept identity is related to the Other, to what one's identity is not, and, as a result of this discrepancy, an identity is established.²⁶ That can explain why rap music is traditionally appealing to Black audiences, because the experiences expressed, subjects such as the economic poverty and race, are dissimilar to those of the (white) Others. Yet this identity (and thus the understanding of difference) is not fixed, but fluid and about the process of becoming, now and in the future.²⁷ It is constructed out of multiple fluctuating components, such as history, language and culture, which all influence one's representation of the Self and thus one's identity.²⁸

Because the identity of hip hop artists is closely linked to identifying as Black (as opposed to white), race is an important component of authentic representation. Critical race theorist Richard Delgado claims that “‘race’ means, quintessentially, African American’, as ‘whites do not see themselves as having a race, but as being, simply, people.’²⁹ Delgado calls this the ‘black-white binary’.³⁰ According to him, this binary is found in everyday life and within almost every society.³¹ In the United States, Black people are, then, perceived as inferior to their white counterparts, an ideology called ‘white supremacy’, for they are physically different.³² Yet, most postcolonial researchers believe race is a cultural idea constructed within society, rather than a biological fact.³³ Most rappers consider race as a

²⁴ Hall and du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 4; Butler reference, quoted in Hall's *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 15.

²⁵ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.

²⁶ The usage of ‘Other’ comes from Peter Brooker, *A Glossary of Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2017), 201.

²⁷ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7.

²⁸ Hall and du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 4.

²⁹ In the original quote, Delgado uses ‘African American’. I believe that, with such term, this author excludes Black people who are not African Americans and other minorities (Chinese, Mexicans, and so on) from the ‘definition’ of race. That is why I would change ‘African American’ to ‘Black’.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 77, 92.

³⁰ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 85. Gloria Wekker agrees with Delgado, as she believes that whiteness is not considered as a racial or ethnicised position in a society at all. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

³³ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Chichester: John Wiley & sons, Ltd, 2016), 65-66.

cultural construction as well, and, according to rappers such as 2Pac and rap group N.W.A., the distinction between Black and white has been too natural for too long to be treated equally by the police or other communities, for example.³⁴ Some rappers, such as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, discuss different race-related topics, and use word play to explain the difference between Black women and men.³⁵ Kendrick Lamar, however, is eager to discuss the question why Black on Black homicide is alright according to African Americans, while the death of a Black man caused by a white police officer is not acceptable.³⁶

What hip hop has in common with postcolonial critique is the attempt to disclose and discuss social injustice based on ethnical reasoning.³⁷ The dynamics of identity and race in a postcolonial context are crucial to the (musical) hip hop genre due to their inherent ties to the notion of authenticity.³⁸ Even though postcolonial theory is frequently intersected with other disciplines in the last decade, the term postcolonialism is mostly used to describe the extensive history of colonialism and in what way colonialism has influenced a society on norms and values.³⁹ Within hip hop, this is discussed by several rappers, including Kendrick Lamar. The first two verses of 'The Blacker The Berry' show the meaning of being Black in a predominantly white-oriented society, with references to the slavery of African Americans in the past and the way in which this still has an impact on a Black (wo)man's position in the United States. The experiences with these postcolonial influences of people's behaviour towards one another has to be legitimate in order to be authentic as a rapper. Lamar's 'keepin' it real' attitude shows in his lyrics, but even more in interviews, such as the quote from an interview in the introduction, where he states that he has to have lived the things he raps about.⁴⁰

As it is essential for a rapper to be authentic, his/her form of representation matters both publicly and musically. Philip Auslander distinguishes three layers of performance in his

³⁴ These rappers are an example as they are willing to discuss race in songs such as 'F*ck tha Police' (N.W.A.) and 'Me against the world' (2Pac). Although they do not specifically say that they believe race to be constructed or to be natural, it is clear that their 'performance persona' wants to show the audience what a Black man has to go through with the police, for example.

³⁵ Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' is a song about the look upon (Black) women, how this view is stereotyped and how she is using this to her benefits. More female rappers, such as Cardi B ('Get Up 10'), do this in order to show the male sexual approach towards (Black) women.

