

The Butterfly Straight Outta Compton: Analysis of Hip-hop Music and Its Impact on Black Rights Movements

Zijun Peng^{1,a,*}

¹St. Anselm's Abbey School, Washington D.C., 20017, the United States

a. zpeng@saintanselms.org

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Hip-hop music and its relationship with African American rights movements was not widely studied in the last 40 years. Most of the research focuses on its protest attribute and how it links to the police violence after Black civil Rights Movements.. This essay turns instead to the contrast between the hip-hop music in the 1980s and 2010s. Contextualizing N.W.A(Niggas with Attitude)'s music within the rising awareness of Black rights and the increase of police violence shows both their protest attribute and desire for justice through "Gangster Rap," which is represented by the lyrics of violence, drug and sex. Kendrick Lamar, on the other hand, expresses his idea of protest and self-reflection in a more "activist" way through "Conscious Rap," which focuses on socio-political, economic and cultural issues. The two artists' lyrics and their time reveal how popular culture influences the ideas of people and how the Black rights movements changes

Keywords: Hip-hop music, African American, the 1980s and 2010s, Kendrick Lamar, N.W.A

1. Introduction

1.1. Intro

When being asked what hip-hop is, many artists will consider it from a music perspective: strong beat drum, rhythm, rhyme, or even sample. However, the great Chinese director Yan Min, who is famous for directing "Rap for Youth," gave a different opinion, "The Essence of Hip-hop is to shout out for the disadvantaged minority." The nature of that "shout" changes over time: hip-hop has been very different in different times and places, as the music responds to social movements and disadvantaged groups. In Asia, the minority is always considered as children, females, or working class, but in the United States, hip-hop is traditionally considered as the expression of African Americans' demands in a violent way. In recent years, although the way for it to convey its message seems more "sophisticated", the core of it has not changed. In the essay, it is trying to analyze the shift of hip-hop music from violent rebellion to political activism between the 1980s and 2010s and how it shares the same characteristics with the African American rights movement and to some extent lead the movements.

1.2. Previous Studies

Generally speaking, the study of hip-hop music is not a long and hot topic. In Tarcia Rose's book *Black Noise Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* in 1995, she firstly studied hip-hop community and culture in a systematic way. She generally discusses the process of culture making in a capitalist society and how to understand rap music in such a structure. She also develops several ways of learning and interpreting the culture. Further, as an African American woman of a second-generation immigrant family, she gives some of her specific understanding of the culture [1]. In the book, Tarcia Rose focused on multiple artists and songs specifically, including N.W.A(Niggas With Attitude) and their song *Fuck tha Police*. She mainly points out its influence to the FBI and police department, people's reaction to it, and how hip-hop music expressed African Americans' rage in the 1980s.

Due to their recent time and still potential influence, Kendrick Lamar and his album *To Pimp a Butterfly* has not been studied a lot. The major discussion focuses on *Alright* and its protest attribute, Todd Craig, in *Open Season 2015*, mainly analyzed the lyrics of *Alright* and *For Sale*, and gives the album the name of "the blackest album. [2]" Rachel S. Vandagriff did much study on *Alright*. In her "Talking about a Revolution: Protest Music and Popular Culture, from Selma, Alabama, to Ferguson, Missouri," she focused on the protest content in the lyrics and the influence of them on young African American [3].

1.3. Methods

This essay would provide another division on the relationship between hip-hop and black rights movements. While the previous historians have focused on N.W.A's influence on the police department, I would like to explore their impact on the "movements" or rage of people at that time. As for Kendrick Lamar, historians have discussed his protest elements in the songs a lot, but I will try to explore what he is really conveying to us: self-reflection, self-love and the way an "activist" fights for rights.

