

REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN THE 2010s HIP-HOP

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ABSTRACT. *Representations of Black Masculinity in the 2010s Hip-Hop.*

One of the most well-known perceptions of contemporary African-American males comes from hip-hop music, a genre dominated largely by Black men. The overly sexual, hypermasculine, angry and aggressive persona is a characteristic of these performers. However, in recent years, this toxic masculinity has been challenged and deconstructed by mainstream artists. Important voices in hip-hop, such as Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West and Jay-Z are embracing a more truthful and intellectual approach to what it means to be a Black man in the United States. This paper sets out to explore these changes, exemplifying them through the lyrics of commercially successful and critically acclaimed rappers.

Keywords: *hip-hop, rapper, Black masculinity, Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar.*

REZUMAT. *Reprezentări ale masculinității de culoare în muzica Hip-Hop contemporană.*

Una dintre cele mai cunoscute percepții asupra bărbaților afro-americani contemporani provine din muzica hip-hop, un gen dominat în mare parte de bărbații negri. Personalitatea excesiv de sexuală, hipermasculină, furioasă și agresivă este o caracteristică a acestor artiști. Cu toate acestea, în ultimii ani, această masculinitate toxică a fost contestată și deconstruită de artiști în vogă precum Kendrick Lamar, Jay-Z și Kanye West, care adoptă o abordare mai onestă și mai intelectuală asupra ceea ce înseamnă să fii un bărbat de culoare în Statele Unite. Această lucrare își propune să analizeze aceste schimbări, exemplificându-le prin versurile rapperilor comerciali de succes și a celor apreciați de critici.

Cuvinte cheie: *hip-hop, rapper, masculinitate afro-americană, Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar.*

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Hip-Hop History and its Effect on Black Masculinity

The 2018 Pulitzer Prize in music was awarded to Kendrick Lamar, a hip-hop artist from the streets of Compton. He was the first non-jazz or classical artist to receive such an accolade. Lamar's 2017 album, *DAMN.*, offers a look at the lives of young Black men who experience extreme poverty and gang violence, but it also offers insight into the inner struggles, insecurities, and worries of Black men. This theme is not new to Lamar's music, but the sweeping commercial success and the critical acclaim of the album signals an important change in what is considered the "usual" style and topic of hip-hop.

Hip-Hop functions as a reflection on the culture surrounding the American Black community. Its origins can be traced back to 1973, to Kool DJ Herc who first used the turntable to create beats in a way which had not been done before (Blanchard). However, the spoken word rhyming structure predates hip-hop. Blanchard claims that its predecessor could be "African-American rhyming games, as forms of resistance to systems of subjugation and slavery" (Blanchard). With this tactic, African-American slaves were already using a pre-concept of today's rap as a means of social advocacy. Furthermore, Blanchard underlines that "rhyming games encoded race relations between African-American slaves and their white masters in a way that allowed them to pass the scrutiny of suspicious overseers. Additionally, rhyming games allowed slaves to use their creative intellect to provide inspiration and entertainment." The entertainment and inspirational value is a very prominent feature of contemporary rap music, as well.

This genre is often named "the CNN of Black people" because of the above-mentioned role it plays. Many rappers use their experiences and reflect on the issues their communities face; even today, social and political advocacy is a common trait of this style, although a lot of it has become different with the commercialization of hip-hop. In this paper, I will discuss contemporary mainstream rappers' works, mainly focusing on their lyrics. The idea of Black masculinity is closely tied to hip-hop because it is a Black male-dominated genre and it showcases one of the most well-known Black male roles.² This stereotyping also occurs with Black male athletes: the main characteristics of these men are closely tied to their physical prowess; they are viewed as exceptionally strong, violent, hypermasculine and sexually promiscuous. Lemelle (51) argues that the buying and selling of Black men between various sports teams is very similar to the slave trade, and it is a way of controlling the

² This occurs not necessarily because the stereotypes are true, but because the genre is very popular in the United States and globally, it is also one of the only Black male-dominated areas of entertainment, so it has a great effect on how Black men are perceived.

