

Defeating racism on African-Americans through music statements and
achievements: An analysis of Kendrick Lamar's albumKosmas Merguna Ganda¹✉, Imas Istiani²^{1,2}Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how Kendrick Lamar's music serves as a powerful confronting and defeating racism against African Americans through his lyrical statements and artistic achievements. Focusing on several of his seminal albums including *Section.80*, *good kid*, *m.A.A.d city*, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and *DAMN.*—the analysis highlights Lamar's incisive critique of systemic and institutionalized racism, police brutality, and cultural marginalization. His work not only exposes the structural inequalities faced by Black communities but also explores themes of identity, resilience, and empowerment, offering a nuanced portrayal of African-American life in contemporary America. By unpacking key songs and their socio-political contexts, this study reveals how Lamar's music transcends entertainment to become a form of cultural resistance and social activism. Moreover, the article discusses the broader impact of Lamar's achievements, including his role in shaping public discourse on race and inspiring collective empowerment within and beyond the African-American community. Ultimately, this analysis situates Kendrick Lamar as a pivotal figure whose artistic contributions significantly advance the struggle against racism through the transformative power of music.

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INTRODUCTION

Racism remains one of the most pervasive and enduring social issues in the United States and around the world, profoundly shaping the lived experiences of African-Americans. Rooted in historical systems of slavery, segregation, and institutional discrimination, racism manifests not only through overt acts of prejudice and violence but also through subtle, systemic

inequalities embedded within political, economic, and cultural structures. These entrenched forms of racial bias have perpetuated disparities in education, employment, criminal justice healthcare, and representation, creating barriers that continue to marginalize African-American communities.

Beyond material inequalities, racism also affects identity formation and cultural expression, often imposing limiting

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stereotypes and narratives that dehumanize and silence Black voices. The psychological and social consequences of such discrimination contribute to cycles of disenfranchisement and social exclusion, making the struggle against racism a complex and multifaceted endeavour. In response, African-Americans have historically used various forms of cultural resistance—literature, art, music, and activism—to challenge dominant narratives, assert their humanity, and demand justice.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, born on June 17, 1987, in Compton, California, is widely regarded as one of the most influential and critically acclaimed rappers of his generation. Raised in a challenging environment marked by gang violence, economic hardship, and systemic racism, Lamar's upbringing deeply informs his music and artistic vision. His parents, both African-Americans from Chicago, moved to Compton to escape the violent gang culture there, but Lamar nonetheless grew up witnessing firsthand the social struggles and police brutality that permeate many Black communities in America.

Lamar began his music career in the early 2000s under the moniker K.Dot, releasing mixtapes that showcased his lyrical talent and storytelling ability. Signed with Top Dawg Entertainment (2005) and later co-founded the hip-hop supergroup, Black Hippy, his breakthrough came with the release of his debut studio album *Section.80* (2011), which addressed themes of racial injustice, identity, and the Black experience. This was followed by *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), a concept album that vividly portrayed Lamar's youth in Compton and the challenges of growing up amid violence and poverty. The album received widespread critical acclaim and commercial success, solidifying Lamar's reputation as a profound storyteller.

Kendrick has emerged as one of the most influential and groundbreaking artists of the 21st century, using his music as a powerful weapon to confront and dismantle the systemic racism endured by African-Americans. His work spanning multiple critically acclaimed albums such as *Section.80* (2011), *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), *To Pimp*

a Butterfly (2015), and *DAMN.* (2017), transcends traditional hip-hop boundaries by combining lyrical complexity, social critique, and cultural storytelling. Lamar's music not only entertains but also educates and mobilizes, serving as a form of activism that challenges the deeply entrenched structures of racial inequality in the United States.

Different from the other albums, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* wholly explores themes of racism and its impact on the lives of young people in Compton which means it doesn't have a single song solely dedicated to racism. The album uses the narrative of Kendrick Lamar's own experiences to paint a picture of the realities of racism, violence, and systemic inequality that he and his community faced growing up. The album's title itself reflects the duality of growing up in a challenging environment. It highlights the struggle to maintain innocence and good intentions while navigating a "mad city." "m.A.A.d city" depicts the environment of Compton where violence and crime are prevalent, which are often tied to systemic issues and racial inequality which are not explicitly about racism. How social pressures, particularly in a context of poverty and limited opportunities, can lead individuals to make choices that perpetuate cycles of violence and disadvantage can be found in "The Art of Peer Pressure".