2. Analysis

2.1. Background in the 1980s and analysis of N.W.A's *Fuck tha Police*

As one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, Compton has held its violent reputation since the 1970s. Considering its poverty and poor order, it is quite surprising that it is home to several hall-of-fame artists, represented by N.W.A and Kendrick Lamar. However, they come from two completely different time frames, and both of them were shaped by the time and influenced their time. Let's first consider N.W.A and Compton in the 1980s.

The 1980s is an important period in the post-civil Rights Movement time, which contains both the rise of African Americans' rights and the potential crisis. On the one hand, in 1981, the death of Micheal Donald and the murderer's execution represented the last recorded lynching in America, which ended this long heinous action. On the other hand, the crack cocaine epidemic had a great influence on American society. Due to the overproduction of drugs in Columbia, crack cocaine gained much popularity in the 1980s. At that time, a dosage of crack could be as cheap as \$2.50 in Los Angeles [4]. The popularity of drugs, together with the heavy concentration of African American families in poor cities, led to a significantly greater impact on their communities compared to others. From 1984 to 1989, the homicide rate for Black teenagers increased to double, while for Black adults aged 18 to 24, it increased by nearly the same alarming rate [5]. Compton, in this time, turned to a mostly black community and gained its reputation of violence. N.W.A.(Niggas with Attitude), under this circumstance, was established in 1987, consisting of Arabian Prince, Ice-Cube, Eazy-E, MC REN,

Dr. Dre and DJ Yella. They are considered as one of the most successful hip-hop groups of all time. After their first album *Straight Outta Compton* released in 1988, they got popular rapidly all over the United States and led the trend of “Gangster rap,” which is represented by the lyrics of violence, drug and sex and the fierce beat drum.

In this album, the most famous song is *Fuck tha Police*, which I will analyze first as my primary source. In the beginning, N.W.A establish a court, which is the police always use, to judge the police department:

Right about now NWA court is in full effect

Judge Dre presiding, in the case of NWA versus the police department.

Prosecuting attorneys are MC Ren, Ice Cube and Eazy motherfuckin' E [6]

In reality, the police department and juries used the court to judge the African Americans, give them false accusations, and get rid of the crime themselves. Here N.W.A. reverse the condition, judging the police department with all-black attorneys. They try to put the police in African Americans’ shoes and treat them in the same way as they do. In Ice Cube’s lyrics, he straightforwardly points out the condition they are facing:

Fuck the police comin' straight from the underground

A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown

And not the other color, so police think

They have the authority to kill a minority

The conflict between “authority” and “minority” was clearly narrated by Ice Cube. He sings the part with rage and power. Also, although the police hate at that time was noticeable, Ice Cube is the first artist to diss the police in public by saying “straight from the underground.” It is reasonable to say that he is the one who declared the formal war against the police department. After that, Ice Cube expresses a confusing fact:

But don't let it be a black and a white one

'Cause they'll slam ya down to the street top

Black police showing out for the white cop

It is kind of surprising that black police did the same thing to African Americans, but in fact, it is a widely happening event all over America. Prince George County in Maryland can be a great example on the east coast. Prince Jones, a student from Howard University and a future Navy member, was shot by several black police because he was mistaken for a drug dealer [7]. Despite having a large percent of middle-class African Americans, Prince George county experiences indifference from its police force towards the residents. It is not only a racial hatred that causes police violence, but also a deeper problem that happened inside the black community.

In the chorus, they just repeat the title “fuck the police,” and finally, N.W.A finds the white police guilty and sends him to jail. The reaction of the cop is interesting:

Wait, that's a lie! That's a goddamn lie!

I want justice! I want justice!

Fuck you, you black motherfuckers!

It is a satire scene in the song. After experiencing injustice, the white police keep shouting “I want justice” to ask for fair judgements. Since his shouting fails to save him, he, at last, shows his racist nature by saying “you black motherfucker.” Here N.W.A reverses the situation again. Justice is the demand of all the innocent Black victims under police violence. When it happens to African Americans, the police never care about it. However, when the tragedy goes to themselves, they show their strong desire for justice. Such a court scene implicitly expresses the real demands of African Americans to stop the violence in a more “formal” and “legal” way, though it is a song full of violence.

