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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to my husband, who helped me through the countless late nights at the library. Thank you to Professor Peter Leman, who encouraged me to follow my passion and be adventurous and unconventional in my research.

Reclaiming the Black Personhood

The Power of the Hip-Hop Narrative in Mainstream Rap Music

Morgan Klatskin

In response to acutely visible injustice, music has long served as a method of resistance for the Black community. From the hymns of the slaves working on plantations to the protest ballads of the Civil Rights movement, African Americans have historically used song to uplift, defend, and mobilize their community. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new weapon emerged in urban communities to fight legal and social injustices against the Black community: rap music. In its inception, rap music was closely tied to hip-hop culture. While the terms “hip hop” and “rap” are terms often used interchangeably in public discourse, a close analysis reveals that instead, aspects of hip-hop culture are actually used as thematic tools in rap music. While the presence of the hip-hop culture in rap is often only identified according to the presence of political consciousness in lyrical narratives, in fact, political consciousness is only one of three key elements of the hip-hop culture, the others being Afrocentrism and Black liberation (see Dyson, Bonnette for a larger treatment of this subject). Each of these elements is important to understanding the function and power of hip-hop themes in rap music.

At different times, the presence of these themes in mainstream rap music seems to ebb and flow. Specifically, in the face of intense legal injustice against the African American community in the 1980s, popular emcees in the “golden age of rap”—which I define as extending approximately from the early 1980s until the mid-1990s—openly leveraged all three key elements of hip-hop culture in their music in order to respond to a highly visible injustice: the Reagan war on drugs. Following this golden age of rap, these themes became much less present in the mainstream, though these themes did persist in the underground rap music scene (see Rutherford, Tibbs for further discussion). However, that move away from hip-hop culture is beginning to change course; hip-hop culture has begun to reappear in the mainstream rap music of today in response to another period of acutely visible injustice against the Black community. From 2012 to 2016, highly visible cases of fatal brutality against African American men sparked hundreds of protests across the nation, as well as new and lasting political movements: these included the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philandro Castile, and Alton Sterling. Rap music is responding in kind. These returning ripples of hip-hop themes suggest the possibility of a determined hip-hop revival in rap music. In both golden-age and modern-day rap, emcees have used hip-hop themes in rap lyrics to assert the Black narrative and effectively reassert Black personhood itself (Cooper). In their utilization of the hip-hop themes, emcees encourage their audiences to participate in the reshaping of Black America’s narrative.

Rap music’s original rise began in response to acutely visible injustice against the Black community during the Reagan administration. Although to some, Ronald Reagan has been romanticized to the point of becoming a political paragon, others have remembered Reagan’s reign less fondly. For example, Alice Walker, a Black poet, states in a 1984 poem, “We do not admire their president. / We know why the White House is white.” In an economically depressed America struggling to overcome the trailing economy of the 1970s, Reagan promised an American revival. His 1980 campaign slogan, “Let’s Make America Great Again,” gave Reagan’s pledge to improve America the edge of fiery and urgent patriotism, while also subtly introducing a narrative of fear of threatened national decline led by enemies at home and abroad.

Foreign fear in the Reagan years centered on terrorism and communism, while domestic fear often focused on a hyperbolized narrative that US inner-cities were crime-ridden, lawless, no-go zones. His White House’s reimagining of Nixon’s war on drugs—which had focused on drug

rehabilitation and treatment over incarceration—in many ways aggravated public fear of “violence, violation, and disorder” in inner cities (Rossinow 139). Inner cities seemed to mainstream America “like a land that time forgot, a postindustrial stalking ground of idle, dangerous youth” representative of a violent and threatening underclass of “other” that was “pressing at the boundaries of its desolate urban habitat” (Rossinow 139, 148). In 1981, US Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger even described escalated crime in urban areas as helming a “reign of terror in American cities” (Olson 1981). While the Reagan era did not invent the racial tension and unrest of the 1980s, the White House seemingly did little to dispel racial fears and tensions.