³⁶ Though the discussion about Black-on-Black homicide is more complex, I have chosen to state Lamar's main intention of the song in the shortest and simplest manner possible. For the lyrics, see appendix 3, verse 3.

³⁷ However, rap music can discuss more inequalities, such as poverty, crime, violence, etc.

Young, *Postcolonialism*, 58.

³⁸ Hip hop can also be seen as a culture within society. That is why 'musical' is placed in parentheses. Baker, *The History of Gangster Rap*, 217.

³⁹ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 3.

⁴⁰ See Introduction, page 3.

artist's persona theory.⁴¹ First, the 'real person' is the artist as a human being. That is, the person that the artist is in everyday life. Second, the image or personality the artist shows in live shows and interviews is the 'performance persona'. Third, the artist's personality lived out in a song, which is called the 'character'.⁴² Although this distinction is thorough and straightforward, it can be difficult to separate these layers at all times. For example, Lamar's representation as the 'real person' and 'performance persona' at the same time in an interview or song, due to the necessity of authenticity, shows that Auslander's differentiation of layers is complicated. In this thesis, these layers will be used in the analysis of the song and it will be shown how these layers can overlap even more.

In this thesis, the five elements of authenticity, identity, representation, race and postcolonialism will be discussed in the analysis of Lamar's song, and it will be shown how these concepts (often) intersect simultaneously. That is, in order to be authentic, one has to represent their identity with the consequences of postcolonial and racial biases that they deal with, which are shown in a 'keepin' it real' attitude. The rapper's authenticity and identity can, or rather have to, be lived out in Auslander's three layers at all times. In order to demonstrate in what way rappers can be (in)authentic, Kendrick Lamar's 'The Blacker The Berry' will be analysed on musical, textual and performative level in the next chapter.

⁴¹ Auslander, 'Performance Analysis,' 6.

⁴² Ibid.

Chapter 2: The Blacker The Berry

But when we don't have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us? It starts from within. Don't start with just a rally, don't start from looting -- it starts from within.
- Kendrick Lamar.⁴³

In this chapter, the concepts authenticity, identity, representation, postcolonialism and race from chapter 1 will be discussed while analysing Kendrick Lamar's song 'The Blacker The Berry'. These theories are not only useful for the hip hop genre generally, but also for this song in particular, as this song is constructed to question one's own behaviour towards Black people and Lamar's criticism upon society, while representing his racial identity constructed in an authentic manner. 'The Blacker The Berry' is from the album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015). The song 'The Blacker The Berry' is one of the extreme songs regarding the subject, because Lamar critically discusses the difference between Black and white people in the contemporary society of the United States, as a response to the shootings of, among others, Michael Brown and Eric Garner.⁴⁴ In this song, he does not only criticise the behaviour of white people towards Black people, but also his own and of his community.⁴⁵ According to Lamar, the controversy between the thoughts of white on Black violence and Black on Black homicide is incorrect, for a person is still killed, no matter the murderer's skin colour. Hence, Lamar says to have respect for 'ourselves', as the change of violence against one another starts from within (see quote above). In order to link the concepts to the song, an analysis will follow on musical and textual level and on Lamar's attitude while performing the song.

First of all, Kendrick Lamar's authenticity is noticeable throughout both the song and the interviews he has given about 'The Blacker The Berry'. He claims that he will not say anything in his songs that he has not experienced himself, which is crucial to the understanding of authenticity within the rap genre.⁴⁶ If this statement is true, the listener finds

⁴³ Lamar talks about the shootings of Black people in the United States. The full quotation is available in 'Appendix 1'.

Joe Lynch, 'Kendrick Lamar Talks Ferguson: "What Happened Should've Never Happened"', January 8, 2015, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6436333/kendrick-lamar-on-ferguson-police-michael-brown>.

⁴⁴ Lynch, 'Kendrick Lamar Talks Ferguson.'

⁴⁵ Hip Hop and Politics, 'Kendrick Lamar and the Future of Hip-Hop,' accessed December 9, 2020 <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/musc210-hhp/introduction/hip-hop-complexities-section-3/>.

