

THESIS

PRODUCTIVE SELF-ADVOCACY:

HOW KANYE WEST AND KENDRICK LAMAR COMMUNICATE BLACK SOVEREIGNTY

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ABSTRACT

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Hip-hop culture has been commodified and sold internationally, but it has always been intertwined, intentionally or otherwise, with social change. This thesis seeks to complicate and reimagine the contemporary hip-hop moment. In contrast to scholarship that interrogates and investigates the 1990 and 2000 hip-hop landscape, this thesis moves to the contemporary; particularly, examining the possibility that Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar used their stardom to advocate messages of, what I call, productive self-advocacy. This new term seeks to articulate a shift in advocacy in artists and activists from singular individual civil rights leaders to many individual activists who collectively work together to solve their community's challenges. Productive self-advocacy moves from asking for a seat at the proverbial table to demanding that the Black community create its own. These artists deploy rhetorical strategies to encode messages that advocate for self-dependency and a departure from traditional appeals to the law as well as government agencies. Through this thesis, I hope to expand research on hip-hop and social movements to explore the new era of advocacy from artists and the public.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for encouraging me and believing in me even if I did not believe in myself. I hope that I made you proud, Ma. The sacrifices you have made to get us to America are insurmountable, and I can never repay you, but I hope this heals

some of that pain. I love you. To my wife, who was my fiancée at the time, I love you more than any words can explain. You've been a rock in a world that has been incredibly turbulent. Thank you, and I love you.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, sister, mother, Haiti, and hip-hop heads everywhere.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I remember the first time I heard a hip-hop record. I was about six years old, and my older brother and sister had just arrived in the United States from Haiti. If I remember correctly, the song was “California Love” by 2pac and Dr. Dre. I did not know what they were talking about and why, but one thing that I knew was that it made me feel good and powerful. Hip-hop has always been a part of my lived experience. At one point, I wandered from hip-hop and returned to it only to find that my love for hip-hop had never been about the artists or the fashion (which I could not afford), but about the history and the messages. Unlike other genres, hip-hop offered me, as a Black man, an opportunity to feel happiness, sorrow, anger, love, strength, and vulnerability, all in the same genre, often in one single song. Hip-hop offers varied perspectives because the Black experience is also multifaceted. This thesis seeks to complicate and reimagine the contemporary hip-hop moment.

The Black American Experience and Hip-hop

Hip-hop is a complex piece of the American fabric that serves as an art form as well as a culture and movement. The genre is a cyclical fusion of Black and Latino art and music rich with various musical influences such as rock, soul, funk, blues, and jazz. Interestingly, these genres mentioned above were also created by and influenced by Black musicians. These cultural influences on hip-hop are deep, beginning with spirituals sung by Black slaves. Stories and songs of a promising tomorrow flowing through the Black church and hymns still resonate throughout Black music today: jazz, rock, country. Hip-hop wouldn't be possible without these genres and

experiences--we can look at Rakim, whose mother was a jazz and opera singer who helped orient his rhymes and flow.¹ The influences are abundantly clear. To further contextualize how hip-hop came to be, it is important to understand that societal environment. The genre was born in South Bronx of New York, which was often referred to as "America's worst slum," "the city of despair," "ghetto of the ghettos," "the stain," "the cancer."² The times were not as far-fetched as the descriptors indicate. As Jeff Chang discusses, the South Bronx alone had faced tremendous losses, "600,000 manufacturing jobs--40 percent of the sector disappeared. By the mid-seventies, average per capita income dropped to \$2,430 - 40 percent of the national average."³ As a result, young people leaned into the teachings and lessons of their parents (Black Panthers), Black Power, Black Liberation, and Pro-Black culture. They put their thoughts, frustrations, and dreams into the music.

DJs (Disc Jockeys) utilized sounds from Black auditory history to create a new form of art and expression that the youth wanted to hear, could resonate with, and needed. Unemployed, uneducated, and unsupported by the country, the people of the South Bronx and other ghettos around the United States needed to express their neglected conditions. These poor neighborhoods used hip-hop to speak about their rich experiences and share their culture with people worldwide. These movements and ideologies, coupled with outspoken and political parents, created teens and young adults eager to express themselves differently than in the

¹ Jeff Chang and D. J. Kool Herc, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Reprint edition (New York: Picador, 2005), 258.

² S. H. Fernando, *The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip-Hop* (Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994), 2.

³ Jeff Chang and D. J. Kool Herc, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Reprint edition (New York: Picador, 2005), 13.

past. They created music out of despair, hope out of hopelessness to help make sense of their lives.

