

# The Political Efficacy of Kendrick Lamar's Performance Rhetoric

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*In contrast to those who view political efficacy as only affecting public policy, this article argues that self-narration involving a critique of the state like those issued from Kendrick Lamar's televised award show performances in 2015, 2016, and 2018 are political gestures that broaden the national conversation on racially-motivated police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. The four performances discussed here provide a clear view of how hip hop rhetoric engages with and disputes common sense discourse rooted in white supremacist logics, particularly regarding the infallibility of police and the criminality of Black bodies. The sum of Lamar's discourses and his political critiques characterizes a rhetorical device I call a poetics of inversion, a varied, multivalent, and politically efficacious rhetorical strategy involving self-narration, political gestures, and reformulation of hegemonic American mythologies. Examining Lamar's performances brings into focus the political efficacy of his lyrical rhetoric and his visual, auditory, and performative rhetorical gestures.*

**Keywords:** hip hop rhetoric, Black Lives Matter, political efficacy, poetics of inversion, Kendrick Lamar

Numerous theorists have articulated the personal and political efficacy of first-person narration. For example, Paul Gilroy argues that Black<sup>1</sup> American autobiography “express[es] in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation.”<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Mostern maintains that “the tradition of African-American writing is thus one in which political commentary necessitates, invites, and assumes autobiography as its rhetorical form.”<sup>3</sup> While some theorists maintain that actions must directly affect policy to be political, Mostern argues, and I agree, that “all politics can be described as an engaged relationship between the social location of particular political actors and the social totality in which their action takes place.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, politics is not just policy. Politics also happens when a person actively challenges the social milieu that proscribes their opportunities and positioning. I build on Gilroy's and Mostern's work to argue that self-narration involving a critique of the state like those issued from Kendrick Lamar's televised award show performances in 2015,

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<sup>1</sup> Following, first, Patricia Hill Collins when she named “Black feminist thought” and, more recently, the Associate Press (AP), I capitalize Black throughout this article. Also following the AP, I do not capitalize white, which points to the shared history of violence and discrimination that Black Americans have received as a result of their skin color, which is not consistent with the history of people with white skin. I later capitalize Brown for the same reasons.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Mostern, 6.

2016, and 2018 are political gestures that broaden the national conversation on racially-motivated police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Lamar uses the opportunity to perform to huge audiences to initiate and participate in a rhetorical exchange that is informed by and contributes to ongoing debates about state-sanctioned killings of Black Americans, violence within Black communities, the role of hip hop, and American history. According to the logic of Lamar's lyrics and music award show performances, American wealth and access disparities stem from the legal and practical regulation of Black bodies, beginning with the transatlantic slave trade and continuing in what he has called the "modern day slavery" of racist police practices.<sup>5</sup> Examining Lamar's performances brings into focus the political efficacy of his lyrical rhetoric and his visual, auditory, and performative rhetorical gestures. Although each performance is limited in space and time, the responses to Lamar's performances, and his reaction to these responses, allow his performances to reverberate throughout American culture, thereby influencing public opinion about the political issues he addresses. Therefore, Lamar's performances exemplify the political efficacy of hip hop rhetoric to address moral, ethical, political, and public policy issues that are central to American life and to do so in an eloquent, powerful, and accessible manner. The sum of Lamar's discourses and his political critiques characterizes a rhetorical device I call *a poetics of inversion*, a varied, multivalent, and politically efficacious rhetorical strategy involving self-narration, political gestures, and reformulation of hegemonic American mythologies.

A poetics of inversion transforms American *common sense* by recycling and re-encoding Christian-influenced ideologies that govern racist policies, thereby (re)signifying stereotypes about Black Americans and offering alternative ways to understand the social climate of the United States. I use common sense much in the way that Saidiya Hartman, after Antonio Gramsci, does to indicate an implicit national ethos that informs cultural and social practice.<sup>6</sup> In the United States, this ethos implicitly defines *subjectivity* as white and male while policing and incarcerating Black bodies immorally. The four performances discussed here provide a clear view of how hip hop rhetoric engages with and disputes common sense discourse rooted in white supremacist logics, particularly regarding the infallibility of police and the criminality of Black bodies.

Lamar's awards show performances constitute a flexible and effective rhetorical strategy based on W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, the use of religious allegory, and a poetics of inversion that expands the potential of hip hop to advance the national conversation around the relation between race and American identity. Du Bois articulated double consciousness in 1903, and Lamar demonstrates through first-person narratives and performance rhetorics how the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" remains characteristic of a Black American's experience.<sup>7</sup> Du Bois describes how "one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings," and Lamar uses his performances to illustrate how this sense continues today.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Grammy 2016 Performance," *Genius*, Accessed July 28, 2020, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-grammy-2016-performance-lyrics>.

<sup>6</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1903, 2003), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Du Bois, 9.

## Black Lives Matter: Kendrick Lamar on BET

The Black Lives Matter movement began in July 2013 in response to the acquittal of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin's so-called vigilante killer. In the two years between the movement's founding and Kendrick Lamar's opening performance of the June 28, 2015, BET Awards, dozens more Black Americans were killed by vigilantes, by police, or in police custody, including the highly publicized deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, and Tamir Rice. Across the country, BLM supporters protested the lack of accountability for the deaths of these unarmed Black men. Lamar's performance at the 2015 BET Awards uses a poetics of inversion to expose the colorblind rhetoric of phrases like "officer-involved shooting," meant to minimize the modern-day lynchings of Black Americans, and instead reiterates in culturally relevant terms that Black Lives Matter. He utilizes the lyrics of his song "Alright" and the rhetoric of performance to morally indict U. S. policing structures while demonstrating that those persecuted under this regime can survive by banding together.