⁴⁶ NPR, 'Kendrick Lamar: "I Can't Change The World Until I Change Myself First",' published December 29, 2015, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/29/461129966/kendrick-lamar-i-cant-change-the-world-until-i-change-myself-first?t=1607597586812>.

out what his life in Compton was like during Lamar's childhood, including the present violence. 'The Blacker The Berry' might seem as a song which critically judges white people, especially police officers, who treat Black people unjust by shooting them without second thought, as has happened to Trayvon Martin. Although Lamar does criticise this behaviour in the first two verses because he is shocked at the poor treatment of Black people, the third verse is slightly different, which is noticeable in the last sentence of this verse in particular. Here, Lamar questions why he is sorry for the death of a Black man due to shootings by white police officers, while he has killed another Black man in cold blood (due to 'Peer Pressure', see next paragraph). This Black-on-Black homicide is as incorrect as the white violence is, and Lamar tries to emphasise this with a comparison in the lyrics between African ethnic tribes Zulu and Xhosa and Compton Crip gangs from his neighbourhood, who kill people from their own Black community (but from another group/tribe) to their group's/tribe's benefit. In his anger and dissatisfaction towards his own and community's behaviour, his authenticity is heard, as he could not have been this frustrated if he did not know what he was talking about.

Musically, the level of authenticity can be emphasised by the usage of samples from another song into one's own, which happens continuously in the gangsta rap genre. The introduction of 'The Blacker The Berry' begins with a synthesizer which has a steady rhythm of 4/4. After ten seconds and four rap lines, a drumbeat is heard. This beat is sampled from Cold Grits' 'It's Your Thing', and it is heard throughout the song, until the last line of the third verse (4:10).⁴⁷ Grits' song is instrumental, and I believe there is not specific reason why this beat has been used in Lamar's song. The drumbeat is not the only sample that has been used in 'The Blacker The Berry'. In the bridge, the words 'you, you, you' are heard several times in the second sentence (after 'burn, baby, burn' and 'that's all I wanna see') and in the sixth sentence (after 'But homie, you made me'). Here, Lamar has chosen to sample himself from a song of the album *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (2012), namely 'The Art of Peer Pressure'.⁴⁸ This song is about the pressure Lamar has felt among his peers, which caused him to do things which he later regretted (such as shooting a Black man, something Lamar admits in the

⁴⁷ The sample appears at 0:04 in 'It's Your Thing'.

RDRM7, 'Direct Sample of Drums,' Whosampled, accessed December 6, 2020, [https://www.whosampled.com/sample/333081/Kendrick-Lamar-Assassin-\(Reggae\)-The-Blacker-the-Berry-Cold-Grits-It%27s-Your-Thing/](https://www.whosampled.com/sample/333081/Kendrick-Lamar-Assassin-(Reggae)-The-Blacker-the-Berry-Cold-Grits-It%27s-Your-Thing/).

⁴⁸ The sample appears at 0:58 in 'The Art of Peer Pressure'.

MY28407, 'Direct Sample of Vocals/Lyrics,' Whosampled, accessed December 6, 2020, [https://www.whosampled.com/sample/350107/Kendrick-Lamar-Assassin-\(Reggae\)-The-Blacker-the-Berry-Kendrick-Lamar-The-Art-of-Peer-Pressure/](https://www.whosampled.com/sample/350107/Kendrick-Lamar-Assassin-(Reggae)-The-Blacker-the-Berry-Kendrick-Lamar-The-Art-of-Peer-Pressure/).