Black male image. It is important to also note that Black male rappers and athletes are characterized similarly: their public image generally portrays them as wild, violent, criminal or improper in some capacity. This image is contested and challenged by both rappers and athletes in various ways. Throughout my paper, I will examine the way rappers respond to these stereotypes. Athletes, on the other hand, have also made progress to diminish the savage stereotype associated with them. For example, in 2014, football player Michael Sam announced publicly that he is gay (Connelly), before the NFL draft began. After the draft, Michael Sam has become the first openly gay NFL player. Similarly, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick started protesting in 2016 during the national anthems played before games. He did not stand up, and after a while he started kneeling during the anthems, as opposed to standing with his hand on his heart. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color", he explained to NFL Media.

Rappers arguably have a more prominent social role because their main media format revolves around language. Blanchard mentions that "rappers are viewed as the voice of poor, urban African-American youth, whose lives are generally dismissed or misrepresented by the mainstream media. They are the keepers of contemporary African-American working-class history and concerns." Many rappers fit into the role of prophet, activist, or the voice of their community, but in some cases, these positive attributes are met with negative stereotypes, the most prominent one being the hypermasculinity with which the hip-hop scene has been saturated for the longest time. This archetype of the overtly sexual, misogynistic, homophobic and violent Black male was extremely popular for many reasons, which I will elaborate on in this paper. However, in recent years, the image of black men in hip-hop has been shifting towards a more subdued and less violent one. Ioan Marc Jones argues that mainstream rappers such as J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, and Kid Cudi are paving the way for black men to embrace and show the vulnerability which was either hidden behind bravado or completely rejected before. In my paper, I will explore and exemplify these changes through select contemporary mainstream artists' work, focusing on themes which are discussed in their music, compared to prior rappers and their topics and personas. First, I will examine Jay-Z's career because he started out as a typical "gangsta rapper", but his style and the topics he discusses in his music have gone through a change from the 1990s to today. I chose to examine Kendrick Lamar as the quintessential contemporary rapper because of his sweeping commercial success and because his brand and public image incorporate inquisitiveness and social commentary. There are other artists such as J. Cole, Common, Kid

Cudi or Chance the Rapper whose work incorporates similar ideals and social commentary. Further research and discussion will expand the contemporary rapper's image.

Black Men in Early Hip-Hop

Why is the black male so exaggeratedly violent and hypermasculine in hip-hop? Blanchard argues that it is not a picture deliberately created by the artists, it is, in actuality, the reality from which they come to the forefront of popular culture. "Violence in rap is not an affective agent that threatens to harm America's youth; rather, it is the outcry of an already-existing problem from youth whose worldviews have been shaped by experiencing deep economic inequalities divided largely along racial lines." The imagery used by rappers reflects the violence and helplessness of the low-income, crime-riddled communities they come from. Songs such as N. W. A.'s "Fuck tha Police" (1988) touch upon the violence committed not only by the Compton-community, but also by the police officers who racially profile black males as drug dealers and violent offenders, even if they are simply occupying a space such as the streets of their neighborhoods.

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
(...) Fuckin' with me cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product
Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics (N.W.A.a)

The lyrics are violent and provocative, but they discuss the reality black men faced on the streets of Compton in 1988. The rap group N.W.A. was even under FBI surveillance and protested by politicians for their harsh and outspoken nature, even though they were not breaking any laws (*The Defiant Ones*). The band members also showcased the strong, overly masculine and "hard" personas which were commonly associated with gang members or criminals in 'hoods which were considered dangerous or criminally charged. In earlier songs, the topics of social injustice are presented with more bravado and attitude, and the problems were shown through the eyes of a strong black man who is standing up to authority. Gangsta rap defines violence as a part of life or even as something necessary to prove one's worth in society. N.W.A.'s song "Straight Outta Compton" (1988) defines the band as a gang and introduces

its members as strong men who do not respect the law, have guns and are not afraid of violence. The lyrics are charged with bravado and each band member displays a “hard” attitude:

Straight outta Compton!
Crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube
From the gang called Niggas Wit Attitudes
When I’m called off, I got a sawed-off
Squeeze the trigger and bodies get hauled off (N.W.A.b)

The first verse by Ice Cube sets the tone to the entire song in which all three band members assert their dominance similarly, by making claims about how they operate the same way street gangs do and how they are strong and smart with “street knowledge” (N.W.A.b) to avoid prosecution and weapons and power to intimidate other gangs – both in music and in the hood.