Lamar opens his performance with a striking image that calls into question the power of police in low-income, predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods. The rapper stands atop an abandoned, graffitied police car with a massive, billowing yet tattered American flag behind him.<sup>9</sup> Some might interpret this gesture as defacing the flag, mainly because the flag waves behind vandalized police cars. Damaging public property is, of course, against the law, and many people use minor offenses like these to rationalize police killings of unarmed Black people. In other words, Lamar's performative gesture evokes the fact that he and the other Black performers on stage might be killed by an officer of the law in a confrontation over a minor offense like vandalism. This visual rhetoric also suggests that what the flag is purported to represent—"liberty and justice for all"—has never been fully realized for Lamar and the rest of the performers on stage. This opening visual suggests that racist policing practices and the restriction of rights and privileges guaranteed by the American Constitution that result from such practices make the "American Dream" unachievable for Black Americans.

Lamar's intro likens police to Biblical Romans and Black residents of highly patrolled areas to persecuted followers of Jesus. He raps, "All's my life I has to fight, hitta / All's my life, I," as Black dancers from all sides of the stage converge around him and the vehicle. The dancers seem to be gravitating toward him and his message, wanting to hear more. Lamar obliges with, "Hard times like, 'Yah!' / Bad trips like, 'Yah!'" "Yah" in this case is a shortened version of Yahweh, the Hebrew word for God that is not to be uttered. In the following line, Lamar says, "Nazareth," where the Biblical Jesus is from and spent many of his younger years. The book of John illustrates the low opinion of Nazareth at the time when Nathanael, one of Jesus's disciples, exclaims, "Nazareth! ... Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"<sup>10</sup> when told from whence the prophesied Messiah hails.

At the time, the cultural viewpoint was that Nazareth and those from there would not likely contribute positively to society and certainly would not breed a savior of humankind. In this unspoken comparison to his hometown and others like it throughout the country, Lamar suggests that popular opinion in the United States about Compton, CA, and those who reside there mirrors that of Biblical views of Nazareth and its residents. By extension, the police officers who kill Black and Brown Americans through state-sanctioned violence are akin to the Romans who crucified

<sup>9</sup> Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar Performs 'Alright' at BET Awards," uploaded by *Slate*, June 18, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmuBFcadJqs&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmuBFcadJqs&feature=emb_title).

<sup>10</sup> John 1:45-1:49.

people in Biblical times. This form of capital punishment was initially used on enslaved people but was then extended to “provincial freedmen of obscure station,” although “Roman citizens were exempt under all circumstances.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, “officer-involved shootings” led to many deaths of Black and Brown Americans, whose ancestors were either enslaved or, when freed, were barred from many of the benefits of citizenship. While officers explicitly killing citizens is not permitted by U.S. legal code, officers do have the authority to commit violence against citizens, and that violence can and does lead to death, particularly of those of “obscure station.” Whereas white Americans are also killed during encounters with police, Black Americans are about three times more likely to be killed by an officer.<sup>12</sup> In both the lyrics of “Alright” and this specific performance, Lamar makes this reality visible, draws attention to how this reality contradicts the Christian principles America claims to uphold, and subtly suggests that these legal practices are not far removed from those of Roman crucifixion. Even if one does not notice these Biblical references, one will likely notice that the dancers are drawn toward Lamar and pump their fists in the air near the end of his intro. These physical gestures show that Lamar’s words resonate with the dancers’ experiences, and their fists in the air signify solidarity and evoke the Black Power salute.

The 15-20 dancers on stage begin krumping as Lamar raps, “I’m on one / Homie you on one / But if God got us / Then we gon’ be alright,” further signaling a connection between the nonviolent, persecuted Israelites of the gospels and the residents of Compton. Krumping originated in South Central Los Angeles, some ten miles from Lamar’s hometown, and according to its founder, the style is “a very positive thing because it really does keep kids off the streets.”<sup>13</sup> Because the movements are “really like you’re fighting on the dance floor,” it is a way for Los Angeles-area kids to release their anger and frustrations without participating in violence.<sup>14</sup> Lamar’s inclusion of krumping in his performance is especially relevant when considering the refrain of “Alright”: “And we hate po-po / wanna kill us dead in the street for sure / I’m at the preacher’s door / My knees get weak, and my gun might blow / but we gon’ be alright.”<sup>15</sup> According to music theorist Noriko Manabe, the cadence and musical structure of the song, coupled with Lamar’s vocal intonations, make its meaning “in turns ambivalent and assuring, as the punchline ‘right’ vacillates between unsteadiness and certainty.”<sup>15</sup> Such ambivalence makes sense when one wants to “stay strong” while both recent and distant history has shown that encounters between young Black Americans and police often end in what is euphemistically called “officer-involved shootings,” frequently resulting in the death of unarmed Black citizens. In the face of such grim realities and perhaps in the face of the barrel of an officer’s gun, the instinct is to protect oneself—“my gun might blow.” Krumping, therefore, becomes a form of visual rhetoric that embodies the message of Lamar’s lyrics because there is little to do in the face of police wanting to kill you and people who look like you.

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<sup>11</sup> Kaufman Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, “Crucifixion,” *JewishEncyclopedia.com*, Accessed October 29, 2021. <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4782-crucifixion>.

<sup>12</sup> Bethania Palma, “Do Police Kill More White People Than Black People?” *Snopes*, September 22, 2016, Snopes Media Group Inc. Accessed October 29, 2021. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/do-police-kill-more-whites-than-black-people/>.