last sentence of ‘The Blacker The Berry’).⁴⁹ This is supposedly sampled to point out the mistakes Black people can make, in the same way that white people can.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Lamar honours rapper Tupac Shakur (2Pac), as he cites 2Pac’s text from ‘Keep Ya Head Up’ in the title (‘The Blacker The Berry’) and in the pre-chorus, where the full sentence from 2Pac is used (‘The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice’).⁵¹ 2Pac has been an influence for Lamar, as he was one of the best-known rappers from the nineties for his lyrical abilities.⁵² In his song, 2Pac raps about the beauty of women and the darker the skin, the more beautiful the woman. 2Pac takes this one step further, explaining that the darker the skin, the deeper the roots to their African ancestors.⁵³ Lamar has probably used this sentence because he agrees with 2Pac, but he argues that the darker the skin, the more likely to be shot. Moreover, Lamar refers to other rappers’ lyrics in the bridge, although not directly, as ‘Six in the morn’ comes from Ice-T’s ‘6 ‘N the Mornin’’. This reference is allegedly used because Ice-T raps about the police arriving at his door and Lamar’s ‘The Blacker The Berry’ is about the police violence towards Black people.⁵⁴ Lamar also uses ‘Burn, baby, burn’, which originally comes from soul DJ Magnificent Montague. This DJ’s song is about the Watts Rebellion, which started after policemen fought with a (presumably) drunk, Black man.⁵⁵ In addition, the outro is a sample from Terrace Martin’s ‘Curly Martin’.⁵⁶ Martin has explained that Lamar made a song about being proud on one’s Blackness, and Martin used jazz elements to emphasise that feeling, as both genres have its origins within the African-American culture.⁵⁷ This outro starts at 4:33, and it stands out for it is a mixture of jazz and blues elements instead of the

⁴⁹ Genius, ‘The Art of Peer Pressure,’ Accessed January 2, 2021, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-art-of-peer-pressure-lyrics>.

⁵⁰ I have to note here that, due to the structure of society and white supremacy, these ‘mistakes’ may not effectively be the same in any way.

⁵¹ Genius, ‘The Blacker The Berry,’ accessed 14 October, 2020, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry-lyrics#song-info>.

⁵² This influence is also noticeable in the original title of the *To Pimp A Butterfly* album.

Archive.today, ‘The 50 Most Influential Rappers of All Time,’ Accessed January 9, 2021, <https://archive.is/20140530203134/http://www.bet.com/music/photos/2011/09/50-most-influential-rappers.html%23!2011-topic-tu-pac-crop>.

⁵³ Genius, ‘Keep Ya Head Up,’ accessed January 2, 2021, <https://genius.com/2pac-keep-ya-head-up-lyrics>.

⁵⁴ Genius, ‘6 ‘N the Mornin’,’ accessed January 15, 2021, <https://genius.com/Ice-t-6-n-the-mornin-lyrics>.

⁵⁵ History.com Editors, ‘Watts Rebellion begins,’ History, published February 9, 2010, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/watts-riot-begins>.

⁵⁶ The choice of this sample is explained later in this chapter, when identity and identification is explained. The sample appears at 6:34 in ‘Curly Martin’. Brandon Tran, ‘Direct Sample of Multiple Elements,’ Whosampled, accessed December 6, 2020, [https://www.whosampled.com/sample/425843/Kendrick-Lamar-Assassin-\(Reggae\)-The-Blacker-the-Berry-Terrace-Martin-Curly-Martin/](https://www.whosampled.com/sample/425843/Kendrick-Lamar-Assassin-(Reggae)-The-Blacker-the-Berry-Terrace-Martin-Curly-Martin/).

⁵⁷ Genius, ‘The Blacker The Berry,’ accessed January 4, 2021, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry-lyrics>.

boom-bap beat from the rest of the song.⁵⁸ Mostly due to the boom-bap beat, ‘The Blacker The Berry’ is considered a gangsta rap song.

What is surprising to hear in this song, however, are string instruments, which occur in the bridge and the chorus, for it is not usual for hip hop to use classical instruments in order to be authentic.⁵⁹ Every time they occur, these string instruments build up the tension, whereafter the instruments are no longer heard and only the synthesizer and the drumbeat sample are used continuously. This anti-climax of the string instruments is rather disappointing, I believe, as the tension is not resolved, but the listener is triggered to listen the next part of the song. Among the string instruments from the bridge and the chorus, the song consists of various instruments. The synthesizer in the background, along with a frequent use of an electric guitar, is heard throughout the song (until 4:10). For the boom-bap beat, drums, percussion and a bass guitar are used. An alto saxophone is heard in the last part, with jazz and blues elements (4:33 – 5:28).