Hip-Hop and/as Racial Justice Messaging

Like the music of the pro-Black movement, social movement era, hymns, and spirituals of before, these Black hip-hop artists advocate for racial justice. Then, and now, Black Americans face a life of political and societal anguish, discrimination, and otherness. As we look through history, there is a continuous and persistent need for racial justice advocacy. However, what makes the hip-hop era special is that despite the profound change, both social and political, promises were left unfulfilled. This led the youth to get caught in an expedited transitional period both in maturity and their national sense of place and belonging. As Patricia Hill Collins states, “During this period marked by the end of the Black Power Movement and the ascendancy of hip hop, they lived the shift from color-conscious racism that relied on strict racial segregation to a seemingly colorblind racism that promised equal opportunities yet provided no lasting avenues for African American advancement.”⁴ Black Nationalism and pride in one’s Blackness naturally found their roots in hip-hop. Artists found ways to convey these teachings and philosophy in their music. Instead of looking to the existing music and messages to define their existence, artists began to produce music that advocated for their own needs and desires. One of hip-hop’s founders, Clive Campbell, also known as DJ Kool Herc, said his intention in 1973 was to create a sound, a culture, which would allow people to have fun; he

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Temple University Press, 2006), 3.

and others brought together elements of funk, disco, West African cultures, and jazz.⁵ Even if not entirely intentional in their creation, these sounds indicated the beginning of what I call productive self-advocacy in the music.

Defining Productive Self-Advocacy

Productive self-advocacy depends on creativity and freedom of expression. In this case specifically, this freedom of expression sought to fill a void that was missing from the Black American life. As we established above, hip-hop was predated by music genres across the globe but rooted in the Black American and Afro-Latino experience. It was created to rebel and call attention to the conditions in which they lived. However, productive self-advocacy describes an inspiration to shift focus (mentally, emotionally, or physically) from the songs of yesteryear - songs calling for divine intervention as heard in the Negro spirituals, a call for hope one day as heard in the freedom songs - to and using hip-hop as a call for change, differing from the 80s and 90s hip-hop that brought attention to the conditions of poor Black and Brown youths in the Bronx. Productive self-advocacy is retrospective and calls into question the assumptions of the community as well as the self. This can be seen in Kanye West's *Graduation*, six years before *Yezzus*. In the song, "Everything I Am," he says:

I know people wouldn't usually rap this
But I got the facts to back this
Just last year, Chicago had over six hundred caskets
Man, killing's some wack shit
Oh, I forgot, 'cept for when niggas is rappin'
Do you know what it feel like when people is passin'?

⁵ Rebecca Laurence, "BBC - Culture - 40 Years on from the Party Where Hip Hop Was Born," News, *BBC*, (August 9, 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130809-the-party-where-hip-hop-was-born>.

Chicago has always had a history with violence, gangs, murder. What Kanye is doing as a rapper, first with “Jesus Walks,” a song about bringing Jesus to mainstream hip-hop, then “Everything I Am,” is questioning why rappers talk about death even though they all mourn when they lose a loved one. Productive self-advocacy asks the listener to look within oneself to question if they can or want to become the agents of change from the status quo. He provides the ask and also demonstrates it with his actions through the song.

Hip-hop has been and continues to be a voice of expression, self-determination, rebellion, and change; per Collins, although there are generational divides between the Civil Rights Movement and the hip-hop generation, they both affect and shape African American politics.⁶ For most of the 1990s, the height of hip-hop’s popularity and controversy, these children born of Black Power and Civil Rights Movement parents engaged in gangster rap and aggressive motivational music to fill the gap that the broader society could not. Tricia Rose describes how hip-hop fills these spaces, arguing that “hip-hop gives voice to the tensions and contradictions in the public urban landscape during a period of substantial transformation and attempts to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work of the disposed.”⁷ In a sense, Hip-hop continues to be a fight for representation, identity, respect, and a space where the underrepresented are legitimized. Historical influences on hip-hop continue to play a factor in the contemporary moment. Artists like Kendrick Lamar are descendants of an art form dedicated to culture and speaking out on disparities. I argue that what we see today is a break from traditional freedom songs that “offered activists a way to respond and to resist while also

⁶ Collins, Patricia Hill. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Temple University Press, 2006., 18.

⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Wesleyan University Press Middletown, CT, 1994), 72.

demonstrating a commitment to peace and interracial unity.”⁸ Productive self-advocacy moves past calling for equality, fairness, or assistance and a move toward action. Productive self-advocates like Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar create messages that encourage the Black community to build for themselves rather than demand for people to save them. Additionally, in response to many hip-hop scholars, this moment may be the new social movement that resides within the individual and spreads throughout the community.

Productive self-advocacy messages are communicative notes that indicate a transition from the traditional notions of protest and equity. These messages show a dystopian view of race relations and a dismal view of fair treatment of Black people. Productive self-advocacy can be traced to the early 19th century debates between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington about racial uplifting. However, this concept of productive self-advocacy can be seen as siding with Booker T. Washington. Instead of pleading for equality from white members of Congress and politicians, this concept acknowledges that there is no amount of protest or bargaining that can change the fundamental fact that the United States of America has an identity grounded in the destruction of Native peoples and on the backs of slaves. These messages dictate that there needs to be self-dependence from the Black community to take care of its people. There are a plethora of ways that a person, group, or community can advocate for itself, but “productive” indicates a focus on community action by the community and for the community. It suggests a focus on effort. “Self-advocacy” seeks to articulate the complexity of the Black community. The self is not about the singular person but as a representation of the whole. In other words, by

⁸ Miller, Elizabeth Ellis. “Remembering Freedom Songs: Repurposing an Activist Genre.” *Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English*, 1, 81, no. 1 (2018): 50–72.

advocating for the Black community, one is simultaneously advocating for themselves. No matter the level of fame that one reaches, there is no difference in the eye of the racial majority. Often being the representative or spokesperson for the entire community, which is not isolated to Black folk, but communities of color.