So, according to depictions that appear in earlier hip-hop, black men are strong, hypermasculine and confrontational, sex is a motivating factor and black men’s sexual performance is regarded as a matter of pride. On the other hand, women are viewed through this sexist perspective as well, referred to as “hos”, “bitches” or other derogatory terms. The topic of women is generally closely tied to sex. As the song “I Get Around” by 2Pac shows, men are expected to be with many partners and to not be in a committed relationship, and women are reduced to their sexual desires and availability.

Back to get wrecked, all respect
To those who break their neck to keep their hoes in check
'Cause, oh, they sweat a brother majorly
And I don't know why your girl keeps pagin' me
She tell me that she needs me, cries when she leaves me
And every time she sees me, she squeeze me—lady, take it easy!
Hate to sound sleazy, but tease me
I don't want it if it's that easy
Ayo, bust it, baby got a problem saying "bye-bye"
Just another hazard of a fly guy (2Pac, Shock-G, Money-B)

Sexual dominance is a very strong stereotype linked to black males, Lemelle points out that the black penis image is prominent in culture since the times of slavery (49). He quotes Alvin Poussant and Amy Alexander who found that taking pride in their sexuality is characteristic of urban African-American youth “who have little else to be proud of than their perceived sexual prowess” (49). Lemelle uses feminist rhetoric to argue that although black hypermasculinity is a strong stereotype, the black male is also feminized by

the Eurocentric culture (50): although he is viewed as strong and savage, he has no power over white society, led by white men, so he is reduced to a role similar to what women hold. Through the white gaze, black masculinity is viewed as savage behavior. Miles and Brown point out that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europeans used the antithetical images of savage vs civilized to create a division between the two races. And, “[i]n the act of defining Africans as ‘black’ and ‘savages’, and thereby excluding them from their world, Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were representing themselves as ‘white’ and ‘civilised’” (50).

Lemelle notes that this racist distinction is still present in contemporary culture and the hypermasculine, overly sexualized black male body is still treated similarly to slaves: one obvious example is the treatment of black athletes through buying and selling them to teams in a manner similar to the slave trade, as I mentioned above. Lemelle also brings up the strong discrimination in the prison and housing system: segregation kept African-Americans in slum housing, in bad schools and deliberately held them back from social progress; even today, these obstacles are not entirely gone. Hip-Hop music also has a similar connotation: while this genre is mainly black-controlled, record labels are generally owned by white people who profit off the enormous success of black artists. Marketing strategies are developed around the stereotype of the hypermasculine black male because it confirms the biases of the white gaze. Lemelle (51) argues that the black man labeled “other” is also feminized because he is placed under the white male who still dominates him.

In 2010s hip-hop, however, there is a definite change in what is considered the quintessential black male rapper. The gangsta attitude which was very prominent in the early 1990s and stretched over the following decade of rap music is slowly fading or it is deconstructed by many mainstream rappers who no longer identify with the violent hypermasculine persona. The “gangsta” attitude, however, is not gone, there are many rappers who still identify with it, simply because many of them come from backgrounds which involve gangs (e.g. 21 Savage’s name refers to the 21 gang he belonged to). Another change from the early days of hip-hop to contemporary is the breakthrough and sweeping commercial success of female rappers such as Nicki Minaj or Cardi B. Of course, there were women rappers before them as well (Missy Elliot, Lil’ Kim, Lauryn Hill, etc.), but the impact of contemporary rappers is important to underline. Nicki Minaj is critically acclaimed and commercially as successful as her male counterparts. She uses similar bravado and style to push back against the male perspective; this is showcased in her 2018 single, “Barbie Dreams” where she pushes male rappers into the role of “hoes” and she becomes the “playa”, the promiscuous, sexually in control woman whose