Second, the representation of Lamar as the Black individual and the fact that he is speaking for the Black community is obvious, as he refers to his own life, but these experiences are relatable for many other Black people. Language, for instance, is generally dealt with as a privilege for white people, as Black people do not speak the language fluently enough and/or speak with an accent, according to the predominantly white-oriented society (‘Excuse my French ... you, fuck y’all’). Another example from the lyrics is ‘You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture’. Here, Lamar is referring to the white people of the United States, who are insulting Lamar as a person and his community as a whole. The distinction between Lamar representing himself as individual or representing his community is intersecting in almost every sentence. For example, he talks about ‘his people’ (symbolisation) and ‘his culture’, instead of ‘our’ culture (first is characterising, latter would be symbolisation if used).⁶⁰

In a performance where Lamar carries out his album *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Lamar announces the song ‘The Blacker The Berry’ with ‘let’s get it.’⁶¹ The music begins, but it is

⁵⁸ NewMusic, ‘New Music: Kendrick Lamar – “The Blacker The Berry”’, published February 9, 2020, accessed December 6, 2020, <https://www.rap-up.com/2015/02/09/new-music-kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry/>.

⁵⁹ NewMusic, ‘New Music: Kendrick Lamar – “The Blacker The Berry”.’

⁶⁰ This differentiation is explained in chapter 1, in the paragraph about ‘representation’.

⁶¹ ‘The Blacker The Berry’ starts at 0:40:47 and ends at 0:46:30 in the video. There are other live performances available on Youtube. However, in this thesis, this live performance will be analysed. dboy_fit, ‘Kendrick Lamar - To Pimp A Butterfly full live performance 720p @ Austin City Limits PBS WEBRip,’ Youtube, February 19, 2016, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJe-ngucZ6s>.

immediately different than the studio version of the album.⁶² The introduction is without the background vocals of Lalah Hathaway, and the male vocals are a recording instead of Lamar singing the introduction and the bridge live. He only says ‘Huh’ and ‘They may call me crazy’ (as a repetition of the heard recording).⁶³ In the studio version, Lamar sings and raps in the pre-chorus and chorus. In the live performance, however, he chooses to sing along with the recording of these parts (appendix 3). Moreover, it is noticeable that Lamar has a Black band, without any white participants, and that during the performance, Lamar looks at his band most of the time, while only frequently looking at the present, predominantly white audience. This could suggest Lamar’s representing the Black community, with his Black band, and his Black self-representation, as ‘performance persona’.

Third, Lamar is identifying with the Black community from the United States, as he repeatedly says ‘I’m African American, I’m African’ in the first and third verse, whereafter he compares himself to the moon and the heart of an Aryan (the white ‘race’), as this is how Black he is. His identification is even noticeable in ‘My hair is ... round and wide’ where he is identifying with the ‘race’ that he has, same as ‘I want you ... a proud monkey’. In this way, Lamar voluntarily puts himself in the ‘bottom of mankind’, as he is equal to a monkey (for lyrics, see appendix 3). His race is part of his identity, because he is seen as having a race by others. Even names, such as Tyrone and Darius, have prejudged, racial identities, for Lamar is as Black as these names.⁶⁴ Lamar both represents the Black community and represents himself as the Black Other, in contrast to the white identity which he is not. Therefore, this is his identification with the Black society of the United States. Furthermore, as Lamar speaks of his own experiences and represents the Black community as a whole, this rapper is seen as authentic because he is honest about his life and his hypocrisy (in the lines ‘So why did... than me? Hypocrite!’).⁶⁵

His identification with the Black community is obvious in the instrumental outro and in the choice of singers as well. The rapper has decided to include other genres, such as jazz and blues (outro), soul (introduction sung by Lalah Hathaway) and reggae (chorus sung by Assassin).⁶⁶ The fact that these genres are originally Black genres can explain Lamar’s choice to add these elements, because the song is about the Black heritage and Black culture in a

⁶² For the studio version, the medium Spotify is used. Kendrick Lamar, ‘The Blacker The Berry,’ Spotify, track 13 on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Top Dawg Entertainment, Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, released March 15, 2015.