Leaning on the exaggerated Reagan-era narrative of African American inner cities, the bipartisan Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which was tough on cocaine—but only on crack cocaine, which was almost exclusively concentrated in America’s inner cities; powder cocaine, by contrast, was popular with rich, predominantly white elites. By some accounts, it seemed that “everywhere there was money, there was cocaine,” and its presence was so normalized that it was openly joked about at Hollywood film award ceremonies (Rossinow 121). Despite this, the 1986 Act punished crack cocaine offenses 100 times more severely than it punished powder cocaine offenses, a move which plainly disadvantaged inner-city African Americans and predominantly affected low-level street dealers and users. The legislation reintroduced mandatory minimum sentencing, even though there had been a “near-complete repeal of mandatory minimum penalties in 1970,” and judges were bound to rule according to the mandatory minimum sentence, which was 5 years’ jail time (USSC 6). According to the Act, sentence length was determined solely on the drug quantity carried, and the Act set the quantity thresholds for possession extremely low. To trigger the five-year mandatory minimum sentence, one would only have to be carrying 5 grams, or 0.17 ounces, of crack cocaine. To trigger these same minimums for a powder-cocaine offense, one would have to be in possession of 500 grams, or 17.6 ounces. Furthering the intensity of this law, two years following the 1986 Act, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which made “first-time simple possession of crack cocaine an offense punishable by a mandatory minimum penalty,” the only drug in the history of the American criminal justice system to be so punished (USSC 6).

In its severe punishment of crack cocaine offenses and lenient punishment of powder cocaine offenses, this legislation carried with it a narrative that

inner-city African Americans were a violent and addicted criminal “other,” a significant threat to an otherwise idyllic America. Because this narrative was intertwined with an act of legal force, it had real and lasting effects on the Black community. African Americans during the Reagan era were “besieged, catching the blunt end of both social disorder and the coercive efforts to curb it” (Rossinow 139). Inner-city African Americans’ struggles with cyclical poverty, drug abuse, gang violence, and diminished educational and employment opportunities were worsened by such Reagan-era drug legislation. Breaking from the cycle of poverty was extremely difficult for many inner-city African Americans. In his 1994 song “Things Done Changed,” the Notorious B.I.G. admits, “If I wasn’t in the rap game / I’d probably have a key knee deep in the crack game / Because the streets is a short stop / Either you’re slingin’ crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot.” At the time, “23 percent of all Black men in their twenties were entangled in the criminal justice system—meaning that they were imprisoned, on parole, or on probation” (Rossinow 149). One analysis found that the number of Black males aged eighteen to twenty-nine without high school degrees who were incarcerated nearly tripled between 1980 and 1989, rising from 7.4 percent to 20.1 percent (Rossinow 149). Furthermore, Reagan’s aggressive anti-drug legislation sparked the mass incarceration of African Americans, effectively diminishing African American personhood for generations.

In the face of this pejorative narrative, rap music was forming a golden age. From the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, lyrics rife with thoughtful and poignant indictments of a system that seemed to have cast wages against Black Americans were mainstream in rap music. Popular hip-hop OGs, such as KRS-One, N.W.A., Public Enemy, Mos Def, Chuck D, Run D.M.C., Ice-T, and Grandmaster Flash—“the Black CNN,” as Chuck D dubbed them—boldly and unapologetically fought the narrative that Black personhood was lesser with their music (Cummings 18). These emcees, along with others, drew connections between slavery, police brutality, and incarceration, tackling issues of underfunded education and the racist hypocrisy of the American Dream. In exposing legalized racism, in demanding acknowledgement of African Americans’ grand history and ancestry, and in remembering the aid of a liberating God, hip-hop themes in rap music fired back at an overarching legal narrative which institutionalized racism and recklessly devalued Black personhood.

Author and academic Eric Michael Dyson agrees that in golden-age rap music, words served as a “means of upward mobility, or as a means to escape suffering . . . to grapple with a white supremacist society that refuses to acknowledge [African Americans’] fundamental humanity” (76). But Dyson also acknowledges the influence that a shift toward materialism in American culture in the 1990s had on rap’s divergence from its hip-hop roots. The economic deprivation of the time, he notes, created a “hungering for material emblems, trinkets, symbols, and rewards,” and mainstream rap music responded to that hunger (76). Priorities began to shift away from racial justice as rap music entered what emcee Talib Kweli called rap’s “rock ‘n’ roll phase,” in which mainstream rap music became recklessly decadent, misogynistic, violent, and even somewhat nihilistic (NPR Staff 2013).