As articulated by many writers, this issue of racial injustice has not dissipated or ceased. Thoughts from writers like Ralph Ellison expressed in *The Invisible Man* and continued in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* describe a need to change the way Black communities think about social justice. In Coates' book, which serves as a letter to his fifteen-year-old son, he advises the young Black boy grappling with the difficult conditions of the time. Contrary to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Coates does not offer hope for equality and salvation. Instead, he states that the power lies in understanding that the system will never change, and one man cannot change the system. The book seems to allude to calls for separation and building the community from the inside. Productive self-advocacy is to call out the injustices for one another rather than tell the perpetrators what they already know. Instead, productive self-advocates like Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar create messages that encourage the Black community to build for themselves rather than wait for people to save them.

The culture of hip-hop can be found in the work presented by West. He has captured hip-hop's essence and soul since his early days of song producing and beat making. Kanye West's political voice and popularity crescendo when examining his albums and fashion between 2011 and 2016. Lamar, like West, balances his artistry and commercial success to produce political messages that go against common sense. However, these artists differ in how they demonstrate and encode messages of productive self-advocacy. Both artists maintain their

commercial status while propagating productive self-advocacy messages that get communities to realize their power to change their conditions.

Linked through their connection to hip-hop and the Black community, West and Lamar produce these messages within their music. Kanye West uses multiple platforms to speak directly to political concerns, and Kendrick Lamar uses his music specifically to address issues about sovereignty and independence while responding to #BLM. Looking at Kendrick Lamar's work during the same period, he analyzes his metamorphosis into a commercial artist, "misusing [his] influence"⁹ in his second major-label album, *To Pimp a Butterfly (TPAB)* which some may say helped move justice forward. Even though songs like "Swimming Pools" have a consequential effect on discussions of alcoholism and alcohol abuse in the Black community, overwhelmingly, songs like "Bitch, Don't Kill My Vibe," "Money Trees," and "The Recipe" glorify the hop-hop lifestyle. They do not interrogate the issues that plague the Black community as *TPAB*. This album has been one of the most concentrated and complicated conversations about race in America since the beginning of #BLM, peaking at number one on the *Billboard 200*. Produced three years after his major label debut, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, *TPAB* is an example of what hip-hop and Black politics look like when combined. Kendrick Lamar discusses major issues while giving Black folk music to dance to, yet encoding these songs with messages that need to be contemplated and analyzed.

Using Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar as case studies, I propose a new way to investigate the current trend in the hip-hop genre today. I chose Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar to explore how these artists exemplify the call for productive self-advocacy in their music

⁹ *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Audio CD (Aftermath, 2015).

(as well as fashion and public persona in West's case). Understanding productive self-advocacy as it pertains to hip-hop is critical to understanding how communication changes and develops in hip-hop and African-American culture. This is not to say that all African-Americans listen to hip-hop, but the music became an instrumental part of Black culture, and both are inextricably linked. For too long, communication studies underplayed Black American discourse; this thesis seeks to understand the role Black communication, in the form of hip-hop, plays in shaping and responding to contemporary social protest. Additionally, this project seeks to understand and explore hip-hop and its complexities because, to this day, this genre still is one of the few places for unabashedly Black artists.

Productive Self-Advocacy: Artists of Today are Reflexive and Self-critical

Although there are many ways to interpret productive self-advocacy and the artists who implement these strategies to uplift the community, this work seeks to identify a particular version of productive self-advocacy contextualized in our contemporary moment. Specifically, the productive self-advocacy that I describe here hinges on the differences between the contemporary moment and other moments of the past. Artists of today deal with a set of circumstances that other Black artists have never had to deal with before. Some of which deal with 1. The globalization of the world, 2. The democratization of information, 3. Commercialization of hip-hop and the amount of wealth to be made, 4. Lack of harmonious alignment of social movement and social purpose, to name a few.

Like the samples we find in hip-hop, the artists today layer on and use previous moments to create a new, reimagined sound. No productive self-advocacy in and of itself is not a net new concept, but how it takes shape today is. The closest example we can use to exemplify similarities and differences between the music of the past and today can be found in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of 1965 through 1975. BAM was black power, cultural nationalism, and community over the individual movement that expressed those beliefs through music, art, and demonstrations. Although there are many similarities throughout this research and in the contemporary hip-hop moment, as Dyson notes, the differences lie in “different time periods, different artistic constraints, and different political and racial situations. . . A critical difference between the Black arts Movement and conscious rap is that hip-hop has not been supported by a vibrant political movement.”¹⁰ Artists of today are functioning on an independent wavelength, taking care of themselves, their family, and their local communities rather than Black folk nation-wide or universally. Previously there existed more cohesion between the larger community and the BAM philosophy that there is no individual outside of the whole, speaking for the community was a given. What we see today as Kitwana noted, there is not a collective agreement of what is required of the hip-hop artist, listeners, community, and social movement. What we may be seeing with the productive self-advocates of today is a new social movement of the individual to empower those around them.