⁶³ For an overview of differences from studio version to live performance, see appendix 3.

⁶⁴ For lyrics, see appendix 3, verse 3.

⁶⁵ For lyrics, see appendix 3, verse 3.

⁶⁶ Genius, ‘The Blacker The Berry.’

predominantly white-oriented society.⁶⁷ All of these genres have their origins in the Black community, for the genres discuss the difficulties Black people have had to go through ever since they have come to the United States (as slaves). The change of style, from gangsta rap to jazz and blues, is unexpected and surprising, for it is not usual to end a hip hop song with jazz and/or blues. The choice to finish 'The Blacker The Berry' in this way are most likely influenced by Lamar's proudness of the Black community, even though this is flawed too.

Fourth, the represented racial identity is connected to postcolonial theory, and Lamar compares his contemporary experiences in society to the slavery from before. This happens in the pre-chorus (the blacker the 'berry', interpreted as man, the bigger the gun shot) and especially chorus. Soul singer Assassin begins with the treatment of Black people and the pain they have to go through because of their skin colour. The 'chains' (for lyrics, see appendix 3) are slave chains from origin, but the singer also refers to the golden necklace most people from the ghetto neighbourhood wear, either because they are part of the hip hop culture or from (mostly) drug related issues.⁶⁸ The 'whip' (appendix 3) has two connotations simultaneously as well, meaning the instrument to hit a slave and a fancy car Black people can afford after hard work. In the last sentence of the chorus, 'Black' and 'block' are pronounced almost the same, leading to the remembrance of 'every race' 'starting' from the 'block' or 'Black'. That is, the track and field 'race' start from the block, but every 'race' started from the Black people of Africa and every 'race' started from the Black neighbourhood 'block'. The latter could indicate the importance of the hip hop origins from the ghetto.

This analysis shows that the five concepts authenticity, representation, (Black) identity, race and postcolonial theory are intersected in 'The Blacker The Berry'. Although Lamar is proud of his Black heritage, he believes that the Black community have to examine their culture in order to change their state of living (see quote above). Lamar presents this racial identity on a lyrical, musical and performative level. He is authentic in this way, because the represented identity with the consequences of racial and postcolonial biases that he deals with, are shown in Lamar's 'keepin' it real' attitude. In addition, this song is about the same self-love ethic from 'i' and 'Alright', though in 'The Blacker The Berry', Lamar states self-love is necessary to stop the 'black-white binary' in the United States' society.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Hip Hop and Politics, 'Kendrick Lamar and the Future of Hip-Hop.'

⁶⁸ It is not the case, however, that every person who is part of a drug cartel wears these necklaces or that every person from the ghetto wears these kinds of jewels. It is generally worn by people who have earned money by either being active in the hip hop scene or the selling of drugs, but any person can wear a gold chain necklace.

⁶⁹ The 'black-white binary' comes from Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 78.

This self-love ethic is emphasised by the use of multiple samples, which have identical subjects to 'The Blacker The Berry'. That also explains why Lamar chose to represent American society in this way, to show the similarities between the present violence, no matter the person's skin colour.

Conclusion

In this thesis, Kendrick Lamar's 'The Blacker The Berry' is analysed in order to examine how Lamar's racial identity is represented in this song. The first chapter showed how authenticity, representation, identity, postcolonialism and race are represented within the gangsta rap genre. That is, in order to be authentic, one has to represent their identity with the consequences of postcolonial and racial biases that they deal with, which are shown in a 'keepin' it real' attitude. The analysis in the second chapter exemplifies that racial identity and authenticity are significant in the song, as Lamar constantly shows his pride of being Black, despite the prejudged opinions of white counterparts which are revealed in the lyrics of the song. Yet, Lamar is aware of the indifference from Black people on their own society with regard to violence. That is why his self-love ethic (for oneself and for one's community) in this song emphasises the need for change within his culture in order to change the society of the United States.

