

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, better known as Kendrick Lamar, was born June 17, 1987 in Compton, California. His mother and father, who are originally from Chicago, moved to Compton in search of a new and better life as his father was a member of Chicago's notorious Gangster Disciples gang. Lamar was born and raised in Compton at the heights of the crack epidemic and Los Angeles' gang violence. Kendrick was raised in the Westside, Compton neighborhood where rapper, Westside Boogie, is also from. This neighborhood is the territory for the Westside Piru's, a Compton blood-gang. The Westside Piru's are also very closely associated with the Tree Top Piru's where rappers YG and Dj Quik are from. As a child, Lamar was surrounded by guns, drugs and violence like many marginalized young black children were (and still are) at the time. Surrounded by madness, Kendrick managed to remain a good student who enjoyed writing stories and poems. These stories and poems later became rap lyrics.

Since its inception, Hip-Hop music and culture has been synonymous with African-American culture and lived experiences as well as the way that these two things are interpreted by different audiences. Hip-Hop music in its totality has inseparable ties to African cultural traditions. Since the turn of the century, Hip-Hop music and culture have seemingly become more monotonous concerning the thematics of lyrics, beats, and visual portrayals. McClendon (2015) states that in this century, the performance of "cool" is repeatedly flaunted but lacks substance. In this century, "cool" is sustained by dress, appearance, and behaviours that constantly feed a celebrity system fixed on aspects of shared videos and momentary transcribed thoughts. Essentially, "Cool" no longer suggests individuality. It has been stated by many that Hip-Hop music and Hip-Hop culture have a greater influence on the youth, specifically Black youth, than the

church does (something that can be said about the Culture industry at-large). With this type of constitutive and interpellative power, rappers rhetoric has the immense ability to relay and more importantly, create culture. With this said, I aim to explore and showcase in what ways Kendrick Lamar subverts traditional Tropes of Black hegemonic masculinity that have been perpetuated within the culture industry, specifically within Hip-Hop. This exploration can lead to a more diverse understanding of black masculinity and help to create more individuality and freedom within Black masculinity.

I will demonstrate this through an audio-lyrical analysis of four of Lamar's songs: *You Ain't Gotta Lie*, *Dedication*, *Momma*, and *The Art of Peer Pressure*. I chose to analyze these specific songs because they span the course of six years, all come from Grammy-nominated albums, and all involve Lamar giving a detailed retrospective of his own experiences as Black-male growing up in marginalized conditions.

You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)

You Ain't Gotta Lie is the fourteenth song on Kendrick Lamar's Grammy-winning, second major studio album, *To Pimp A Butterfly*. The song has an upbeat instrumental that begins with the sound of a high-pitched, psychedelic guitar solo which is accompanied by the voice of Lamar who appears to be having a casual conversation with his friends in the background. Steadily, the drums and keyboard become more prevalent in the beat and then Lamar says, ". . . check it out, i'ma tell you what my momma had said, she like:", as the first verse begins with him rapping from a perspective that he would attribute to his mother in a slightly up-pitched voice:

I could spot you a mile away

I could see your insecurities written all on your face

So predictable your words, I know what you gonna say
Who you foolin'? Oh, you assuming you can just come and hang
With the homies but your level of realness ain't the same
Circus acts only attract those that entertain
Small talk, we know that it's all talk
We live in the Laugh Factory every time they mention your name

In this verse Lamar is presumably rapping to himself from a meta-perspective, criticizing himself for trying to be what the popular crowd and popular culture around him expect him to be. This first verse attempts to align some common themes of marginalized hegemonic masculinity, more specifically the disingenuous performance of these themes, with buffoonery. This becomes apparent in the lines, "Who you foolin'?" , "Circus acts only attract those that entertain" , and "We live in the laugh factory everytime they mention your name". These comical allusions aim to undermine black masculine hegemony by turning the performance of its common, mostly negative tropes into a literal joke. In the bridge, Kendrick lists several of the most common tropes of Black hegemonic masculinity that he has interpreted.