<sup>13</sup> Shaheim Reid, “Krumping: If You Look Like Bozo Having Spasms, You’re Doing It Right,” *MTV News*, April 23, 2014. <http://www.mtv.com/news/1486576/krumping-if-you-look-like-bozo-having-spasms-youre-doing-it-right/>

<sup>14</sup> Reid, “Krumping.”

<sup>15</sup> Noriko Manabe, “We Gon’ Be Alright? The Ambiguities of Kendrick Lamar’s Protest Anthem,” *MTO: A Journal for the Society of Music Theory*, Volume 25, Number 1, March 2019, DOI: 10.30535/mto.25.1.9.

Being in the streets and encountering potentially hostile police creates urgency and fear that might lead one to seek the kind of salvation associated with a preacher—being “at the preacher’s door.” Being “at the preacher’s door” is a way to surrender to God and find hope in our “fucked-up” realities, as Darrius D. Hills argues.<sup>16</sup> It is also a way to ask for forgiveness for considering violence as a response when the violent realities of neighborhoods like Compton. Lamar lyrically advocates for banding together through faith in a greater purpose and higher power—“if God got us / then we gon’ be alright”—and visually suggests channeling those energies into something more positive like krumping. Throughout Lamar’s BET performance, both the krumpers and the hook, “we gon’ be alright,” continue to be positive, nonviolent responses to racially-motivated police brutality.

Lamar reiterates his rhetorical challenge to so-called “officer-involved shootings” through a metaphorical killing and rebirth of his dancers during the second chorus. The music and lights appear to short circuit, and everything goes silent and dark, save for the billowing flag and the words *To Pimp a Butterfly*, the title of Lamar’s album, on either side of the stage. When the lights and music return, Lamar is now downstage off the car, and many of his dancers line up across the stage, some waving additional and much smaller American flags. Other dancers are in the aisles of the audience, while still others are now sitting on the roofs, hoods, and trunks of the police cars. Positioning people of color physically on top of police vehicles suggests that people of color can “rise above” and “come out on top” despite the unequal power dynamics. A bit later in the performance, Lamar vocalizes “Ah!” and the music drops, seemingly causing the dancers to fall to the ground as if they have been shot. The music returns, and they begin pumping their fists from their metaphorically slain positions, suggesting how those gunned down will live on in the memories of others and in the solidarity their deaths can forge among others. When Lamar raps, “Heaven, I can reach you,” those who have fallen begin to move again.<sup>17</sup> As he says, “My rights, my wrongs; I write till I’m right with God,” everyone gets up again, which seems to reiterate, “if God got us, then we gon’ be alright.”<sup>18</sup> In a certain sense, their rising suggests a resurrection via the solidarity mentioned above and the power of hip hop in Black American communities.

Many conservatives condemned Lamar’s performance as inciting anti-police violence, missing the underlying messages of vulnerability and Christian tenets. A highly publicized condemnation came from Fox News, which aired a short clip of one of the early choruses and highlighted only some of the lyrics—“We hate po po, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure...” and “My gun might blow...”<sup>19</sup>—in large, yellow font across the screen. The newscast took Lamar’s lyrics out of context and failed to address any other lyrics, particularly those demonstrating Lamar’s words’ complex and nuanced emotional and psychological reality. The anchors went on to say that they “don’t like it,” “it’s not helpful,” “that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years. This is exactly the wrong message.”<sup>20</sup> None of the five anchors discussed lyrics about pain, fear, and suffering or the calls for faith in a higher power and nonviolent

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<sup>16</sup> Darrius D. Hills, “We Gon’ Be Alright” Kendrick Lamar and the Theology of Affirmation,” *Beyond Christian Hip Hop: A Move Towards Christians and Hip Hop*, edited by Erika D. Gault, and Travis Harris, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/buffalo/detail.action?docID=5981641>, Accessed October 29, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Lamar, “Alright.”

<sup>18</sup> Lamar, “Alright.”

<sup>19</sup> “Geraldo Rivera Rips Kendrick Lamar’s BET Award Set,” uploaded by Unruly, June 30, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3\\_hi8eWdbY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3_hi8eWdbY).

<sup>20</sup> Unruly, “Geraldo.” Lamar’s performance has since been removed from BET’s website. Even in articles discussing the performance where BET’s video is linked, there is a blank spot.

uplift. The anchors also failed to discuss the number of actual killings of unarmed Black people during recent years, but they were keen to discuss murders in Baltimore as if to justify officers killing Black civilians.

Two days after the newscast, Lamar called TMZ Live to discuss the issue. He seemed baffled by the anchors' gross misinterpretation of the song and performance and asked, "How could you take a song that's about hope and turn it into hatred? The message, the overall message, is 'we gon' be alright.' It's not the message of 'I wanna kill people.'"<sup>21</sup> The interviewers on TMZ asked Lamar whether his presence on top of a vandalized police car in the performance validated Rivera's interpretation. Lamar responded,

No it doesn't. The problem isn't me standing on the cop car. I think his attempt is really diluting the real problem, which is the senseless acts of killings of these young boys out here, and I think for the most part it's avoiding the truth. This is reality, this is my world, this is what I talk about in my music, and you can't dilute that. Me being on the cop car, that's the performance piece after these senseless acts.<sup>22</sup>

From Lamar's perspective, those who shared the conservative newscasters' interpretation of his BET performance were missing the point and ignoring the genuine danger and anger felt by Lamar and those whose stories he seeks to share. "Of course Imma be enraged about what's going on out here, of course Imma speak on it," Lamar went on.<sup>23</sup> "Yeah we angry about what's going on, yeah we see what's going on... but you can't do that, you can't take away our hope...that things'll be ok at the end of the day."<sup>24</sup> Following his rebuttal of seemingly intentional misinterpretations of his performance, Lamar described what he sees as the real problem: Not hip hop, but

our reality... the oppression of having guns and drugs in these streets and us being in the mentality where we have to somewhat survive in these hostile situations. That's the real problem, and the more and more we try to avoid that, the more and more we gon' keep talking about it."<sup>25</sup>

The number of Black Americans killed before police investigate or use de-escalation tactics demonstrates that police still assume that Black citizens are criminals and pose a violent threat, validating Lamar's point.