2.2. Influence

Generally speaking, the influence of the song is incredible. As I point out before, it is the first time that an artist diss the police in such a direct way. *Fuck tha Police* is like the shot over Lexington. It started another peak of black rights movements after the Civil Rights Movement. People went on the street and fought against police violence with the slogans of “fuck the police.” The “movements,” or just violence triggered by anger, at that time were somehow guided by their songs. For example, in 1992, after the incident of Rodney King, the 1992 Los Angeles riots broke out, resulting in the death of 63 people, with 2,383 more injured. The songs of N.W.A and its major members Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, such as *Black Korea* by Ice Cube, were widely used as the symbols of the movements. However, it is significant to notice that it is more like a depiction of the real condition young African Americans were facing in the communities like Compton, rather than deliberately inciting society to pay attention to black issues. As I said before, the “movements” in this period were literally expressions of African Americans’ rage.

2.3. Background in the 2010s and Analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s *The Blacker the Berry*

20 years later, Compton and the United States changed a lot. After its peak in the 1980s, the criminal rate dropped quickly in the late 1990s and 2000s in Compton. The government officers and police made multiple important policies to avoid the crime. In the United States in general, the treatment of African Americans did not change much. It was considered as a landmark that in 2008, Barack Obama became the first African American president in America, but the fact proved that he failed to do many useful things for black communities: “As our first black president, he has avoided mention of race almost entirely. In having to be “twice as good” and “half as black,” Obama reveals the false promise and double standard of integration.” said by Ta-nehisi Coates.[8] In real life, with the increasing popularity of mobile phones and the Internet, more incidents of police violence were exposed by the media: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Micheal Brown... Though African Americans had tried a lot to avoid the appearance of these names, they just could not stop. The way of the movements need changes.

In this case, another talented artist was on his way straight outta Compton, which is Kendrick Lamar. He is influenced by N.W.A a lot and was signed by Dr. Dre’s Ruthless Records. Therefore, in his second album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, he released a number of songs concerned with gangsters, such as *m.A.A.d city*. Nonetheless, after he saw the struggles of African Americans these years he cannot help thinking about the future of African Americans and the rights movements. Three years later, he released his third album, which is considered as the “blackest” album of all time [2]: *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

In this album, Kendrick focuses on the image of a “butterfly.” The process for a caterpillar to a butterfly takes time and energy, and in the album, Kendrick’s mind is growing from song to song, and finally becomes the butterfly. In my opinion, the growing of his mind also represents the development of the black rights movement. In the first stage, *King Kunta* cites many words from Micheal Jackson, James Brown and Stars Wesley, representing the movements in the 1980s and 1990s. In the second stage, *Alright* and *the Blacker the Berry* typically expressed Kendrick’s self-reflection on the movements of the past 30 years. It is also the first time that an African American artist expresses the crime, self-reflection and guilt of the community itself. Here I’ll analyze the lyrics of *The Blacker the Berry*, trying to explore the thoughts of Kendrick Lamar.

The name of the song comes from the novel *The Blacker the Berry* in 1929. It is an interesting wordplay. “Black” represents both the color of berry and people, and together with “the sweeter the juice,” is trying to say that “the blacker a person is, the stronger/ smarter he is.” In the beginning, Kendrick Lamar directly acknowledges that “I’m the biggest hypocrite in 2015. [9]” It is confusing