[Bridge]

Askin' "where the hoes at?" to impress me
Askin' "where the moneybags?" to impress me
Say you got the burner stashed to impress me
It's all in your head, homie
Askin' "where the plug at?" to impress me
Askin' "where the juug at?" to impress me
Askin' "where it's at?" only upsets me
You sound like the feds, homie

In the bridge, Lamar provides us with his reaction to an individual obviously attempting to perform, and conform to hegemonic Black masculinity. Within this part of the song, Lamar not only confronts a black male lacking individuality, but also a modern Hip-Hop game lacking individuality as “hoes”, money, guns, drugs, etc. are prevalent themes in many of the songs by today's young mainstream artists. As the bridge ends, the chorus begins with Kendrick Lamar singing:

You ain't gotta lie to kick it, my nigga
You ain't gotta lie, you ain't gotta lie
You ain't gotta lie to kick it, my nigga
You ain't gotta try so hard
You ain't gotta lie to kick it, my nigga
You ain't gotta lie, you ain't gotta lie
You ain't gotta lie to kick it, my nigga
You ain't gotta try so hard

Lamar is essentially telling the individual that he can be his true self and get the genuine respect of his peers without having to perform the role of “thug”. A message he is also delivering to Hip-Hop culture.

Dedication

Dedication is a song by the late Nipsey Hussle on his Grammy-nominated album, *Victory Lap*. The beat has a strong bass line with a high-pitched keyboard in the background. Kendrick Lamar is featured on the song in the second verse which begins with the lines:

I spent my whole life thinkin' out the box
Boxin' homies three-on-one, got DP'ed but I ain't drop

In these couple of bars, Kendrick establishes that he has always been a big thinker, but with that said, the “hood” takes its toll on his mental and physical health. “DP’ed” means “disciplined”, so Lamar is saying he kept pushing on regardless of the restraints of where he’s from. The next several lines of his verse are of Lamar quickly reminiscing on his past and his family. The verse continues with Lamar saying:

I spent my whole life tryna make it, tryna chase it
The cycle of a black man divided, tryna break it
You take a loss? Shit, don't cry about it, just embrace it
Minor setback for major comeback, that's my favorite

In this portion of his verse, Lamar directly confronts some of the hegemonic Black masculinity that he has seen and experienced. “The cycle of black man divided, tryna break it”, discusses the intersectional identities of Lamar and other marginalized Black men and more specifically, the internal friction that comes from these intersectional identities. The verse continues:

My nigga L said, "You do a song with Nip, K. Dot, he a better Crip"
I said, "He a man first, you hear the words out his lips
About flourishing from the streets to black businesses?"
Level four, yard livin', given to false imprisonment

It is important to recall that Kendrick Lamar is from Westside Piru, a Blood gang in Compton, California. In this portion, Lamar is confronted by a friend (who is presumably a Blood as well) about doing a song with Nipsey Hussle, who is a Crip from the notorious Rollin’ 60’s Neighborhood in Los Angeles. Kendrick quickly fires back and subverts the hegemonic masculine tradition of his hometown by pointing to the humanness of Nipsey Hussle who, although proud of his turf as that’s where he is from, preaches financial literacy, transcending the street lifestyle, and Black entrepreneurship.

“Level four, yard livin’, given to false imprisonment” is a direct allusion to the prison yard and a metaphor for mentally being a prisoner to the streets which produce and reproduce marginalized hegemonic masculine values. The verse continues:

Listen close, my nigga
It's bigger than deuces and fours, my nigga
Since elementary we close, my nigga, yeah, straight like that
I give you the game, go back to the turf and give it right back
For generations we been dealt bad hands with bad plans
Prove your dedication by hoppin' out Grand Am's
I'm at the premiere politickin' with Top, Nip, and Snoop
Damn, Pac watchin' the way we grew, from dedication

Kendrick is actively talking to and enlightening his close friend throughout this portion of the verse. “Deuces” and “fours” is a reference to opposing gangs in the Los Angeles area, so by saying it’s bigger than this, Lamar makes the upholding of these values appear trivial and non-productive. In the third and fourth lines, Lamar establishes himself as a messenger and tells his friend to go back to the neighborhood and share this wisdom with their community. In the fifth and sixth lines, Kendrick continues his message. In these lines, Lamar makes it clear that he understands why things are the way they are, due to generations of marginalization. The last two lines portray a final image of success, not restrained by the tropes of hegemonic marginalized masculinity. Top, a reference to Anthony Tiffith, is a former Blood and Snoop Dogg is a former Crip. Here we have two Bloods and two Crips enjoying their success together with no animosity, just adoration. something that would make Kendrick’s idol, Tupac, proud.