A powerful and poignant example of law enforcement's racial bias and how Lamar's lyrical and performative rhetoric resonates in that context occurred about three weeks after Lamar's interview with TMZ on July 26, 2015. Members of the Black Lives Matter movement in Cleveland, OH, chanted, "We gon' be alright," at a protest, where, according to Alisha Harris of *Slate*, "an allegedly drunk 14-year-old boy was arrested outside the venue and allegedly roughed up by police."<sup>26</sup> Police pepper-sprayed the crowd linking arms around the scene, but the boy received medical treatment and was released to his parents, rather than being taken away in a police car or on a

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<sup>21</sup> Kendrick Lamar -- Geraldo's Twisting My Message ... I'm Preaching Hope, Not Violence | TMZ," uploaded by TMZ, July 3, 2015, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2x4nkj>.

<sup>22</sup> TMZ, "Kendrick."

<sup>23</sup> TMZ, "Kendrick."

<sup>24</sup> TMZ, "Kendrick."

<sup>25</sup> TMZ, "Kendrick."

<sup>26</sup> Alisha Harris, "Has Kendrick Lamar Recorded the New Black National Anthem?" *Slate*, August 3, 2015. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/08/Black\\_lives\\_matter\\_protesters\\_chant\\_kendrick\\_lamar\\_s\\_alright\\_what\\_makes.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/08/Black_lives_matter_protesters_chant_kendrick_lamar_s_alright_what_makes.html)

stretcher. Given that Black people are arrested and even killed by white police officers, some considered this a minor victory, and demonstrators began chanting. Harris suggests that “the song, for those protesters, seems both a way to be defiant and proud in the face of those who don’t see you as anything more than a ‘race-baiter’ or a ‘thug’—and a way to mark the moments when protest seems to make a difference.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, Lamar’s music, lyrics, and performances reflect many of the concerns of contemporary Black Americans and, as a result, can contribute to the political actions and the sense of empowerment demonstrated by members of the Black Lives Matter movement.

### **The Blacker the Berry: Double Consciousness, Black Pride, and the 2016 Grammys**

The 2016 Grammy Awards were held on February 15, 2016, just eight months after the 2015 BET awards. In that short period of time, police killed 186 Black Americans.<sup>28</sup> In the 46 days of 2016 before Lamar’s performance at the Grammy Awards, police killed 32 Black Americans.<sup>29</sup> In his performance of “The Blacker the Berry” and “Alright” to a nationally televised audience, Lamar visually and lyrically argues that Black Americans remain shackled by the modern-day slavery of the criminalization of Blackness, police brutality, and the prison industrial complex.<sup>30</sup> As Spencer Kornhaber wrote in *The Atlantic*, Lamar’s performance was “about the inner struggle forced by outer struggles.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, as a person who is both Black and American, Lamar experiences the reality of American policing through the lens of what W. E. B. Du Bois calls double consciousness, and that double consciousness is the driving force of his political critique at the 2016 Grammy Awards.

The performance’s opening immediately evokes the mass incarceration of Black Americans and its genealogical connection to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Lamar approaches the microphone handcuffed, in a blue jumpsuit, and shackled to the man in line behind him, who is dressed the same and shackled to the man behind him, and so on. A man behind bars on the stage plays a blues saxophone as the men shuffle to the front of the stage, mimicking the movements of a chain gang and reminding the audience that Black American music—and American music more broadly—is intertwined with the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and the prison-industrial complex. When Lamar reaches the microphone, he lifts his cuffed hands up and over the stand, readjusting his chains so that he can place his fingers on the mic. The lights flash twice on stage in concert with two rock beats, during which the other men on stage raise their chains in what seems like defiance. The saxophone returns, alone, briefly, and the men slowly lower their hands to its beat.

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<sup>27</sup> Harris.

<sup>28</sup> I came to this figure by adding the number of deaths of Black people at the hands of police in each individual month. The data is not broken down by individual day on the Mapping Police Violence website, but I was able to find a list broken down by day for 2016, which gave me the data for February 2016 up to Grammy Awards on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The BET Awards happened on June 28, 2015, and no Black Americans were killed by police on the last three days of that month, at least not according to the available information. “National Trends,” *Mapping Police Violence*, Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/nationaltrends>. “The Counted: People Killed by Police in the US,” *The Guardian*, Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>

<sup>29</sup>*The Guardian*, “The Counted.”

<sup>30</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Kendrick Lamar’s 2016 Grammy Performance 1,” uploaded by Fatima Robinson, November 26, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/30297854724>

<sup>31</sup> Spencer Kornhaber, “Deconstructing Kendrick Lamar’s Grammys Performance,” *The Atlantic*, February 16, 2016, Accessed October 31, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/02/kendrick-lamars-new-song-grammys-performance-review/462939/>.

This occurrence seems to signify the internal struggle of feeling downtrodden, depressed, and discriminated against alongside the resistance, rage, and drive toward retribution characteristic of Du Bois' double consciousness.