To be clear, hip-hop themes were not totally lost; underground rap did retain its hip-hop roots. A few emcees, such as Lauryn Hill, were noted as popular hip-hop-centric artists. However, these artists’ music was not as popular or lasting in the mainstream as the commercialized rap music of the time. Some argue that the promotion of such rap music was a response to the failed censorship efforts of the 1980s and early 1990s that aimed to suppress rap music’s rise: since rap music’s popularity could not be stopped, “corporate America sought to reap the benefits and exploit [rap] music for its own gain” (Rutherford 326). As the legal tensions of the 1980s waned in visibility to mainstream America, it simply became “difficult to sell” rap music that openly used hip-hop themes in its narrative (Tibbs 55). Emcees who honored rap music’s hip-hop roots even commented on the absence of hip-hop themes and questioned the validity of new and popular rappers whose music ignored its own roots. For example, in his song “Hip Hop,” released in 2000, Dead Prez declares:

I’m sick of that fake thug, R&B–rap scenario, all day on the radio
 Same scenes in the video, monotonous material
 Y’all don’t hear me though, these record labels slang our tapes like dope
 . . . You would rather have a Lexus, some justice, a dream, or some substance?
 A Beamer, a necklace, or freedom?

Debates over the authenticity and place of commercialized rap music are present in the work of Lauryn Hill, Rakim, Killer Mike, Nas, Ice Cube, J. Cole, Yasiin Bey, and Kendrick Lamar, among others. Rap music was changing, and

the rap music that was rising to the top was not always received well by those whose music was driven by hip-hop themes.

Top-selling singles year by year mark these changing tides in mainstream rap. Since 1989, rap music has consistently claimed the highest-selling singles, but beginning in 1994, those singles demonstrate a departure from hip-hop culture. In 1989, the number-one highest-selling single was “Self-Destruction” by Stop the Violence Movement, a star-studded collection of the most popular East-Coast emcees, which formed in response to rising gang violence in Black communities. Rapper D-Nice reminds the audience of the control they have over the African American narrative as individuals, saying, “It’s time to stand together in a unity / Cause if not then we’re soon to be / Self-destroyed, unemployed / The rap race will be lost without a trace.” The emcee asks that they come together as a community to “stop the violence” and go “Down the road that we call eternity / Where knowledge is formed and you’ll learn to be / Self-sufficient, independent.” D-Nice warns his audience that “Society wants to invade / So do not walk this path they laid,” and reinforces his affirmation that Black Americans have the power to shape their own narrative. Later in the song, Rapper Kool Moe Dee goes on to remind his audience of the violence committed against their people in the fight for civil rights—“Back in the sixties, our brothers and sisters were hanged / How could you gang-bang?”—and contributing emcees encourage the African American community to “leave the guns and the crack and the knives alone” and “get a grip, and grab what’s wrong.”

The top-selling singles of the following four years show the rising influence of the party-oriented materialism of commercialized rap but overall retained their connection to hip-hop culture. In 1994, there was a more visible break from rap music’s hip-hop roots. The Notorious B.I.G.’s “One More Chance / Stay with Me,” the top-selling single of 1994, opens with the lines “First things first: I, Poppa, freaks all the honeys / Dummies, Playboy bunnies, those wanting money,” and themes of misogyny (“I’m not only a client / I’m the player President”), violence (“Don’t see my ones, gon’ see my guns, get it?”), and materialism (“I stay Coogi down to the socks / Rings and watches filled with rocks”) are woven throughout. This period of commercialized rap dominated airwaves for decades, but in recent years, hip-hop themes have once again begun to emerge. Like in golden-age rap music, emcees are again leveraging hip-hop themes to forge a narrative that

reasserts African American personhood in the face of highly visible injustice toward Black Americans.

Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of unarmed Black teen Trayvon Martin, there were six other highly visible cases of fatal brutality against African Americans—most at the hands of police—in the span of only four years. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling were viscerally painful illustrations of ongoing injustice against the Black community and the continued devaluation of Black personhood. These deaths were especially poignant because several occurred within weeks—sometimes merely days—of each other. Furthermore, each death was made visible to mainstream America in a way that many similar deaths of African Americans had not been before. News of these fatal incidents dominated news outlets and social media for weeks, strengthened calls for police reform and legal reform, and ignited lasting political movements such as Black Lives Matter. For example, the fatal shooting of unarmed teen Michael Brown in 2014 and the subsequent acquittal of Officer Darren Wilson sparked protests across the United States as well as prolonged protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's death sparked months-long protests and riots in Ferguson that were aggravated by a militarized, local police force who used rubber bullets, tear gas, smoke bombs, and flash grenades against protesting locals. Emcees such as J. Cole, Talib Kweli, P. Diddy, Macklemore, Killer Mike, Jay-Z, and Q-Tip joined in protest on the ground in Ferguson, in their own cities, and on social media. Most notably, emcees began to protest louder in their music. Mainstream rap music is increasingly hearkening back to its roots in narrative themes of political consciousness, Afrocentrism, and Black liberation, demanding its audience to consider another narrative of the Black community.