Momma

Momma is a song from Lamar's album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The song begins with its neo-soul beat that is supported by a heavy bass line. The beat invokes feelings of tranquility and peacefulness. Several lines into the first verse, Kendrick drops the bar:

Been in it before internet had new acts
Mimicking radio's nemesis made me wack

This simple bar conveys a far more profound idea. In the first line, Lamar establishes himself as veteran in the rap game. He admits to originally trying to create music similar to what was played on the radio, but that wasn't who he was, so he didn't even like it. By constructing mainstream rappers and mainstream rap music as "radio's nemesis", Lamar somewhat passively critiques the state of Hip-Hop by aligning the mainstream trends with the downfall of the culture. The first verse ends with the lines:

Thank God for rap, I would say it got me a plaque
But what's better than that?
The fact it brought me back home

In these lines, Kendrick Lamar states the importance of Rap music and what it has done for him. He admits that the plaques and notoriety are cool but rap music's effect on him can not be measured by awards. He is making the case that Rap music has allowed him to reveal his true self, to himself, and this is an unmatched feeling. The Chorus breaks in with the harmonious voices of a man and woman singing:

We been waitin' for you
Waitin' for you
Waitin' for you

Waitin' for you

These entities can be understood as divine ancestors, mentors, and protectors that have been waiting for Kendrick to realize who *he* is. The harmony of the male and female voices is important because it plays on the ideology of the divine feminine and the divine masculine coming together to create something new. In this case, Kendrick himself is the “new”. Being “new” is representative of the uniqueness of individuality, which can not be genuinely replicated. The second verse opens with the line:

I know everything

In this verse Kendrick is rapping solely from his own perspective of himself. In an almost braggadocious way, Kendrick almost uses this entire verse to disclose his wisdom and intelligence by listing all the things he knows and by saying, “ I know everything” seven times throughout the verse. This is consistent with the way many audiences perceive his persona. Many see him as a very intelligent rapper and some even joke that you need a dictionary to listen to his songs. Kendrick then appears to have an awakening by the end of the verse when he says:

I know what I know and I know it well not to ever forget

Until I realized I didn't know shit

The day I came home

In these lines, Kendrick has the realization that no matter what or how much he thinks he knows, he will never know it all and the journey of knowledge acquisition and self-discovery are never ending. The final 3 lines of this verse function to metaphorically erase the sentiments throughout the rest of the verse. After the chorus plays, Kendrick's third verse begins with him encountering a young version of himself and the description

of this young boy. After several lines, the boy begins to speak to Kendrick essentially telling him he knows who he is and that he sees how Kendrick has become a famous rapper.

Oh, I forgot, 'Don't Kill My Vibe', that's right, you're famous

I used to watch on Channel 5, TV was taken

The verse continues with the young Kendrick saying to his present self:

But never mind, you're here right now, don't you mistake it

It's just a new trip, take a glimpse of your family's ancestor

Make a new list of everything you thought was progress

And that was bullshit

I know your life is full of turmoil

Spoiled by fantasies of who you are, I feel bad for you

This is Kendrick Lamar facing his most pure and genuine self (him as a child) essentially having a profound ego-death of who he believed his adult self to be after years of outside influences. The last two lines of this section express how Kendrick's performance of hegemonic values are eating away at his subconscious mind because these values do not reflect who he is as an individual. The young boy continues:

I can attempt to enlighten you without frightenin' you

If you resist, I'll back off quick, go catch a flight or two

But if you pick destiny over rest in peace

Then be an advocate, tell your homies especially

To come back home"

Here the boy gives Kendrick an ultimatum; accept the wisdom or remain blissfully ignorant. In the third line, "rest in peace" is a double entendre. It can mean either to rest

in peace in the sense of a relaxing, expensive, celebrity vacation, or in the sense more applicable to young black males surrounded by marginalized hegemonic masculinity, which would be physical death. But if Kendrick does choose his own destiny and the wisdom and enlightenment that comes with it, it is also his responsibility to share this same wisdom with his community and peers. With this, the adult version of Kendrick becomes a divine messenger himself whose destiny is to preach individuality. As soon as Kendrick says the last word of the verse, his voice fades quickly and the beat slows down and changes, as if to signal to the listener that they should be pondering what exactly they just listened to.