Lamar's opening words, "I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015,"<sup>32</sup> coupled with the closing image of Lamar's silhouette against a projection of the map of Africa with the word "Compton" across it, also evokes double-consciousness. The hypocrisy in the opening lyrics refers to the contradiction between loving and exalting one's community when that environment contributes to the pain and suffering of one's community. Adam Wert notes that Lamar's self-criticism "can be read not as an accusation of hypocrisy among its African-American listeners, but as drawing the listener into wrestling with the tension articulated in the song," and Wert "read[s] the song as raising a question, not resolving it."<sup>33</sup> In the context of my argument, this kind of wrestling is constitutive of a poetics of inversion. The double-consciousness embedded in the ending image is best summarized by some of Lamar's lyrics in "The Blacker the Berry:" "I'm African American; I'm African."<sup>25</sup> Lamar identifies with both his Americanness, which is always marked as "other," and his Africanness, from which he is primarily detached due to centuries of legalized slavery, cultural degradation, and social stratification. Lamar's lyrics, visual representations, and musical choices in his 2016 performance further emphasize how Africanness is feared, suppressed, and even denied in white Western nations (particularly America), despite its foundational influence and structuring of those nations' cultural and economic successes.

Lamar opens his medley with "The Blacker the Berry," which expresses the speaker's rage in the face of sustained racial injustice alongside his pride in his race.<sup>34</sup> The lyrics address a second person ("you"), which I argue, along with James D. McLeod, Jr.,<sup>35</sup> represents white, Western civilization. In Lamar's specific context, "you" would be the white American establishment:

You never liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it,  
 I'm African American, I'm African  
 I'm Black as the moon, heritage of a small village  
 Pardon my residence  
 Came from the bottom of mankind  
 My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide,  
 You hate me don't you?  
 You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture  
 You're fucking evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey  
 You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me...  
 You sabotage my community making a killing

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<sup>32</sup> Lamar, "2016." Some criticized these lyrics, interpreting them as Lamar's endorsement of respectability politics. Lamar responded, "The message I'm sending to myself—I can't change the world until I change myself first. For instance, when Chad [Lamar's hometown friend] was killed, I can't disregard the emotion of me relapsing and feeling the same anger that I felt when I was 16, 17—when I wanted the next family to hurt, because you made my family hurt. Them emotions were still running in me, thinking about him being slain like that. Whether I'm a rap star or not, if I still feel like that, then I'm part of the problem rather than the solution." Kendrick Lamar, interview by NPR Staff, Morning Edition, NPR, December 29, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/29/461129966/kendrick-lamar-i-cant-change-the-world-until-i-change-myself-first>.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Wert, "Tension and Ambiguity: Paul Tillich and Kendrick Lamar on Courage and Faith," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 113-121. [muse.jhu.edu/article/664537](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/664537).

<sup>34</sup> Lamar, "2016."

<sup>35</sup> James D. McLeod, Jr., "If God Got Us: Kendrick Lamar, Paul Tillich, and the Advent of Existentialist Hip Hop," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 123-135. [muse.jhu.edu/article/664538](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/664538).

You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga.<sup>36</sup>

The way Lamar takes fear-induced prejudices stemming from early colonization and slavery that continue in many white minds (such as the belief that Black people are closer to animals than whites) and turns them into points of pride is characteristic of a poetics of inversion. Lamar expresses not only a profound and enraged accusation against “you” but also a committed and dedicated love for and pride in his heritage. “Fuck your friendship” is a clear rebuke of gestures of inclusion and white saviorism. Lamar emphasizes his Blackness and its distance from Americanism (whiteness) by first stating that he is African-American but then clarifying that he is African. This notion does not disavow his American-ness but instead emphasizes his African(Black)-ness. Lamar also rethinks and mobilizes racial epithets like “monkey” and stereotypes about Black male bodies—nappy hair, big penises, and wide, round noses—as points of pride.

It is important to note that Lamar censors his most controversial lines for his performance in a gesture that illustrates the limitations of a nationally televised performance. For example, the preceding lyrics become “[bump] your friendship,” “you know that it’s big,” “you know you’re evil,” “emancipation of a real higger.”<sup>37</sup> These lyrical alterations might be said to blunt the kind of rhetoric Lamar feels free to use on his albums. However, Lamar can still deliver the same messages without using explicit language and amplifies that message through the rhetoric of performance. Lamar responds to previous comments by (re)signifying what he says in direct dialog with his critics. In this way, self-censoring can be viewed as another rhetorical gesture Lamar deploys in service of his political statements and another site of a poetics of inversion.

At the close of this verse, Lamar and the other men who were a part of the chain gang begin removing their handcuffs and chains, which speaks directly to white fears of Black criminality, not only Black Americans as criminals but as people who are “better off” in chains. Lamar’s use of the word “emancipation” and the way he shouts, “trap our bodies but can’t lock our minds” during the men’s self-unshackling are poignant,<sup>38</sup> as they connect the contemporary practice of jailing a disproportionate percentage of the Black population with both enslavement and the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolishes the practice of involuntary labor, except as a punishment for crime. The chorus of “The Blacker the Berry,” which is sung by Jamaican dance hall artist and deejay Assassin, reiterates this same criticism of contemporary practices in the white, Western world and a similar form of inversion:

I said they treat me like a slave, cah’ me Black  
 Wo, we feel a heap of pain, cah’ we Black  
 And man a say they put me inna chains, cah’ we Black  
 Imagine now, big gold chains full of rocks  
 How you no see the whip, left scars ‘pon me back  
 But now we have a big whip parked ‘pon the block  
 All them a say we doomed from the start, cah’ we Black  
 Remember this, every race start from the block, jus ‘member dat.<sup>39</sup>

In this chorus, Assassin discusses the hurtful ways white supremacist societies treat him and those that look like him “like a slave” solely because of skin color. However, he also uses a poetics of

<sup>36</sup> Genius, “Grammy 2016.”