for people here, and the reasons he regards himself hypocrite has not been revealed until the last verse. In the next few lines, he declares his pride as an African American: “my hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide.” It is shameful for many people to speak out about the characteristics of their race, especially private things like “dick,” but Kendrick is not. He is proud of his identity and culture. In the last sentence of the verse, Kendrick claims one of his crimes as a “killer,” which is made by “you.” Here “you” can be interpreted in many ways. It represents the government organizations such as the CIA and FBI, who resulted in the Crack Cocaine Epidemic in black community. It can also symbolize the strong racism existing in American society. These burdens are born with African Americans, and force many of them to engage in illegal activities, like selling drugs or joining the gangs. However, when working on these jobs, they are hurting the other African Americans. As Kendrick expresses in another song in this album, *Institutionalized*: it is an “institutionalized” problem in the United States. He is trying to reflect on the crime of the African Americans themselves, not simple racial problems. In the last verse, he explicitly claims the fault of black. At first, he uses the example of Prius and Crips:

*It's funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war
Two tribal armies that wanna build and destroy
Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that live next door
Beefin' with Pirus, only death settle the score*

He compares Zulu and Xhosa with Prius and Crips, questioning why black people have to kill each other for just money and territory. On the one hand, he satirizes both gangs, regarding them as the tribes in the middle age. On the other hand, he finds these fights meaningless, which would only destroy the African American communities themselves. After that, he listed some of the stereotypes African Americans always have

*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*

Watermelon, chicken, Michael Jordan and Marcus Garvey...They are significant elements of African American culture. Kendrick tries to use them to remind the community what an African American needs to do to save his community. In the last sentence of the song, he gives the blame to himself again: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street/ When gang-banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?/ Hypocrite!” Different from the mainstream reaction to Trayvon Martin’s death, he is not raging but reflecting. Kendrick Lamar blames those African Americans who only cry for victims of police violence, but ignores the victims of gangster violence as “hypocrites.” In 2012, there were more than 2000 people who died from the gangsters, and most of them were Black. The conflicts inside the African American community are sometimes more severe, but nobody truly realized or pointed out the problem. In the whole song, Kendrick implies that African Americans should sometimes reflect on themselves: hatred and rage cannot change their situation. Eventually, they have to start to change from themselves.

2.4. Influence

Compared to *Straight Outta Compton*, the influence of *To Pimp A Butterfly* is not that heated. Its protest attribute, similar to *Fuck tha Police*, is the first thing people notice. The chorus of the *Alright* “We gon’ be alright” has widely become the slogan of the movements this time [10]. Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics, different from N.W.A, is more like poetry and speech, instead of rage expression. His attention turned to racism, rather than simple police violence in the 1980s and 1990s. In his songs, people gradually explore the roots of the violence before and try to solve them in a more “activism” way. Further, Kendrick Lamar’s another significant idea of self-reflection was not widely realized

until 2020. At first when the album was released, Kendrick's attitude was criticized by many people. Stereo Williams, for instance, described *The Blacker the Berry* as "a great song derailed by a misguided intention. [11]" Nevertheless, when BLM rose to its another peak in 2020, Kendrick's thoughts were discovered again. People started to reflect on the "movements" in the past, and stop using violence. Kendrick Lamar, like his predecessor 20 years before, led another advance in black rights movements.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of popular culture to modern human rights movements, especially hip-hop for African American', has been widely underestimated by the public for a long time. In the 18th and 19th century, as Lynn Hunt claimed in her *Inventing Human Rights A History*, popular culture was created by the upper class. It was Rousseau, a white middle-class man, writing the struggles of the workers and women. However, in the 20th and 21st century, hip-hop itself is a medium for lower-class people to express their demands. During the 1980s and 1990s, five young guys from Compton started N.W.A, and their songs started the 20-year resistance to police violence. After them, Kendrick Lamar, a little kid from ghetto, explores the potential of hip-hop to a higher level. He and his thoughts in the lyrics to some extent start the trend of self-reflection and the shifts of people's attention from police violence to racism. The hip-hop music, in the last decades of years, has provided guides and slogans for the black rights movements. In the foreseen future, African Americans will continue to fight for their rights. Potentially, the next civil Rights Movement will be led by another hip-hop artist from Compton.

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