sexual prowess is desired by the men around her. She uses The Notorious B.I.G.'s 1994 song "Just Playing (Dreams)" where he discusses his desire towards various R&B singers. The chorus repeats "Dreams of fucking an R&B bitch / I'm just playing... I'm just saying" (Notorious B.I.G.). Nicki Minaj samples the song and uses its premise to exert power over some rappers, naming them and questioning their sexual prowess and bravado: "Man I ain't got no type like Jxmmi or Swae Lees / But if he can't fuck three times a night, peace! / I tried to fuck 50 for a powerful hour / But all that nigga wants is to talk *Power* for hours." (Nicki Minaj) Then she proceeds to change the original song's chorus to "Dreams of fucking one of these little rappers / I'm just playing, I'm just saying.", thus further diminishing the named men's power. Of course, the subject of female rappers and the roles they play is a topic of research which could not be fit into this paper, but it is important to note their presence because they discuss and challenge male rappers' behavior.

It was pointed out by critics that this widely circulated gangsta figure portrayed by many rappers may have had detrimental effects on how black youth view themselves; the lyrics and the cocky, boisterous attitude is passed on to the young black men who listen to hip-hop. This is certainly true in some aspects, but Belle (288) claims that "although in some ways, hip-hop is a microcosm of patriarchal and hegemonic ideals promoting male domination physically, financially, and lyrically, I also encourage listeners and critics to acknowledge the undeniable sense of freedom hip-hop manages to provide to Black men, particularly those from working-class communities." She also points out that rappers are mixing the "thug"³ persona with intellectualism (289). She uses "Otis" by Kanye West and Jay-Z to illustrate the sophisticated nature of their material. The line "Build your fences, we building tunnels / can't you see we getting money up under you? / Can't you see the private jets flying over you?" (Jay-Z, Kanye West) is not only bragging about wealth, which used to be quite common for rappers who made millions and managed to become rich and famous. Kanye and Jay-Z challenge the authority of powerful white men, referencing the wall being built at the southern border of the United States, with the intent to keep immigrants out of the country. These lines signify the fact that although the white elite constantly creates obstacles for people of color to succeed, they find a way to overcome the systematic oppression. Jay-Z is a great example of change in both tone and attitude, he began his career in the era of gangsta rap but today he plays a different role.

³ Belle explains that she uses the term "thug" as "a play on the stereotypical representations of Black men and masculinity in the media that present the image that Black men are too aggressive, violent, and angry" (289). This persona was adopted by most gangsta rappers in the early 1990s.

Jay-Z: Drug Dealer Turned Millionaire

At the beginning of his career and at the top of his commercial success, Jay-Z implemented most of the above-mentioned tropes of black masculinity into his work, and, as Belle (295) points out, he contemplates masculinity in many songs. His most famous song, “99 Problems” has a hook which would lead listeners to think that it is a sexist song about women: “If you’re having girl problems, I feel bad for you, son / I got ninety-nine problems but a bitch ain’t one” (Jay-Z 2003). Although this is repeated throughout the song, it addresses three different topics which have little to do with women. Jay-Z addresses critics who claim that mainstream rappers are losing their legitimacy because they keep rapping about riches:

I've got the Rap Patrol on the gat patrol
Foes that wanna make sure my casket's closed
Rap critics that say he's Money, Cash, Hoes
I'm from the hood, stupid! What type of facts are those?
If you grew up with holes in your Zapatots
You'd celebrate the minute you was havin' dough (Jay-Z 2003)

He also addresses racial profiling and racist cops in the second verse: “I heard ‘Son, do you know why I’m stopping you for?’ / ‘Cause I'm young and I'm Black and my hat's real low? / Do I look like a mind reader, sir? I don't know” (2003). However, in the third verse, he switches to a third theme, a man who he deems a “pussy” because he pretends to be tough. Belle (296) explains that “[b]ecause the said man would not “bust a grape in a fruit fight,” the suggestion is that he is not a man, because he cannot exert violent force onto another man.” Violent behavior used to be expected from Black men in mainstream hip-hop songs: “You gain ‘street credibility’ by being hyperviolent, homophobic, and heteronormative, while degrading women” (Belle 296).