Political consciousness in the rap narrative often takes the form of indictment of an unjust criminal justice system by centering on physical representations of it—such as the police, the president, or legislation—or by analyzing the effects of institutionalized racism on the Black community—such as mass incarceration, cyclical poverty, or implicit prejudice. In their own narratives, rappers expose a reality of the inner city that disrupts simplified and hyperbolized narratives of urban areas as one-dimensional, crime-ridden, violent neighborhoods, and reasserts the humanity and complexity of inner-city Black communities. In his 1992 song, "Changes," 2Pac reveals the reality of inner-city life for many African Americans, lamenting, "I see no changes,

wake up in the morning and I ask myself, / 'Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?' / I'm tired of being poor—and even worse, I'm Black / My stomach hurts so I'm looking for a purse to snatch." On top of the struggle to meet necessities such as food, he reminds the audience that inner-city Black lives are in danger of a sinister player, the American criminal justice system. 2Pac accuses it of not only treating the Black community unjustly, but also of egging on inner-city problems, rapping, "Cops give a damn about a negro / Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero / 'Give crack to the kids—Who the hell cares?! / One less hungry mouth on the welfare!'" 2Pac asserts that these entities have intentionally worsened inner-city problems by introducing crime and squashing the Black Panther movement: "'First, ship 'em dope and let 'em deal to brothers / Give 'em guns, step back, watch 'em kill each other!' / 'It's time to fight back,' that's what Huey said / Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead." The emcee asserts that it is these baleful tools—cocaine, guns, assassination—that have kept the Black community oppressed. He directly contradicts the Reagan-era narrative that the war on drugs would help reduce crime and better American life, reminding the audience of the war's lingering and weighty presence in the Black community.

Discussions of governmental oppression in hip-hop narrative often consider the history of Black enslavement as it is reinvented in a superficially and supposed "post-racial" America. KRS-One weighs in on the idea that policing is a recycled method of slavery in his 1993 release "Sound of Da Police." The emcee cites continued injustice against the Black community as a method for keeping African Americans from rising up against an establishment that shields itself from responsibility for its own egregious crimes while severely punishing African Americans for lesser crimes. He raps, "Your laws are minimal / 'Cause you won't even think about lookin' at the real criminal." KRS-One goes on to reveal the multiple facets of this modern-day oppression by drawing connections between slave overseers and police officers, noting, "The overseer rode around the plantation / The officer is off patrolling all the nation / The overseer could stop you what you're doing / The officer will pull you over just when he's pursuing." As law professor Donald J. Tibbs asserts, KRS-One's narrative suggests that "policing Black people is actually the cornerstone of anti-Blackness under American law" (Tibbs 71). The emcee continues in this vein, "The overseer has the right to get ill / And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill / The officer has the right to arrest / And if you fight back, they put a hole in your

chest!" Despite the time elapsed between times of literal enslavement and the modern-day, KRS-One declares that "after 400 years, I've got no choices!"

These same connections between literal enslavement and modern-day methods of oppression echo in the mainstream rap music of today. In his 2016 track "Black America Again," Common cracks the veneer of America's supposed "post-racial" criminal justice system to similarly reveal its role as a contemporary form of cyclical Black enslavement. From literal enslavement to the obstacles facing Black people today, Common first frames the murder and enslavement of the Black community as foundational to the systematic devaluing of the Black personhood through cultural and physical imprisonment before ultimately asserting that a counter-narrative is the salve:

Here we go, here, here we go again
Trayvon'll never get to be a older man
Black children, they childhood stole from them
Robbed of our names and our language, stole again
Who stole the soul from Black folk?
Same man that stole the land from Chief Black Smoke
And made the whip crackle on our backs slow
And made us go through the back door
And raffled Black bodies on the slave blocks.

Common then draws a connection between imprisonment of the past and present, exploring the effects of such bondage:

Now we slave to the blocks, on 'em we spray shots
Leaving our own to lay in a box
Black mothers' stomachs stay in a knot
We kill each other—it's part of the plot
I wish the hating will stop and the battle with us
I know that Black lives matter, and they matter to us
These are the things we gotta discuss!
The new plantation: mass incarceration
Instead of educate, they'd rather convict the kids
As dirty as the water in Flint, the system is . . .

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I don't believe the news
Or radio, stereotypes we refuse
Brainwashed in the cycle to spin
We write our own story: Black America again.