<sup>37</sup> Genius, “Grammy 2016.”

<sup>38</sup> Genius, “Grammy 2016.”

<sup>39</sup> Genius, “Grammys 2016.”

inversion to point to the ways that Black people throughout the western world are coming up: the chains that kept them down have become valuable gold chains that demonstrate a measure of wealth, and the whips that left scars of the legacy of slavery on his back have similarly become fast cars—“whips”—that function as status symbols. Additionally, the final line of the chorus uses double entendre to indicate that not only does a quest for winning begin at the starting block but that every race of humankind begins from Africa. This second meaning is more evident when listening to the track, as Assassin’s way of pronouncing “block” is similar to the way he says “Black” in the rest of the chorus.

The visuals of Lamar’s performance also demonstrate pride in Blackness, even and perhaps especially the elements that inculcate fear in whites. At one point, the stage is lit by blacklight, revealing what resemble African tribal markings on the performers’ prisoner scrubs. Two additional dancers wearing tribal skirts are also on stage, and their bodies are covered in blacklight paint. The two dancers contort their bodies in a style known as “bone-breaking” or “flexing,” which originated in Brooklyn and is based on a Jamaican style of dance called “bruk,”<sup>40</sup> a style that might invoke white fears of Black “otherness” and “primitive” humanity. Thomas F. DeFrantz positions the political efficacy of bone-breaking in the context of the hyper surveillance and criminalization of Black bodies. He writes, “If the contemporary police state constructs ‘hands up’ as a habituated posture for young men of color, then bone-breaker’s movement *beyond* it shifts the Black male body—the object of target practice—toward being a subject worthy of perusal.”<sup>41</sup> DeFrantz further explains that bone-breaking “demonstrate[s] flexibility in the face of physical trauma” and “cites the persistent pain of Black life as a source of aesthetic ingenuity.”<sup>42</sup> In the context of Lamar’s performance and a poetics of inversion, this means that bone-breaking resignifies the pain of state-sanctioned violence executed against Blackness into an artform that astonishes the audience at the same time it startles them. As DeFrantz quips, “We can’t see the pain, but we know that’s gotta hurt.”<sup>43</sup> As he did with krumping in his BET performance, Lamar incorporates the visual rhetoric of dance to emphasize his message that Black culture can be a nonviolent response to oppression that is often misunderstood by whites. Tribal drums and percussion underscore a jazz saxophone, punctuating Lamar’s movements as he transitions from “The Blacker the Berry” to “Alright,” and the dancers on stage with him softly chant, “We gon’ be alright,” reiterating Lamar’s claim that faith in a higher power and faith in one’s community can provide solace for Black Americans.<sup>44</sup>

As Lamar raps his verse in front of a bonfire, those in African garb dance and play handheld drums and are joined by men in prison scrubs from the first scene, suggesting that these are descendants of the same lineages. For Black Americans, this can be a point of pride and identification. At the same time, for many white Americans, this reinforces the fear associated with so-called tribal “primitivism,” which they view as an element of Black “criminality.” This essentially dual meaning is characteristic of a poetics of inversion and Du Bois’ double consciousness. It is also symptomatic of what Manabe identifies as the ambiguity of the musical structure of “Alright.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Darryl Harrison, “Bone Flexing in Brooklyn,” *New York Post*. October 22, 2009. <https://ny-post.com/2009/10/22/bone-flexing-in-brooklyn/>

<sup>41</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature,” in *The Black Scholar* 46, no 1 (2016): 66-74 (original emphasis).

<sup>42</sup> DeFrantz, 70.

<sup>43</sup> DeFrantz, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Lamar, “2016.”

<sup>45</sup> Manabe, “We Gon’ Be Alright?”.

Eric Lott argues that white fear of Blackness arises “from the necessary hatred of one’s own excess; ascribing this excess to the ‘degraded’ other *and indulging* it—by imagining, incorporating, or impersonating the other—one conveniently and surreptitiously takes and disavows pleasure at the same time.”<sup>46</sup> He goes on to reframe this hostility toward and fascination with Blackness as “the mixed erotic economy, what Homi Bhabha terms the ‘ambivalence,’ of American whiteness.”<sup>47</sup> The fear that colonizers and enslavers feel about tribal cultures, African or otherwise, is rooted in fears of their own “primitive” and “criminal” behavior, which they project onto people of color. These fears still motivate many discriminatory and sometimes lethal practices and policies in the U.S.

As already discussed, “Alright” directly addresses racially motivated police practices that lead to the disproportionate deaths of unarmed Black Americans. However, Lamar alters his most controversial lyrics in this performance. Instead of “and we hate po-po / wanna kill us dead in the streets for sure / I’m at the preacher’s door / my knees get weak and my gun might blow,” Lamar raps, “I’m at the preacher’s door / wanna kill us dead at the preacher’s door / we said give ‘em some more / this one time, you’re for sure.”<sup>48</sup> As with his self-censorship in 2015, Lamar uses the flexibility of award show performances to accommodate hip hop rhetoric as an ongoing dialog with both supportive and critical audiences.