Today, Jay-Z is a very different rapper: having started out as a drug dealer in Brooklyn, he is now a millionaire with many businesses next to his successful rap career. In his more current music, he sheds the bravado and the hypermasculine behavior. Instead, he becomes much more introspective and he shows vulnerability. His 2017 album, *4:44* focuses on his marriage with Beyoncé, and the very public fact that he had cheated on her. In the track “4:44” he candidly discusses his guilt and pleads for forgiveness from his wife:

Took me too long for this song, I don't deserve you
I harassed you out in Paris
'Please come back to Rome,' you make it home

We talked for hours when you were on tour
'Please pick up the phone, pick up the phone!'
I said 'don't embarrass me' instead of 'be mine'
That was my proposal for us to go steady
That was your twenty-first birthday
You matured faster than me, I wasn't ready
So I apologize (Jay-Z 2017a)

He addresses the bravado and the lack of emotion with which he treated his wife, owns up to the fact that he was emotionally unavailable and even apologizes for not being more empathetic when Beyoncé suffered a miscarriage. The emotional vulnerability intensifies in the third verse where he expresses anxiety over the possibility that he will have to explain his behavior in the future to his children.

And if my children knew, I don't even know what I would do
If they ain't look at me the same
I would prob'ly die with all the shame
'You did what with who?'
What good is a ménage à trois when you have a soulmate?
'You risked that for Blue⁴?'
If I wasn't a superhero in your face
My heart breaks for the day I had to explain my mistakes
And the mask goes away and Santa Claus is fake (Jay-Z 2017a)

The way Jay-Z handles the subject matter certainly changes his image in the eyes of the public. He completely sheds his former persona and replaces it with a more subdued, vulnerable man's voice, a voice which is not trying to exert power or dominance. Thus, the lyrics come across as more sincere and thoughtful compared to "99 Problems" where his tone suggests power and self-assuredness.

A similar tone is used in "The Story of O.J.," a song in which Jay-Z addresses the hardships Black men face in the United States. Even as a very successful and respected millionaire, he finds that he cannot be equal to white men. "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga / Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga / Still nigga" (Jay-Z 2017b) is the hook of the song in which he claims that no matter what status a Black man has in the United States, his main characteristic will still be his blackness. However, it is important to note that he does not express any wish to erase his blackness or become white. On the contrary, he continues with "O.J. be like 'I'm not Black,

⁴ Blue Ivy is Jay-Z and Beyoncé's daughter.

I'm O.J.'... Okay." He leaves a three-second pause before the "okay", creating a judgemental tone. O.J. Simpson reportedly uttered the controversial sentence sometime around his criminal trial, but ultimately his skin color was the main factor which helped him avoid a prison sentence. O.J. Simpson is a black man who used to be a very successful football player in the 1970s and who was tried and acquitted in 1995 for the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown-Simpson and her friend, Ron Goldman. His trial began closely after the L.A. Riots and, although DNA evidence tied him to the crime scene, O.J. was acquitted because his lawyers tactfully used his race and the systematic oppression of black men to create sympathy for him amongst the jury. These tactics are considered controversial because O.J. did not advocate for black people once he had earned his fame and fortune, instead he adapted to the rich white elite who were now his neighbors and friends.

Jay-Z continues by expressing his dismay with O.J. who assimilated into the white elite, instead of advocating for the Black community.

House nigga, don't fuck with me
I'm a field nigga, go shine cutlery
Go play the quarters where the butlers be
Imma play the corners where the hustlers be (Jay-Z 2017b)

Jay-Z still wrestles with the thought of true freedom for Black Americans. He feels as though their skin color traps them under the whites in the social hierarchy. His only hope is financial independence:

You wanna know what's more important than throwin' away money at
a strip club? Credit
You ever wonder why Jewish people own all the property in America?
This how they did it
Financial freedom my only hope
Fuck livin' rich and dyin' broke
I bought some artwork for one million
Two years later, that shit worth two million
Few years later, that shit worth eight million
I can't wait to give this shit to my children