"HiiiPoWeR" is the most direct in its condemnation of racism, while other songs on *Section.80* might touch on related themes of social issues. The song uses its lyrics to call out racism and stereotypes faced by Black people in America, referencing historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. It also touches on the influence of media and the need for unity across ethnicities to combat societal issues.

Through his storytelling, Lamar captures the nuanced realities of African-American life, exposing the persistent impact of racism while also celebrating Black culture, heritage, and strength. Tracks like "Alright" have become anthems of hope and resistance, embraced by movements such as Black Lives Matter, while songs like "The Blacker the Berry" and "DNA." confront both external racism and internalized prejudices with unflinching honesty and poetic intensity.

His ability to articulate the struggles, hopes, and resilience of Black communities has earned him widespread acclaim, including prestigious awards like the Pulitzer Prize for Music (2018) which such a history he made by becoming the first non-classical or jazz musician to received the award by his album *DAMN.*, which the Pulitzer committee described as “*a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African American life.*” Songs like “DNA”, “HUMBLE”, and “FEAR” showcased his ability to weave personal narratives with larger societal issues, making *DAMN* both a critical and commercial success.

In previous study REPRESENTATION OF GANGSTA CULTURE IN NWA’S SELECTED SONGS IN STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON ALBUM (Farhan Purnama Shadiq, 2022) analyzes lyrics that represents *gangsta* culture can be seen through the mention of crime, assault, use of guns, killing, drug dealing, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, social identity, materialism, and misogyny. Farhan found several aspects that represent gangsta culture; importance of reputation and respect socially acceptable and non-acceptable drug types, role of alcohol, misogyny, and money-making in gangsta culture.

Through comprehensive analysis, we seek to illuminate Kendrick Lamar’s enduring impact as an artist-activist who redefines the possibilities of hip-hop as a medium for cultural critique and change. His work not only reflects the lived experience of African-Americans but also contributes to a larger discourse on race, power, and resistance in contemporary society. In doing so, Lamar’s albums stand as vital cultural artifacts that continue to influence and inspire new generations in the ongoing fight to defeat racism and achieve equity and recognition for Black communities.

METHODS

In this study, the research methodology integrates James P. Spradley’s ethnographic approach with Critical Discourse Analysis

(CDA) based on Stuart Hall’s theory of representation and Norman Fairclough’s CDA model to analyze Kendrick Lamar’s albums as cultural texts that confront racism. Spradley’s ethnography emphasizes understanding cultural phenomena from the insider’s perspective by exploring the meanings and experiences embedded in the music, allowing the researcher to interpret the social realities of African-American communities as expressed through Lamar’s lyrics (Spradley, 1979). This participant-centered approach facilitates the identification of cultural domains and themes such as racial identity, oppression, and empowerment.

Complementing this, Stuart Hall’s theory of representation provides a framework to analyze how Lamar’s lyrics construct and challenge racial identities and social meanings, highlighting the role of cultural symbols and ideological processes in shaping perceptions of race and power (Hall, 1997). Meanwhile, Norman Fairclough’s CDA model is employed to critically examine the language, discourse structures, and power relations within the lyrics, focusing on how Lamar’s music resists and reshapes dominant racial discourses through linguistic and social practices (Fairclough, 1995). CDA, as an analytical approach, investigates how language reflects and reproduces social inequalities and how it can be used as a tool for resistance (Van Dijk, 1993).