Common frames narrative as a malleable tool, reminding his listeners that though African Americans cannot control that which imprisons them, they can be active participants in their own enfranchisement.

Emcees often pair this idea of self-liberation with other empowering themes of Afrocentrism, especially as they relate to Black nationalism and Black power. Ab-Soul's 2012 track "Terrorist Threats," samples themes of Afrocentrism, Black nationalism, and Black power, all in just a few lines. Ab-Soul references the ancient Ethiopian emperor Selassie, whose third eye gave him the wisdom and power was able to keep his people free, rapping, "Wish I could see out of Selassie eye / Maybe my sovereignty would still be mine." In the following two lines, the emcee dips into ideas of Black nationalism as he calls out to his audience, "If all the gangs in the world unified / We'd stand a chance against the military tonight." Ab-Soul uses the US military as a symbol of the institutionalized racism that keeps the Black personhood oppressed. He also considers the idea of Black separatism: in declaring, "I ain't got no gavel; I ain't tryna fight nobody battle," Ab-Soul asserts that he refuses to judge or participate in the battles of his oppressor. The emcee stresses the importance of regaining his freedom from that which seeks to enslave both him and the entire Black community, rapping, "I just wanna be free; I ain't tryna be nobody chattel." As they did in golden-age rap music, these themes aim to remind listeners of the power that the Black community has to determine its own fate and to lead its own liberation.

Themes of Black liberation in hip-hop-centric rap music often references God's role as a liberator of the African American community. The Five-Percent Nation and the Minister Louis Farrakhan have espoused the idea that emcees have been given by God the power to shape Black American culture toward enlightenment and liberation. Rappers and groups such as Wise Intelligent, Rakim, RZA, Brand Nubian, Poor Righteous Teachers, Common, and Nas all weave themes of Black liberation throughout their lyrics. In addition to Kendrick Lamar, perhaps the most visible artist in the resurgence of Black liberation themes in rap music is Chance the Rapper. In his 2016 song "Blessings," Chance considers the role God has given him as a leader in the liberation of African Americans, saying, "I don't make songs for free; I make

'em for freedom / Don't believe in kings; I believe in the Kingdom." Chance has suggested that his allowing of free downloads of entire albums is his way of supporting the freedom of the Black community. Chance draws directly from imagery in the Bible, referencing verses from Psalm 119:133 and Ephesians 6:17—Chance's "He has ordered my steps, gave me a sword with a crest"—to illustrate the power that believers have to utilize God's tools of salvation to gain deliverance. Using his "trumpet" or voice to continually praise God, Chance believes that he is helping liberate his community.

In Kendrick Lamar's 2017 track "DNA," these ideas are again at play. Lamar here directs his attention at Fox News, aiming to shatter what he considers a false narrative of the issues plaguing the Black community. Lamar blends hip-hop era themes of Black liberation with the image of governmental figures as unrepentant players in the plight of Black America. Lamar samples an audio clip of the political pundit in which Geraldo Rivera takes issue with rap. Lamar uses the clip as an opportunity to counter Rivera's narrative, while also leveraging scripture to hint of a coming African American emancipation:

I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA
 [Rivera] *"This is why I say that hip hop has done more damage
 to young African Americans than racism in recent years" . . .*
 [Lamar] I'd rather die than to listen to you
 My DNA not for imitation
 Your DNA an abomination . . .
 These are the times, level number 9
 Look up in the sky, 10 is on the way
 Sentence on the way, killings on the way
 . . . I got winners on the way.

Lamar not only refuses Rivera's narrative but also hints at a coming liberation of African Americans, suggesting that those who oppress the Black community are abominations in God's sight; Lamar draws parallels between the ten plagues of Egypt and the persecuted Israelites to the struggles facing the modern-day African American community. He equates the enslaved Israelites to African Americans and suggests that the ninth plague, a period of darkness, is occurring today. With the line "10 is on the way," Lamar hints that this period of darkness will soon end and that the firstborn sons of America—the privileged, the favored—will fall. Following the conclusion of

the plagues, African Americans will be delivered and will experience their long-awaited freedom at the hands of a liberating God.