Lamar also addresses the killing of Trayvon Martin at the hands of the vigilante, George Zimmerman. His final verse describes how what happened to Martin could have happened to any young Black American—“On February 26th I lost my life too.”<sup>49</sup> The verse also tells how the cycle of profiling and killing continues when, despite compelling evidence, defendants like Zimmerman are not convicted. Lamar raps, “... hear screams recorded / Say that it sounds distorted but they know who it was / that was me yelling for help when he drowned in his blood / ... Add to a trail of hatred / 2012 was taped for the world to see / Set us back another 400 years / This is modern day slavery.”<sup>50</sup> In the Zimmerman case, one could hear screams for help before the gunshots that killed Martin on the 911 call. Zimmerman claimed he was yelling for help, not Martin, but the recorded voice sounds young, like a teenaged voice, rather than a grown man’s. According to the logic of Lamar’s verse, the Black American’s story is not valued or believed when there is a legal dispute. Martin was living in the neighborhood where he was targeted as a criminal and slain. According to Lamar’s performance, Martin’s death is an example of modern-day slavery that will persist as long as disparaging preconceptions and the fatal actions they lead continue to exist.

### “Is America Honest or Do We Bask in Sin?”: Lamar and the 2018 Grammys

The 2018 Grammy Awards were held on January 28, a year after Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Trump’s campaign was rife with white supremacist rhetoric, even when the racism was implicit in colorblind slogans like “Make America Great Again.”

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<sup>46</sup> Eric Lott, “White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 482 (original emphasis)

<sup>47</sup> Lott, 482.

<sup>48</sup> Lamar, “2016.”

<sup>49</sup> Genius, “Grammy 2016”.

<sup>50</sup> Genius, “Grammy 2016.”

On the surface, the phrase has no connection to racism. Still, many identified the slogan's underlying "whiteness only gauzily veiled by the language of the nation."<sup>51</sup> Symptomatically, an analysis of Tweets cataloged under campaign-related hashtags "uncovered semantic connections to White supremacist and White nationalist groups throughout the hashtag networks connected to the central slogan of Trump's presidential campaign."<sup>52</sup> In other words, Trump's colorblind political rhetoric attempts to cover racism with seemingly race-neutral language.<sup>53</sup> Kendrick Lamar's performance at the 2018 Grammy Awards directly engages with contemporary white supremacist rhetorics, chastening those who discriminate against Black Americans, and he grapples with the complexities of maintaining a moral high ground in the face of injustice. He uses the rhetorical moment of opening an awards show to contribute to public debates surrounding Black Lives Matter and to critique American reliance on the militarization of the police to "control" Black neighborhoods. He also addresses the use of Black labor to maintain white supremacy and achieve financial and political strength globally.

Like his performance at the 2015 BET Awards, Lamar's opening performance of the 2018 Grammy Awards combines visual and sonic rhetoric to critique state-sanctioned violence through a poetics of inversion. The performance begins with an image of a billowing American flag, this time projected on multiple screens behind and above precise rows and columns of Black men in military garb on stage.<sup>54</sup> Each man is wearing a military-style balaclava mask and begins marching as the start to Lamar's song "XXX." plays: "America. God bless you if it's good to you. America, please take my hand. Can you help me under..."<sup>55</sup> The lyrics and image evoke American reliance on militarization both at home and abroad, and the balaclavas obscure the soldiers' identities. This facial obscurity could be a gesture toward the common-sense imperative to "remember the troops." Still, Lamar suggests that America ought to remember the soldiers in ghettoized neighborhoods like Compton since the performers are later revealed to be Black men. As in the performance, the final word is cut off as the beat drops on the album. In the performance, however, the beat is from the song "LUST." whose underlying theme is lusting after worldly pleasures like sex, money, and power at the expense of living a just and moral life. A key phrase in "LUST." is "James 4:4 says / Friend of the world is enemy of the Lord."<sup>56</sup> In other words, lusting after worldly pleasures like sex, money, and power is contrary to Biblical teachings and living a moral life, a sentiment that undergirds the song's message and, by extension, this performance.

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<sup>51</sup> Emily Lutenski, "Dickens Disappeared: Black Los Angeles and the Borderlands of Racial Memory," *American Studies* 58, no. 3 (2019): 15-35. 31. doi:10.1353/ams.2019.0039., 31.

<sup>52</sup> Sean M. Eddington, "The Communicative Constitution of Hate Organizations Online: A Semantic Network Analysis of 'Make America Great Again,'" *Social Media + Society*, (July 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118790763>.

<sup>53</sup> In 1981, Lee Atwater revealed the underlying racism behind other seemingly race neutral campaign language: "By 1968 you can't say 'nigger'—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights and, all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... 'We want to cut this,' is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'Nigger, nigger.'" Rick Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *The Nation*, November 13, 2012, Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/>

<sup>54</sup>Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamars Full Performance Grammys 2018," uploaded by David Casavant, January 30, 2018, Vimeo, 6:27, <https://vimeo.com/253452173>

<sup>55</sup> Kendrick Lamar, *DAMN.*, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Lamar, *DAMN.*

The first verse that Lamar raps calls Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to mind to address the rippling effects of police militarization within communities like Compton across the U.S. and the anger and sense of powerlessness these policies can evoke. Lamar tells the story of interacting with a man who is “way belligerent and drunk” because “they killed his only son because of insufficient funds.”<sup>57</sup> “Insufficient funds” is a key phrase in King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, where he discusses the fundamental tenets of the U.S.’s founding documents and argues that the signers of the Declaration of Independence wrote a “promissory note” that all people of all races would be guaranteed the rights listed therein.<sup>58</sup> King notes, however, that “it is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as people of color are concerned.”<sup>59</sup> King extends this metaphor, adding that the country has paid its Black citizens with a “bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”<sup>60</sup> The implication is that the country, lawmakers, executors, magistrates, and citizens have committed federal crimes, as writing bad checks for large sums is a federal offense. King continues that those in attendance at the Capitol where he is speaking have “come to cash a check” because they “refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt” or that “there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this nation.”<sup>61</sup> In response to questions about when they will be satisfied, King answers not until Black Americans genuinely have equal access to everything whites do and are no longer the victims “of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”<sup>62</sup> Black Americans are still victims of police brutality, and Lamar follows King’s rhetorical tradition by responding to those horrors in this performance.