The Art of Peer Pressure

This is the fourth song on Kendrick Lamar's Grammy-nominated, first major studio album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. The song opens with Lamar speaking in acapella:

[Intro]

Everybody, everybody, everybody

Everybody sit yo bitch-ass down

And listen to this true mothafuckin' story

Told by Kendrick Lamar on Rosecrans, ya bitch

As he is finishing his intro, the beat fades with drums, a prominent piano , and a synthesized high-pitched sound, then the chorus, also Lamar, sings:

Smokin' on the finest dope, ay-ay-ay-ah

Drank until I can't no mo', ay-ay-ay-ah

Really I'm a sober soul

But I'm with the homies right now

And we ain't askin' for no favors
Rush a nigga quick, then laugh about it later, ay-ay-ay-ah
Really, I'm a peacemaker
But I'm with the homies right now
And Momma used to say (Say, say, say, say)
One day it's gon' burn you out (*Woo*)
One day it's gon' burn you out, out, out
One day it's gon' burn you out (You, you, you, you, you, you)
One day it's gon' burn you
But I'm with the homies right now

The chorus opens with Kendrick detailing what can be perceived as a good day with his homies. Him and his friends partake in smoking cannabis and drinking alcohol, common activities of marginalized hegemonic masculinity. Lamar assures his listeners that this is not his usual self, but when he gets around his friends/peers, this is who he becomes. Lamar continues, “Rush a nigga quick, then laugh about it later...” details Kendrick and his friends beefing with and fighting another individual, in which they derive humor. Again, Kendrick makes sure to convey to us that this is not who he is, he’s a peaceful person, but when he’s with homies this is who becomes. Kendrick then recalls what his mother used to say to him. Constantly trying to fulfill a persona is an exhausting process that will burn you out is the message that was conveyed by his mothers perspective. This is similar to what was found in *You Ain’t Gotta Lie* and *Momma*. Kendrick seems to take heed of the message at the time, but lacks the necessary self-discipline to apply it to his then self and situation.

Kendrick Lamar consistently references his mother and/or his mothers perspective throughout three of the four songs in this analysis, twice being in the titles of the songs as well (*You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)* & *Momma*). I interpret this to be symbolic of the fact that no one is more familiar with the most pure, genuine, and uninfluenced form of Kendrick Lamar than his mother, who carried him, birthed him, and of course, raised him, along with Kendrick's father. From the Lyrics across the three songs (*The Art of Peer Pressure*, *You Ain't Gotta Lie*, and *Momma*), it becomes apparent that Kendrick feels, or at the very least, felt that his mother knew him better than he knew himself. More specifically, she knows/knew who he was as an individual, completely separate from the marginalized conditions of his adolescence. In a sense, Lamar uses his mother and/or his mothers perspective as a meta-perspective of himself. This functions to keep him self-aware even as he partakes in acts that violate his self-character, and/or go against his best interest, such as being with the homies and drinking, being violent, and overall trying to fulfill the character that was created for him by society. This self-awareness gives Kendrick conscious accountability for his actions which leads to personal internal conflict (This conflict was conveyed in his lyrics on *Momma*, *The Art of Peer Pressure*, and *Dedication*. It should be noted that the only song in which Kendrick does not reference "Momma" is *Dedication*, which is also the most recent of the songs by up to 3 to 6 years. This seems to signify Kendrick fully graduating into his own man who has found his own identity separate from the conditions in which he was raised and no longer relying on his mothers meta-perspective).

In *You Ain't Gotta Lie to Kick It (Momma Said)*, seems to be addressing his younger self that was the central character in the chorus of *The Art of Peer Pressure*, which if we recall, demonstrated a teenage Lamar partaking in activities that went against his self-character in order to fit in with his homies (caving into peer-pressure/perceived peer-pressure). In the Bridge of *You Ain't Gotta Lie to Kick It (Momma Said)*, a now older and more mature Lamar directly confronts the individual who is obviously trying to maintain the "cool" facade (in the sense of marginalized hegemonic masculinity) by reprimanding the individual for "trying so hard" to impress him and fulfill the characteristics of marginalized hegemonic masculinity. He does this by disclosing five of the most common themes of marginalized masculinity (Misogyny, money, guns, drugs, crime,) While also saying these things do not make you "cool", and thinking that they do is a mental delusion. All 5 of these themes were present throughout *The Art of Peer Pressure*. Kendrick seems to be acting as a mentor for the individual who can be perceived as the teenage version of Kendrick himself.

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