The return of these hip-hop themes to the mainstream rap music of today reinforces the power that hip-hop themes have to empower, embolden, and uplift the Black community toward the reclamation of the Black personhood. Just as the narrative of the Reagan era had the power to negatively impact the Black community and devalue Black personhood, the hip-hop narrative has proven to be a powerful tool for mobilizing rap music's audience to positively impact the Black community and reclaim Black personhood. Studies on rap listenership in 1993 and 2005 illustrate the power that hip-hop themes have to politically mobilize and inform listeners. Results of a 1993 National Black Politics study demonstrated that listening to rap music in 1993 was a statistically significant correlate for attitudinal variables such as signing petitions and participating in protests and marches (Hemphill 46). Rap listenership in 1993 also indicated support for Black nationalist ideologies and for the belief that Black representatives in government "can best represent the interests of the Black community" as opposed to the ability of non-Black elected officials to do so (Rossinow 48).

However, the golden-age rap audience was far more involved in political matters than listeners after the mid-1990s. As hip-hop-centric rap music fell out of the mainstream, the power that rap music had to politically mobilize its audience also waned. One study found that listening to rap was a statistically significant indicator of political involvement in 1993 but not in 2005, at which point commercialized rap music had dominated airwaves for nearly a decade (Hemphill 11). In 2005, consumption of rap was not a statistically significant correlate associated with any of the previously mentioned attitudinal variables, but listening to rap did indicate "endorsement of the opinion that police overwhelmingly discriminated against Blacks" for Black, Latino, and white listeners alike (28). So while mainstream rap music had largely converged from hip-hop culture after the mid-1990s, rap music as a whole did retain an underlying narrative that institutional racism existed in the American criminal justice system. The lingering presence of this basic principle laid the foundation for the current revival of hip-hop-centric rap music, and the increasingly frequent presence of hip-hop themes in the mainstream rap narrative of today have the same power that the golden-age rap narrative had to empower African Americans to reclaim the Black personhood.

These hip-hop themes do empower listeners to action, but Michael Eric Dyson reminds that "the music can only go so far. It can *help* alter

the mind-set of the masses; it can *help* dramatize injustice; and it can *help* articulate the disenchantment of significant segments of the citizenry. But it cannot alone transform social relations and political arrangements. Politically charged music can *reinforce* important social values, but it cannot establish them" (67, emphasis in original). Rapper Kendrick Lamar shares worries that participation in political matters will grow cold on his 2017 track, "LUST." Lamar contemplates the power that familiarity and ritual has in the Black community and considers the power that time has to weaken the advances that the Black community has made to reclaim its narrative and, thus, its personhood.

With the election of President Donald Trump, protests occurred throughout the United States and in major cities internationally. Lamar illustrates the reaction of many Black Americans to the conclusion of the presidential election, saying, "We all woke up, tryna tune to the daily news / Lookin' for confirmation, hopin' election wasn't true / All of us worried, all of us buried, and our feelings deep / None of us married to his proposal, make us feel cheap" ("LUST"). He explains that while the Black community was initially quick to mobilize—"Still and sad, distraught and mad, tell the neighbor 'bout it / Bet they agree, parade the streets with your voice proudly"—complacency and acceptance could keep the Black community from actively reshaping its own narrative as it falls back into a cycle of outcry and placation. He raps, "Time passin', things change / Revertin' back to our daily programs, stuck in our ways." To fully regain personhood, Lamar observes, the Black community has to keep up the fight and continuously demand justice.

Given rap music's total dominance of the American music industry, key aspects of the hip-hop culture have the potential to reach hundreds of millions more than golden-age rap music was able to reach in its time. Christian D. Rutherford asserts that "this phenomenon of poetry put to music is perhaps the most prominent and relevant illustration of literature operating as 'law' today," noting that rap has become the "paradigm used by many young people to order their lives" (306). Hip-hop-centric rap music is, in many ways, "a compelling brand of political activism that joins aesthetic expression and social awareness" that has "a strong bearing on political understanding"—especially for a rising generation that gets news updates from programs like *The Late Show* and uses social media platforms such as Twitter to energize political movements (Dyson 67).

Though the return of hip hop to mainstream rap music is indicative of a shift in mainstream cultural concerns, we are still in the beginnings of that shift. As popular as artists like Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Talib Kweli, Lupe Fiasco, Common, and Chance the Rapper are, for every artist whose music is reviving the hip-hop culture in mainstream rap music, there are more artists whose music remains unchanged. Even within the track lists of these hip-hop revival rappers, there remain elements of commercialized, bling rap. The return of hip hop to the rap narrative can only serve to strengthen a Black reclamation of personhood, and if current trends continue, the hip-hop culture will make a fuller return to mainstream rap music, encouraging a new generation of Americans to stay woke—if not, the hip-hop revival will sputter out, and hip-hop themes will again be relegated to the underground rap game.

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