As Lamar’s verse continues, he illustrates the pain, hurt, and desire for retribution in the face of such brutality. The man whose son was murdered approaches Lamar, sobbing and wondering why this would happen to him (“philosophizing on what the Lord had done”).<sup>63</sup> In addition to his despair, the man feels confused about how to respond and asks Lamar for guidance. After telling the man, “if somebody kill my son, that mean somebody getting killed,” Lamar raps, “Ain’t no Black power when your baby killed by a coward.”<sup>64</sup> In these lyrics, Lamar accuses police who shoot young, unarmed Black people of cowardice and argues that militarized policing stifles Black power. However, he also understands that lusting after such power is not aligned with a moral life, so he is again conflicted.

Lamar’s answer thus echoes his message in “The Blacker the Berry:” it is grounded in rage and a desire for reciprocity for the lives lost and, as Lamar himself has noted, appears hypocritical, but that hypocrisy is bred by the conditions in which he lives. King, too, despite his commitment to non-violence, understands the ways that “patience is running out and the intransigence and hostility of the government—national, state and municipal—is aggravating grievances to explosive levels.”<sup>65</sup> King also understands that outbursts—he is referring to the Detroit Riots of 1967—are “a wildly emotional protest and desperate attempt to display the utter desperation that has engulfed

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<sup>57</sup> Lamar, *DAMN*.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” American Rhetoric Top 100 Speeches, Accessed July 29, 2020. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>

<sup>59</sup> King, “Dream.”

<sup>60</sup> King, “Dream.”

<sup>61</sup> King, “Dream.”

<sup>62</sup> King, “Dream.”

<sup>63</sup> Lamar, *DAMN*.

<sup>64</sup> Lamar, *DAMN*.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Crisis in America’s Cities,” *The Atlantic*, February 2018, Accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-jr-the-crisis-in-americas-cities/552536/>

many Negroes.”<sup>66</sup> While King did not condone violence, one wonders what his message would be in the face of an additional 55 years of unequal treatment under the law and various instances in which law enforcement ended Black lives.

In the final segment of the performance, Lamar is surrounded by dancers dressed all in red, their faces and heads covered by red hoods. Lamar begins rapping, and at the first pause in his verse, there is the sound of a gun cocking and firing. When it fires, all the dancers duck and cover their heads. As Lamar continues his verse, each phrase is punctuated with the sound of a gunshot, which causes an additional dancer to fall to the floor. This visual suggests the continued plague of police killings of unarmed Black people and that these killings affect far more people than just those who die. Families, friends, and social networks are affected and so too are the lineage of Black Americans who have faced this fate throughout the country’s history.

## Conclusion

Public rhetoric can alter the cultural consciousness, particularly in our information age of social media, where public rhetoric is continually available ad infinitum. Public performance rhetoric can shape political dialogues. Examples of public performance rhetoric that emphasizes the importance of Black lives, like that of Kendrick Lamar in his award show performances in 2015, 2016, and 2018 can be politically efficacious in shaping the degree to which the general public—and its cultural common sense—is complicit in state-sanctioned violence against Black Americans. If one thinks of political efficacy only in concrete policy changes or advances, then perhaps I am wrong. But if we think of efficacy differently, redefining the terms of political debates and broadening the cultural conversation, then what I have argued and what Lamar has attempted in his performances is valid. As James Baldwin wrote, the job of the writer is to change the cultural consciousness.<sup>67</sup> By influencing the cultural consciousness, writers like Lamar can impact racial hierarchies and dismantle white supremacist practices. The way one listens to Lamar’s songs, videos, and awards show performances demonstrates the potential of his hip hop rhetoric to continue the dialog and contribute to public debates surrounding the inherent value of Black life and the conflicted position that Black people hold in the U. S. as (African)Americans.

As contemporary events have continued to show, Black lives are still threatened by and lost at the hands of police. In 2020, the nation watched in horror as an unarmed George Floyd was asphyxiated by Derek Chauvin’s knee, which was pressed to Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Floyd’s death sparked a wave of Black Lives Matter protests and calls to #DefundthePolice, and in the wake of these political actions, Lamar’s “Alright” skyrocketed in the Spotify streaming charts five years after its release. According to *Forbes*, “Alright” reached No. 11 in the U.S. and No. 26 globally during the week the protests began.<sup>68</sup> These numbers reveal how Lamar’s lyrics and performances contribute to the hip hop rhetoric that informs the Black Lives Matter movement and that the political effects of his performances and the rhetoric he uses are overdetermined, ongoing, and extremely significant to racial justice activists’ understanding of their own political efficacy.

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<sup>66</sup> King, “Cities.”

<sup>67</sup> James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy: Norman Mailer,” *Esquire*, May 1, 1961. <https://classics.esquire.com/article/1961/5/1/the-black-boy-looks-at-the-white-boy-norman-mailer>.

<sup>68</sup> Bryan Rolli, “Childish Gambino’s ‘This Is America’ And Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Alright’ See Massive Spotify Gains Amid George Floyd Protests,” *Forbes*, June 3, 2020.