In order to individually support the community and invoke others to the same is by modeling the work that it takes to show up even if those around you are not there, yet. Hadley

¹⁰ Dyson, Michael Eric. “TRACK 3. ‘IT’S TRENDY TO BE THE CONSCIOUS MC’ Culture, Rhetoric, Crack, and the Politics of Rap.” Essay. In *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop*, 59–65. Basic Civitas Books, 2007.

and Yancy are the first to discuss and compile an anthology about *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-hop*. What is particularly interesting about this work is that it was published in 2012 in the medical field (occupational therapy, psychology). They describe a patient who used hip-hop to do self work, “The form develops with both structured choruses and fluid freestyle rap with the use of sound technology...He began to accept his own vulnerability and mistakes through self-reflection in recording and listening to his raps.”¹¹ As mental health, emotional vulnerability, and emotional self-work begins to be more acceptable in the hip-hop community as seen with artists like Eminem (*Rock Bottom*), Big Sean (*Single Again*), Kid Cudi (*Solo Dolo, Pt. III*), and Logic (*1-800-273-8255*), the contemporary productive self-advocate is using music to heal and spread messages for the community to do the same (especially as research shows the stigma attached for men of color to seek mental health assistance). As mentioned previously, productive self-advocacy is reflexive. Additionally, scholarship on hip-hop seems to miss this new moment and not investigate what hip-hop can do despite being hyper-commercialized. One could say the focus on mental health is profitable, but we need additional scholarship to determine if that is true.

To trace back productive self-advocacy and the spaces where they are delineated or if this moment is drastically different needs to continue being explored. We need more scholars to look at the genre as more than what appears on the surface. Compiled memories and conversations between several university scholars and professors concerning hip-hop culture in the U.S (including Todd Boyd, a professor of critical studies at the University of Southern

¹¹ Hadley, Susan, and George Yancy. *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip Hop*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012.

California; Scott Heath, an assistant professor of English at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.; Kyra Gaunt, a singer and associate professor at the music department of New York University) Hamilton captures the lack of rigor, focus and appreciation for the depth that hip-hop contains:

“For much of its history, hip-hop scholarship has been engaged in a legitimizing project, Heath notes. ‘Is this culture worth our time: our research time, our time in the classroom? That work is important and it’s still not complete,’ he says, ‘but we also have reached a point where we have an opportunity to get beyond that rudimentary stage’. . . Hip-hop scholarship has, thus, begun to be more self-critical. Boyd, for example, calling on the hip-hop tradition of braggadocio and plain speaking, characterizes the state of hip-hop in the academy as ‘really weak,’ then adds, ‘Hey, I’m just keeping it real’. . . Heath, a younger scholar, is more circumspect. ‘We’re being more careful about what we recognize as good,’ he says. ‘Making polemical statements and throwing in a few rap lyrics is not hip-hop scholarship. At the same time, even the work I criticize has played a part in creating a space for my work. I don’t forget that.’ Still, the implications are clear: hip-hop scholarship has the opportunity to begin to ask a new set of questions. Gaunt -- one of only three or four academically trained musical scholars in the country who are working in this area -- would love to see the conversation move away from the areas in which it’s been mired: the analysis of lyrics and the record industry.”¹²

I include this lengthy quote to demonstrate that the introspection and reflexiveness that I identify in hip-hop is also happening within hip-hop academia. The research needs to continue because there are multifaceted and multilayered elements of hip-hop that have yet to be discovered. As Gaunt mentioned above and this thesis seeks to explore, we have to look beyond just the lyrics and industry, but at actions, art, fashion, public statements, historical and cultural elements that help make hip-hop happen. It does not exist in a vacuum. However, there is work being done in sporadic spaces.

¹² Hamilton, Kendra. “Making Some Noise: The Academy’s Hip-Hop Generation.” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 21, no. 5 (April 22, 2004): 34–35.