The data for this study consist of lyrical transcripts from several of Kendrick Lamar’s albums, which are analyzed within their broader historical and social contexts of racial injustice. The analysis follows a systematic process of coding and categorizing themes informed by Spradley’s ethnographic techniques and the critical frameworks of Hall and Fairclough. This multi-method approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the cultural significance and discursive

power of Lamar's music as a form of social commentary and resistance. By combining ethnographic insight with critical discourse analysis, the study reveals how Kendrick Lamar's artistic achievements serve as potent statements against racism and contribute to the empowerment of African-American communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the lyrics that Kendrick uses in some of his songs that the author chooses and the explanations.

"m.A.A.d city" – Trauma and Survival in a Racist Environment

In this song, Lamar depicts the harsh realities of growing up in Compton:

"Wake your punk ass up
It ain't nothin' but a Compton thang, G-yeah
Real simple and plain
Let me teach you some lessons about the street
(Smoke somethin' nigga), hood (sup cuz?)
It ain't nothin' but a Compton thang, G-yeah,
how we do"

It doesn't exactly confront racism directly in the same way that some of his other songs do, but it does explore themes about the impact of systematic inequality and racial inequities in the context of his Compton childhood. The song depicts a neighborhood formed by violence, poverty, and the effects of racial injustice, providing insight into the harsh reality faced by young Black men in that community. But the song does suggest the ways in which systemic racism can impact individual psychology and behavior, leading to internalized negativity and self-destructive patterns.

"Alright" – Collective Hope and Resistance

This song has become an anthem of hope and resistance, especially within movements like Black Lives Matter. Its repeated refrain,

"We gon' be alright,"

functions as a powerful discourse of survival and solidarity. Fairclough's CDA emphasizes how this term challenges mainstream narratives of Black suffering by fostering a communal identity based on endurance and optimism. The song's cultural significance exemplifies how music can raise social awareness and promote communal empowerment. The lyrics,

"We hate the po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho,"

directly address the fear and resentment many Black individuals feel towards law enforcement due to a history of violence and mistreatment. The song addresses bigger concerns of systematic racism and economic inequality that disproportionately affect Black communities, perpetuating a cycle of hardship and restricted opportunity. The third verse digs more into Kendrick's personal difficulties with depression and the impact of these systemic flaws on his own life, providing a more personal take on the larger topics. The message of hope and resilience has struck a chord with the Black Lives Matter movement, making it a potent anthem for social justice and a symbol of resistance to racial inequality.

"DNA" – Affirmation of Black Identity and Complexity

In "DNA" from *DAMN.*, Kendrick asserts the complexity and strength of Black identity with powerful line:

"I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA."

This lyric expresses pride in heritage and cultural legacy, clearly contradicting racist stereotypes that seek to demean African-Americans. The song's forceful tone and vivid imagery highlight both external racism and internal conflicts, reflecting Hall's concept of representation as a location for identity negotiation and contestation. Through Spradley's ethnographic lens, "DNA" captures the lived experience of inheriting

both tragedy and resilience from Black history.

“HUMBLE” – Critique of Ego and Social Expectations

Lamar critiques both individual ego and societal pressures with lines like:

“Sit down, be humble.”

This song questions superficiality and materialism while subtly addressing the clichés of Black masculinity. CDA’s prescriptive tone discloses power dynamics in cultural discourse, encouraging self-awareness and authenticity as forms of resistance against oppressive expectations. The song’s fundamental message of humility can also be interpreted as a reaction to the pressures and temptations of fame, which can be especially intense for Black musicians working in a mostly white industry. This song might be interpreted as a critique of the music industry’s inclination to exploit and manipulate Black artists, notably through the promotion of clichéd stereotypes such as the “gangster rapper”.

“HiiiPoWeR” – Political Awakening and Empowerment

“HiiiPoWeR” explicitly engages with political activism and Black empowerment. Lamar raps:

“I be off the slave ship, building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs.”

This track advocates for awareness-raising and collaborative action, in line with Spradley’s emphasis on participant perspectives, by expressing the grievances and hopes of marginalized communities. Hall’s theory sees this as a representational act that reclaims agency and challenges hegemonic power structures. “HiiiPoWeR” prominently contains the name of Martin Luther King Jr. and makes references to other people such as Huey Newton and Malcolm X, tying the song’s message to the larger history of Black activism and the fight against racism.