To Pimp A Butterfly follows the themes of the earlier album *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, namely: showing Lamar's love and hatred for his community, as his community has shown him how to make the best out of the worst of things, while he has had to experience terrible events with gang violence, police treatments, et cetera. Lamar is aware of this controversy in the Black culture, as he repeats this in multiple songs and interviews.⁷⁰ Rapping about certain subjects, such as poverty and the oppressed Black culture, was more common in the beginning of gangsta rap, with N.W.A., Ice-T and Public Enemy as examples from the 1980s.⁷¹ Within the gangsta rap genre, Lamar reintroduced the rapping about the (dis)advantages of being Black and of his culture.⁷² That is why it would be interesting to examine in what way Lamar has influenced the gangsta rap genre and fellow rappers by talking about other issues in the Black society instead of only speaking about one's childhood.⁷³ For this, the albums *untitled unmastered.* (2016) or *DAMN.* (2017) can also be analysed and compared to other rappers' albums and it could be valuable to see whether or not such research would result in similar conclusions on authenticity and identity. If this is not the case, one could question the importance of authenticity and identity in gangsta rap.

⁷⁰ Several songs from both *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* and *To Pimp A Butterfly* have these subjects. Interviews, such as ones the used in this thesis, can be read in order to understand Lamar's point of view on the Black culture's controversy.

⁷¹ I am aware that Public Enemy has more to do with hardcore rap (the genre from which gangsta rap is created), however, I chose to put this rap group here as an example as well, because they do rap about the same subjects as N.W.A. and Ice-T.

⁷² Baker, *The History of Gangster Rap*, 217.

⁷³ This happens mostly in the gangsta rap genre.

The concepts (authenticity, representation, identity, postcolonial theory and race) used in this thesis are individually significant, but they also intersect in my analysis of 'The Blacker The Berry'. One could wonder whether only Lamar uses these intersecting concepts to construct his song, or if this is the case for other gangsta rappers too. With a comparison between Kendrick Lamar and any other gangsta rapper, it becomes possible to determine whether or not contemporary gangsta rappers use these concepts in the same way Lamar does. If such research were to be conducted, this could lead to new perspectives on authenticity and identity in the gangsta rap genre in general and it could be questioned if these (intersected) concepts are represented within the hip hop culture as a whole.

Appendices

Appendix 1

The full quotation from Kendrick Lamar is:

‘I wish somebody would look in our neighborhood knowing that it’s already a situation, mentally, where it’s f**ked up. What happened to [Michael Brown] should’ve never happened. Never. But when we don’t have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us? It starts from within. Don’t start with just a rally, don’t start from looting -- it starts from within.’⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Joe Lynch, ‘Kendrick Lamar Talks Ferguson: “What Happened Should’ve Never Happened” ’, January 8, 2015, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6436333/kendrick-lamar-on-ferguson-police-michael-brown>.

Appendix 2

‘The Blacker The Berry’ musical structure in a chart from the studio version.

Introduction	4x lines with only synthesizer (0:00 – 0:10). 4x lines with a beat sample (0:10 – 0:20). Music stops with a crackle.
Bridge	The synthesizer is heard in the background, beat sample is used in the foreground (0:21 – 0:53). String instruments are heard until a climax follows which ends the bridge (0:32 – 0:53).
Verse 1	Verse is musically only with the synthesizer and the beat sample (0:54 – 1:37).
Pre-chorus	Musically only the synthesizer is heard, until the climax arrives, and the music stops (1:38 – 1:47).
Chorus	Synthesizer and beat sample continue. String instruments are heard until a climax follows which ends the chorus (1:48 – 2:10).
Verse 2	Synthesizer and beat sample continue (2:11 – 2:53).
Pre-chorus	Musically only the synthesizer is heard, until the climax arrives, and the music stops (2:54 – 3:04).
Chorus	Synthesizer and beat sample continue. String instruments are heard until a climax follows which ends the chorus (3:05 – 3:26).
Verse 3	Synthesizer and beat sample continue (3:27 – 4:09). The beat sample stops and only the synthesizer is heard (4:10 – 4:29). Only a noise is heard for the last line (4:30 – 4:32).
Outro	A mixture of jazz and blues elements is heard until the end of the song (4:33 – 5:28).