An interesting piece that brings to life Gaunts request for deeper, more holistic research was a study done by Racine, Professor in the Interdepartmental English Language Program at Dokkyo University, Japan, who conducted a genre-lyrical study on mainstream American rap at two points in time: a quarter-century ago [1980s-1990s] and today [2010s]. He had a set of objectives: 1. Examine race and gender of the artists to determine whether or not the demographics of popular rappers have changed over time. 2. Establish to what extent, if any, the genres and themes of rap have changed over the same period. He employed a specific set of methodologies (e.g., sampling all popular raps within two half-year periods and not adopting a pre-established taxonomy of genres) which sought to yield an “objective characterization of hip-hop than has traditionally been presented in journalistic and academic accounts.”¹³ What is most interesting about the results of this work is that as a by-product of his studies he found,

“expressions of dissatisfaction and dissent have all but disappeared from contemporary American rap. Didactic messages from “authentic”, streetwise artists of the past have been replaced with more introspective lyrical content from current artists. The data indicates that while the focus of lyrical themes and genres has shifted over the years, the demographics of the artists who create them has not. The most influential rap artists have remained almost exclusively Black and male from the birth of rap music until today.”¹⁴

Productive self-advocacy messages of today have parallels with hip-hop, and other black genres of the past. However, productive self-advocates of today differ on many fronts, but most notably on the basis of introspection and the socio-political moment of today. These advocates are reflexive and self-critical of their place in the world, and music industry, yet provide messages of

¹³ Rivers, Damian, Andrew Ross, and John P. Racine. “The Death of Dissent and the Decline of Dissin’: A Diachronic Study of Race, Gender, and Genre in Mainstream American Rap.” Essay. In *The Sociolinguistics of Hip-Hop as Critical Conscience: Dissatisfaction and Dissent*, 237–68. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

encouragement, support for others who are not where they are, yet. The call for Black sovereignty, and self-governance.

Literature Review

Because of its content and presentation, hip-hop has always garnered a ton of attention and critiques. For the 50 years that it has been around, listeners have discussed and debated how to interpret the music and where it fits. Luckily, the genre has been around long enough for scholars to investigate the multifaceted nature of hip-hop. In this section, we'll discuss how hip-hop has served political uses and how it may now function as a social movement, the hyper-masculine and misogynistic attitudes of the genre, and the opportunity for feminists and women's rights advocates to leverage hip-hop for change, and end in a discussion about how scholars talk about the commercialization of hip-hop and why it may not really matter. Many critics, bloggers, and scholars agree that the popularization and commercialization of hip-hop has caused the music to become "commercial." However, it is critical to understand what commercialization means theoretically to articulate how these artists function within a system constructed to make a profit and not necessarily encourage creativity and difference. The best way to orient our thinking is around Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

Hegemony finds its power in making itself hidden in the open; Gramsci's notion of common sense illustrates how the dominant ideology maintains power by convincing the subordinate class that these ideologies are standard.¹⁵ Hegemony is not to be confused with domination or force:

¹⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volume 2* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 51.

for Gramsci [there] is a crucial conceptual distinction between power based on 'domination' and the exercise of 'direction' or 'hegemony.' In this context, it is also worth noting that the term 'hegemony' in Gramsci itself has two faces. On the one hand, it is contrasted with 'domination' (and as such bound up with the opposition State/Civil Society), and on the other hand, 'hegemonic' is sometimes used as an opposite of 'corporate' or "economic-corporate" to designate a historical phase in which a given group moves beyond a position of corporate existence and defense of its economic status and aspires to a place of leadership in the political and social arena.¹⁶

Hegemony represents the subtle and subversive use of power to form order and discipline without overt strength. In contrast, counter-hegemony or often referred to as subordinate or subaltern by Gramsci represents the resistance to the subversive power dynamics that are embedded in everyday life. From this position, the subaltern seeks to reshape traditional power dynamics to include themselves in the leadership. It is from these understandings that we can understand how hip-hop functions within and outside of hegemony. In other words, hip-hop operates within hegemonic structures (music industry) to produce counter-hegemonic messages or what I call productive self-advocacy.

Hip-Hop's Political Power and Function as a Social Movement

It can be said that artists like Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar are political by serving Black communities and bringing injustices that have and continue to be done to Black people to

¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci and Quintin Hoare, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 8. pr (New York: International Publ, 1985), 20.

light. By using their power and influence to balance hegemony (commercial success) and counter-hegemonic (statements against the commonsensical dominant ideology of commercial success), they can respond to and assist protest movements seeking to achieve a similar goal to uplift and support the community. In contrast to the connection between music and protest in the past, movements today have the power of social media to spread messages from the source. A genre like hip-hop which specializes in speaking out is perfect for that. Hip-hop today has the benefit of time and practice to create the right mixture to create the hip-hop effect we see today. Poverty, lack of resources, and police brutality in Black communities are pervasive and still play a foundational role in the genre. Pro-Black movements and ideologies of the time, mixed with outspoken and political parents, created youth eager to express themselves in different ways than in the past. Artists like Kendrick Lamar are descendants of both the movements and art forms dedicated to speaking about disparities. Hip-hop, like most art, depends on the state of affairs in the world; “Unlike rock and other music genres, hip-hop is based on the co-authorship of artists and urban youth communities.”¹⁷ Chuck D, Public Enemy member and hip-hop legend, is often attributed to calling hip-hop the Black CNN---serving as a medium to inform and connect people. By listening to hip-hop, one can get a glimpse into the lived experience of inner city Black and Brown youth alongside commentary on the living conditions of low-income families and criticism of government policies.¹⁸

This Black CNN concept is exactly what differentiates the contemporary moment and past social movements. Due to the commercialization of hip-hop, these songs can reach people

¹⁷ Sonja L. Lanehart, *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2001), 189.