The tone Jay-Z picks to discuss these heavy topics is not the usual dominant, hypermasculine one which was quite prominent in his earlier work. He presents himself as more intellectual and most of the songs on *4:44* do not revolve around masculinity. Although he continually discusses the options of Black men in a country dominated by white men, the toxic masculinity does

not serve a purpose in his musings any longer. The reason behind this change may be the financial security and its freedoms he now has, compared to the beginning of his career when he only experienced life as an oppressed Black man struggling to make ends meet. He addresses his own change in attitude: “Y’all think it’s bougie, I’m like, fine, / But I’m tryin’ to give you a million dollars worth of game for \$9.99 (...) Y’all on the ‘gram holdin’ money to your ear / There’s a disconnect, we don’t call that money over here.” He chooses the voice of an educator who is trying to teach the younger generations about how to gain freedom from their oppressor. The song samples “Four Women” by Nina Simone (1966) in which she paints a picture of four different Black women from slavery to current times. “My life has been rough, / I’m awfully bitter these days / Cause my parents were slaves” is the confession of the fourth and most current black woman in Nina Simone’s song. By sampling it, Jay-Z adds another, more contemporary layer to its message, claiming that although more time had passed since 1966, racism still holds Black people back.

Kendrick Lamar – The New Voice of Black Masculinity

While Jay-Z seemingly matured into the new role of an intellectual rapper, Kendrick Lamar’s entire mainstream career defies the above-mentioned hypermasculine persona most rappers used to adopt. Born in 1987, he is part of a younger generation of rappers, he started rapping long after the “gangsta rap” craze. Although that style shaped rap music and still continues to have an effect on it, it is much less prominent than in the early 1990s. “Reminiscent of James Baldwin, Lamar uses rap music to paint an intense, beautifully blemished picture of his struggles to overcome, yet often succumbing to, peer pressure, misogyny, alcoholism, and violence” (Love 1).

Often referred to as the new “king of hip-hop”, Lamar’s work, which stretches over four full-length albums, showcases his personal struggles and allows him to question his own views and presumptions about certain topics he had addressed before. “Blacker than Berry” clearly shows his ambivalence:

I’m the biggest hypocrite in 2015
 When I finish this if you listenin’
 I’m 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 fuckin’ Aryan
 I’m black as the name of Tyrone and Dareous

NÓRA MÁTHÉ

Excuse my French but fuck you, no fuck ya'll
That's as blunt as it gets
I know you hate me, don't you?
You hate my people, I can tell because it's threats when I see you
I can tell because your ways deceitful
Know I can tell because you're in love with the 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 Piru's, 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 nigga blacker than me?
Hypocrite! (Lamar 2015)

His views are not crystallized and they evolve with him and in "The Blacker the Berry" he truly showcases this. He feels an amalgam of emotions linked to his race, from hatred to biased love, from a critical eye to an overly emotional reaction, and this results in a nearly six minutes long song, delivered in a furious tone. Galil points out that "Lamar's clearly bolstering his initial points with "The Blacker the Berry." But he also maps out the complexities of race, pushes back against stereotypes, and explores the gray area of prescribed roles for young African-Americans." It is a very difficult task to – publicly – address the inner problems which the Black community faces and Lamar finds himself in the position of a hypocrite for criticizing and supporting his peers at the same time. These clashing concepts make it more difficult for him to fit into the role of the activist, however, this nuanced attitude shows a deep understanding of his community and its problems.

Lamar uses very vivid imagery to discuss topics such as addiction and peer pressure. His 2012 song, "Swimming Pools (Drank)" stresses the issue of alcoholism and the way it is perpetuated by his family and friends as a normal part of life. Even the cover for *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*, the album on which the song appears, showcases a photo of Lamar's childhood. "The album's cover art, a grubby Polaroid, provides a visual prompt for the scene: Baby Kendrick dangles off an uncle's knee in front of a squat kitchen table displaying a 40-

ounce⁵ and Lamar's baby bottle" (Greene). The presence of alcohol is normal in Lamar's life; he claims that "Now I done grew up round some people living their life in bottles / Granddaddy had the golden flask back stroke every day in Chicago / Some people like the way it feels / Some people wanna kill their sorrows", then asks the question: "Then what's my problem?" The chorus gives the explanation:

Nigga why you babysittin' only 2 or 3 shots?
 I'mma show you how to turn it up a notch
 First you get a swimming pool full of liquor, then you dive in it
 Pool full of liquor, then you dive in it
 I wave a few bottles, then I watch 'em all flock
 All the girls wanna play Baywatch
 I got a swimming pool full of liquor and they dive in it
 Pool full of liquor I'mma dive in it (Lamar 2012a)

The strong metaphor paints a very familiar picture for many who experienced peer pressure before and Lamar matches the lyrics with a subdued flowing melody which manifests drunkenness. Wild parties are also heavily featured in rappers' performances, part of the hypermasculine personality: hip-hop's Black male attends parties, gets drunk, gets high and conquers women. Lamar challenges this concept with "Swimming Pools (Drank)"; instead of the bravado, he shows the negative effects of peer pressure.

Finally, in "HUMBLE." Kendrick takes a very strong stance against the boisterous Black male figure which has been part of hip-hop culture for decades. The first single off *DAMN.* is a rise against the hypermasculine, violent, and misogynistic Black male concept, Lamar repeats "Sit down / Be humble" as a command for other rappers to follow. He advocates for fidelity and respect towards women by vocalizing his dismay when it comes to retouching women's photos in the media: "I'm so fuckin' sick and tired of the Photoshop / Show me somethin' natural like afro on Richard Pryor / Show me somethin' natural like ass with some stretchmarks." As the "new king of hip-hop", his voice is definitely heard and he is setting an example of a different, more layered view of Black men in the United States. Lamar's strength is his way of reflecting on current political and social problems in a sincere way, without any bravado or unnecessary means of gaining reactions from his listeners. His emotions are justified in his music, he expresses genuine anger and frustration with many situations where Black people are discriminated against, but he does not try to emulate toughness to match his anger. He

⁵ A large, opened beer bottle.

expresses vulnerability and grief, confusion and self-doubt which is why his words resonate with so many all around the world.

Rap music has gone through many changes from its early stages to today and it is one of the most well-established Black-dominated areas of entertainment, thus its influence cannot be denied. The mainly male-dominated genre initially showcased Black men mostly as hypermasculine, tough, and savage people who used bravado to make themselves look even more menacing and serious. This ideal used to be the most prominent depiction of Black men, however, a new generation of rappers is challenging it today. The dangers of substance abuse are more widely recognized and discussed by artists, instead of discussing drugs or alcohol as a quintessential part of Black masculinity. Of course, this stereotype has not disappeared from rap, but many important voices challenge and deconstruct this image. The hardships of lower class Black youth and the dangers of gangs and the violence of the police force are no longer met with bravado in the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar. It is serious and it is a very complex problem which he tries to analyze and make sense of. He showcases the young Black men as vulnerable “good kids” who have no choice but to live in these conditions: “Joey packed the nine, / Pakistan on every porch is fine, we adapt to crime / Pack a van with four guns at a time / With the sliding door, fuck is up?” (Lamar 2012b) The reality Kendrick Lamar knows is that in hoods such as Compton a young man needs to adapt to the criminal lifestyle and belong to one street gang or another to be part of the community, even though it is dangerous and by no means glamorous or a good choice. Lamar discusses the problems young Black men face and depicts them as human beings in dire situations, stripping the lives of drug dealers and gang members of any Hollywood sugar coating.

As a member of the “gangsta rapper” generation, Jay-Z used to depict the hard and hypermasculine persona which used to be popular in the early 1990s, but by today he has abandoned it. His huge lifestyle change and his financial security shaped him into a different person compared to 1994 when “99 Problems” came out, but he is still very invested in what less fortunate Black communities go through in the United States. Both Jay-Z’s and Kendrick Lamar’s personas showcase elements of activism and social and political consciousness. Jay-Z uses his platform and his far-reaching voice to diminish stereotypes and to show the importance of Black culture, while also underlining the hardships of Black men that are still prominent in society. Both Jay-Z and Kendrick Lamar are proof of a new, more conscious and more honest representation of the Black American man in hip-hop: these artists’ lyrics give depth to what once used to be the boisterous, savage, promiscuous man, thus slowly but surely prying off stereotypes which hold back the Black community.

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