Appendix 3

Lyrics of 'The Blacker The Berry', a comparison between studio version and live performance.⁷⁵

Red letters = removed lyrics from the performance.

Green letters = added lyrics to the performance; **Green letters** between parentheses = Lamar's singing while the recording plays.

Introduction

Everything black, I don't want black (**They want us to bow**)
I want everything black, I ain't need black (**Down to our knees**)
Some white, some black, I ain't mean black (**And pray to a God**)
I want everything black (**That we don't believe**)
Everything black, want all things black
I don't need black, want everything black
Don't need black, our eyes ain't black
I own black, own everything black

Bridge

Six in the morn', fire in the street
Burn, baby, burn, that's all I wanna see
And sometimes I get off watchin' you die in vain
It's such a shame they may call me crazy (**They may call me crazy**)
They may say I suffer from schizophrenia or somethin'
But homie, you made me
Black don't crack, (**my nigga**)

Verse 1

I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015
Once I finish this, **if you listenin' then sure you will agree**
The mean is bigger than me, it's generational hatred
It's genocism, it's grimy, little justification

⁷⁵ Lyrics come from Genius. 'The Blacker The Berry.' Added words (green) are put in by the author.

(witnesses will convey just what I mean

Been feeling this way since I was 16, came to my senses

You never liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it)

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

My hair is nappy, my (dick is big), my nose is round and wide

You hate me don't you?

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

I said you're (fuckin') evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey

You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me

And this is more than confession

I mean I might press the button just so you know my discretion

I'm guardin' my feelings, I know that you feel it

You sabotage my community, makin' a killin'

You made me a killer, emancipation of a real hitter (Oh) (nigga)

Pre-chorus

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot

Chorus

I said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black

Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black (hey)

And man a say (and a man say) they put me inna chains, cah' we black (left scars pon' me back)

Imagine now, big gold chains full of rocks

How you no see the whip (How you no see the), left scars pon' me back

But now we have a big whip (But now we got a big whip) parked pon' the block

All them say we doomed from the start, cah' we black

Remember this, every race start from the block, (Remember this, every race start from the block), just remember that

Verse 2

I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015

Once I finish this, if you listenin' then sure you will agree

(witnesses will convey just what I mean)

I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society

(That's) what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me

Curse me till I'm dead

Church me with your fake prophesizing that I'mma be (just) another slave in my head

Institutionalized manipulation and lies

Reciprocation of freedom only live in your eyes

You hate me don't you?

I know you hate me just as much as you hate yourself

Jealous of my wisdom and cards I dealt

Watchin' me as I pull up, fill up my tank, then peel out

Muscle cars like pull ups, show you what these big wheels 'bout, ah

Black and successful, (this) black man meant to be special

Katzkins on my radar, (bitch), how can I help you?

How can I tell you I'm making a killin'?

You made me a killer, emancipation of a real (nigga)

Pre-chorus

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot

Chorus

I said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black

Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black

And man a say they put me inna chains, cah' we black

Imagine now, big gold chains full of rocks (Oh)

How you no see the whip, left scars pon' me back (Left scars pon' me back)
But now we have a big whip (Big whip) parked pon' the block
All them say (All them say) we doomed from the start, cah' we black
Remember this (Remember this), every race start from the block, just remember that

Verse 3

I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015
Once (When) I finish this if you listenin' then sure you will agree
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 damn American (fuckin' Aryan)
I'm black as the name of Tyrone and Darius
Excuse my French but pardon (fuck) you — no, pardon (fuck) y'all
That's as blunt as it gets, I know you hate me, don't you?
You hate my people, I can tell cause it's threats when I see you
I can tell cause your ways deceitful
Know I can tell because you're in love with that Desert Eagle
Thinkin' maliciously, he get a chain then you gone bleed him
It's funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war
Two tribal armies that want to build and destroy
Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that live next door
Beefin' with Pirus, only death settle the score
So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers
Or tell Georgia State 'Marcus Garvey got all the answers'
Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day
Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays
Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements
Or watch BET 'cause urban support is important
So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?
When gang banging make me kill a hitter (nigga) blacker than me?
Hypo(crite)!

Outro

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