¹⁸ Msia Kibona Clark, “Hip Hop as Social Commentary in Accra and Dar Es Salaam,” *African Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 24.

that previous political movements could not reach. Messages of productive self-advocacy embedded in the music have gained international scope; suppressed voices and spaces of marginalized communities worldwide are utilizing hip-hop to speak up. Unlike the activists of the past, movements like #BLM can gain support across the globe. I offer the global perspective because hip-hop and politics are geographically orientated and borderless. Hip-hop is its own language that moves across local and state lines, crosses international waters, and is used in the most unexpected places. Dyson recalls events in Poland where protesters “blasted NWA’s ‘Fuck tha Police’ to express outrage at oppressive social and political forces.”¹⁹ The globalization of hip-hop offers the opportunity for productive self-advocacy messages to influence others and help create change at home through the support of others bound by oppression and disenfranchisement. As described by Msia Kibona Clark, youth not specific to Tanzania or Ghana of which she writes, are using the art as “a tool of self-expression and self-definition and is often used as a tool of resistance.”²⁰ Rappers have the ability and power to speak out in ways that other rhetorical mediums do not allow. Bakari Kitwana offers an interesting perspective noting that hip-hop is not only political; it has and can produce change. However, tensions exist that make it difficult to achieve substantive progress. Kitwana notes that there needs to be a “unified front between hip-hop’s commercial and grassroots sectors on the issue of sociopolitical action.”²¹ He points to countless examples ranging from the The Haitian Refugee Crisis, The

¹⁹ Dyson, Michael Eric. “This Dark Diction Has Become America’s Addiction.” Essay. In *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop*; Intro by Jay-Z, Outro by Nas, 49–49. New York: Basic Civitas, 2010.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23–46.

²¹ Forman, Murray, Mark Anthony Neal, and Bakari Kitwana. “The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power.” Essay. In *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 341–50. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012.

Million Man March, Social Programs and Foundations, East Coast/West Coast Conflict. These movements were either spearheaded, supported, or facilitated by hip-hop artists. It is possible to argue that although there has not been a formal discussion or alignment, some hip-hop artists acknowledge their opportunity to support change and ignite passion and perspective among their global fan base.

Hip-hop is a tool of social commentary and community, but I argue that it now has evolved to do more than that to actually shift thinking and thought. Analysis of hip-hop music allows scholars to investigate strategies that marginalized voices employ to carve out spaces for themselves. David W. Rice describes a mode by which rappers are social commentators. Rappers discuss topics that are happening to them to form “visibility in the lyrics.”²² The artists seek to bring attention to ignored populations; they sometimes write “sorrow songs. . . [to describe] loss, suffering, and trauma.”²³ The effects of hip-hop on the Black community are both historical and contemporary. Staying true to hip-hop, Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West discuss hardship and struggle while bringing people together through those conditions. Overwhelmingly, these authors describe the hip-hop genre as a tool for social commentary and political action. Since its creation, hip-hop in all forms has been an avenue for the Black community to come together and develop sounds and messages that relate directly to the people. The music is a way for the communities to express an identity that is unique to others and for the Black community to feel like they have a culture in America that is their own. The connection between hip-hop and the

²² David Wall Rice, “Rakim, Ice Cube Then Watch the Throne: Engaged Visibility through Identity Orchestration and the Language of Hip-Hop Narratives,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 1 (February 2013): 173–91, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12020.

²³ Joseph Winters, “Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability in Hip Hop,” *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 9–20.

Black community is inseparable, an interchanging of ideas and norms that assist in stimulating both the Black community and the hip-hop culture. Hip-hop is global and is continually used as a genre to fight oppression and discrimination. Specifically, messages of productive self-advocacy resonate because it calls for the individual to make changes and be biased towards action. It allows the listener to feel in control of their circumstances and change their situation. Perhaps the social movements that we recall from yesteryear are now individualized and no longer geographically contained.

Hyper-masculinity and Misogyny in Hip-hop

Even though hip-hop has positive aspects, it is important to note the critique the genre faces for being heteronormative, hyper-masculine, and violent. Scholarly work on hip-hop has pointed out the music and culture as violent, misogynistic, and unworthy of academic study. Bryan J. McCann, for example, argues that rage is a common trope in hip-hop.²⁴ He focuses on Tupac Shakur to illustrate how rappers use rage to convey the messages of the African-American condition. He paints this Black rage as the basis of hip-hop. This view is both oversimplified and paints the picture of a group of angry Black people when hip-hop in its creation and essence is not all about anger. The idea of mad Black people feeds into the stereotypes of Black Americans, which seek to contain and discipline Black voices.

²⁴ Bryan J. McCann, "Affect, Black Rage, and False Alternatives in the Hip-Hop Nation," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 5 (October 2013): 408–18, doi:10.1177/1532708613496392.