The three “i”s in the title (heart, honor, respect) are not just words, but symbols of resilience and self-respect for the Black community, echoing historical advocacy of figures like Martin Luther King Jr. Lamar alludes to the conspiracy theory about Tupac Shakur’s death, implying that even speaking out against the system can have dire effects, implying that Black activists are being targeted.

“The Art of Peer Pressure” – Social Environment and Identity Formation

In “The Art of Peer Pressure”, Kendrick narrates the influence of environment and social dynamics on youth behavior:

“It’s the art of peer pressure, I’m caught up in the moment.”

This ethnographic storytelling demonstrates how institutional racism and poverty influence individual choices, supporting Fairclough’s emphasis on discourse as rooted in social context. The song highlights the cyclical cycle of violence and survival in impoverished neighborhoods. Instead of directly addressing racism, the song concentrates on themes of conformity and the difficulties of navigating adolescence in a hard environment. The song explores the narrator’s internal conflict as he succumbs to peer pressure, experimenting with drugs and alcohol in order to feel accepted.

“The Blacker the Berry” – Confronting External and Internal Racism

This song is a raw confrontation of racism and self-reflection. Kendrick’s lines,

“You hate me don’t you?
You hate my people, your plan i to terminate my culture”

directly accuse systemic oppression, while the introspective verse,

“So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?”

When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?"

exposes internalized conflicts. This dual critique aligns with Spradley's ethnographic goal of understanding cultural complexities and Fairclough's analysis of power relation within discourse. The song addresses historical and contemporary racism and prejudice against Black people in America. Lamar utilizes strong language to express his outrage and dissatisfaction with the systemic injustice and bigotry directed at Black people. He discusses how Black people are frequently stigmatized and criticized based on their color. Lamar discusses the concept of being "hypocrite" in the context of racism, notably when discussing Black-on-Black violence and Trayvon Martin's death, while also admitting to his own potential for violence. He challenges how Black people can completely criticize external racism while there is violence in their neighborhood.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Kendrick Lamar's music serves as a powerful and complex form of resistance against racism in African-American communities. Using James P. Spradley's ethnographic method, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, the analysis reveals how Lamar's lyrics engage with the lived realities of systemic oppression, internalized racial struggles, and social marginalization. His songs capture these experiences while simultaneously actively challenging and reshaping mainstream racial narratives, promoting cultural pride, social awareness, and communal strength.

Tracks like "DNA," "Alright," "HUMBLE," "The Blacker the Berry," "m.A.A.d city," and "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" show Lamar's distinct ability to combine intimate storytelling with broader socio-political critique. His music goes beyond enjoyment, serving as a cultural text that inspires listeners to address racial injustice and envision paths to social change. Lamar's critical acclaim and several important accolades, including multiple Grammys, demonstrate the musical

greatness and cultural relevance of his contributions to music and social conversation.

Moreover, Kendrick Lamar's impact extends beyond African-American communities, eliciting reactions from artists across racial and cultural lines. Many white artists and industry figures have publicly acknowledged Lamar's artistry and the urgency of his messages. For example, artists like Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift have expressed admiration for Lamar's lyrical depth and social consciousness, recognizing how his work challenges listeners to engage with difficult issues of race and inequality. This cross-cultural recognition highlights Lamar's role in broadening public conversations about racism, making his music a bridge that fosters empathy and understanding across diverse audiences.

However, Lamar's open and outspoken indictment of systematic racism has provoked disagreement and discomfort in some groups, reflecting America's enduring racial tensions. His capacity to elicit critical thought and dialogue is part of what makes his work so important and revolutionary. By tackling painful truths, Lamar challenges both Black and non-Black audiences to reconsider long-held biases and power systems.

In conclusion, Kendrick Lamar's albums are compelling and bold protests against racism, demonstrating music's critical function as a tool for cultural expression, political resistance, and social emancipation. His artistic successes not only highlight African-American perspectives, but also motivate a larger audience to think critically about racial justice concerns. Lamar's work demonstrates how art can confront oppression, build solidarity, and make a significant contribution to the continuous struggle for equality and human decency.

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