Guillermo Rebollo-Gil also describes hip-hop through a negative lens, contending that there is a common misogynistic theme within the art (culture).²⁵ Rebollo-Gil argues that the male rapper's "energy is spent trying to either keep women quiet or getting them to shut up. The rest is spent trying to get them into bed."²⁶ Bell Hooks argues, "Black male hip-hop artists who receive the most acclaim are busy pimping violence: peddling the racist/sexist stereotypes of the Black male as a primitive predator."²⁷ In her book about Black men and masculinity, she states that hip-hop offers a place of centralized power that continues to constrain Black males from truly having a radicalized consciousness. Being a listener, regardless of gender, do you care for women, especially Black women? This scholarship makes a good point and seems to be a destructive representation and interpretation of the art, which could cause long-term effects on the scholarship of hip-hop. However, In Collins's book, *Black power to hip hop: racism, nationalism, and feminism*, as she explores her own experiences with sexism and racism in America, she explores the impact of hip-hop on women. Although it seems contradictory, Collins believes that a Black feminist-leaning woman in America can use hip-hop to advance her ideas. However, if we are to accept that the personal is political, there is an opportunity to weave in hip-hop and national policy to create change for women.²⁸ Productive self-advocacy allows the opportunity to utilize a genre like hip-hop wrought with toxic masculine personas and messages to inspire change for others simultaneously. This is not to say that hip-hop or

²⁵ Guillermo Rebollo-Gil and Amanda Moras, "Black Women and Black Men in Hip Hop Music: Misogyny, Violence and the Negotiation of (White-Owned) Space," *Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 1 (February 2012): 118–32, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00898.x.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁷ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 60.

²⁸ Collins, Patricia Hill. "Is the Personal Still Political? The Women's Movement, Feminism, and Black Women in the Hip-Hop Generation." Essay. In *From Black Power to Hip Hop Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, 161–96. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006.

productive self-advocates will make people less misogynistic. Instead, they can alter the thoughts of listeners and offer an alternate perspective and reality.

The Context of Commercialism in Hip-Hop

If violence and misogyny were not enough, the genre has come under fire since artists began selling out shows and seeing enormous profits. Juan Flores describes the process of commercialization of hip-hop, stating, “the commercialization process [of hip-hop] involves the extraction of popular cultural expression from its original social contest and function.”²⁹ Advertisers and companies utilize hip-hop for commercial purposes with no intention of preserving the cultural exigence of the art form. *Don Charnas* contends that the commercialization of hip-hop started with Wu-Tang Clan's commercial for St. Ides, a malt liquor brand. Using hip-hop as a vehicle to influence the listeners to purchase the failing malt liquor company and being successful at it.³⁰ Like the parading of St. Ides in hip-hop videos of the 1990s, the commercialization of hip-hop had an adverse effect on the youth. Bakari Kitwana argues, “Certainly, the commercialization of rap music expanded the definition of hip-hop culture beyond the four elements. [But now] the new Black youth culture is expressed both publicly and privately in myriad ways.”³¹ The construction of development for Black youth becomes more complicated and is now influenced by manufactured images produced from

²⁹ Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2012), chap. Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots, and Amnesia.

³⁰ Charnas, Dan. *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*. New York, NY: New American Library, 2011.

³¹ Kitwana, Bakari. “The New Black Youth Culture: The Emergence of the Hip-Hop Generation.” Essay. In *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, 8–8. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2008.

corporations that do not have hip-hop culture's best interest in mind. These types of criticisms from hip-hop enthusiasts, artists, and cultural members alike assert that money and corporate input have diluted the hip-hop scene. They argue that the genre has become a farce unsuitable for true hip-hop fans. Peter Rosenberg, DJ, and co-host for the notable New York radio station Hot 97 made this clear when he said, "I see the real hip-hop heads sprinkled in here. I see them. I know there are some chicks here waiting to sing 'Starships' later - I'm not talking to y'all right now."³² Never mind the blatant sexism associated with the comment, Rosenberg makes the case that a true hip-hop head would never listen--or worse, sing "Starships" by Nicki Minaj. Recognized internationally as a hip-hop star, criticisms of Nicki Minaj stem from her crossover songs despite their popularity among the hip-hop community.

To those who consider themselves "true hip-hop heads," crossovers are perceived as a betrayal. Critics argue that crossover artists like De La Soul, Snoop Dogg, or the aforementioned Nicki Minaj bring into the question "authenticity as rap poses continually strive to reaffirm their connections to the 'hood in an attempt to mitigate the negative accusations that they have sold out in the event of commercial or crossover success."³³ The main point of contention stems from the presumed interpretation of hip-hop history that the culture began as solely an African-American endeavor. They argue that hip-hop commercialization causes Afrocentric and conscious rappers to be eradicated by corporate [white] America. Many people point to government conspiracy or some secret organization responsible for the demise of conscious hip-hop with shows like *Yo MTV Raps*. Many critics believe that hip-hop was strategically made

³²Harris, Isoul. *Nicki Minaj*. London, UK: Music Sales, 2012.

³³ Forman, Murray, Mark Anthony Neal, and Murray Forman. "'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music." Essay. In *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 207. New York: Routledge, 2012.

less Black by corporations like Time-Warner to destroy its original form. Curtin argues that when Time-Warner acquired Death Row Records, it was for profit, not for the betterment of the culture. Death Row Records featured artists like Snoop Doggy Dogg (at the time), Dr. Dre, and Tupac Shakur; Curtin states that these moves were “strictly capitalistic and [Time-Warner] was generally disinterested in content issues.”³⁴ The crossover records are especially offensive to hip-hop purists because companies like Time-Warner have their white consumers in mind rather than the communities that the songs derive from and represent. After all, these white audiences represent higher profit margins. Even though the parent company does not concern itself with the specifics and the repercussions of the artists they feature, there are concrete consequences. The music may seem encoded for Black audiences but is marketed to white suburban consumers who buy more records. Furthermore, there are complicated representational issues that simultaneously arise as corporations restructure hip-hop in the mainstream. However, it is also important to acknowledge that artists are not captive; they choose how they use their platform.

Critics assert that the commercialization of hip-hop inadvertently affects the Black community. These strategies oppress those artists that seek to talk about issues that plague Black society. Solomon W.F. Comissiong, a community activist and educator, contends that “by methodically buying out rap record labels, the corporate majors were able to silence progressive voices, all the while promoting rappers who would embody an image of Black people that corporations felt more comfortable with.”³⁵ These powerful critiques about hip-hop

³⁴ Michael Curtin, “On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era,” *Making and Selling Culture*, 1996, 191.

³⁵ Solomon W. F. Comissiong, *A Hip Hop Activist Speaks Out on Social Issues* (Xlibris Corporation, 2012), chap. Corporate Hip Hop, White Supremacy & Capitalism.

and its commercialization bring about interesting conversations about the ability of hip-hop artists to stand up against these pressures. However, these critics miss that artists have a choice in these matters. One can look at hip-hop star MC Hammer's decision to dance on commercials for Kentucky Fried Chicken (officially known as KFC since 1991).³⁶ Artists make these decisions every day. De La Soul, one of the first artists to crossover, recalls how they were considered sellouts on *Sway in the Morning*. They discussed that selling out is now required in the industry for success. However, De La Soul notes that the verbiage has changed, and now artists must brand themselves while being flexible to crossover into other genres. This is what makes artists like Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar so interesting to unpack. They have both been able to incorporate messages about independence, freedom, racism, relinquishing the shackles of systematic oppression while simultaneously topping Billboard charts and amassing massive international fandom. Interestingly, productive-self advocacy messages can make money while inciting individual social movements within the listener.

The (Counter)Hegemonic Possibilities of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop is spiritually counter-hegemonic, but corporations like Time-Warner (Death Row Records) attempted to make it an arm of hegemony. As an art form, it follows that hip-hop is a tool for self-expression. On the one hand, the core of hip-hop depends on the unique and varied experiences of people. On the other hand, with the music industry concerned primarily with profits, the artist side of the music is often in direct competition with the business aspects of

³⁶ *MC Hammer KFC Commercial April 29 1992. YouTube.* YouTube, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znpxA2Kui2c>.

music. However, pockets of artists can still use the corporation's power, money, and influence to send counter-hegemonic messages. Productive self-advocacy serves as the counter-hegemonic message; using the platform, artists are not creating comforting or common-sense messages. Rather, they are providing new alternatives that challenge the status quo. When we discuss hegemony, it is important to note that it describes power dynamics and its influence on society.³⁷ Hegemony refers to the methods used to gain power and maintain that power under the guise of normality.³⁸ Normality takes shape in how corporations like McKenzie River Corporation (St. Ides malt liquor) artificially input themselves in hip-hop culture. These institutions function as a mouthpiece and protectorate of hegemony. From the commercials, hip-hop artists unknowingly began to allow these images to define them in the eyes of the suburban folks who listened and watched.

These influences often flow through and influence culture like a ghostly figure through the night, lurking. But, other times, they work in plain sight, as in the case of hip-hop. Commercialized messages of pro-capitalism and neoliberalism come out in droves. Mass media serves as a tool to tap into people's everyday lives with little effort, to "perpetuate their power, wealth and status [by standardizing] their own philosophy, culture, and morality."³⁹ Hip-hop artists have done a great job of normalizing and perpetuating the status quo. The culture of hip-hop has changed since its inception on the streets of New York; it seems it has truly become an arm of Americanism. Contrary to what one might think, hegemony is not a direct cause and effect relationship. Rather, as Stuart Hall asserts, these messages set by the dominant class

³⁷ James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), chap. Hegemony.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Carl Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 39.

create boundaries for the subordinate class setting limits on the way this "subordinate class 'live' and make sense of their subordination."⁴⁰ These boundaries force the subordinate class into complacency in powerlessness.

The dominant class develops self-discipline and control by establishing boundaries. People begin to assume particular roles in society.⁴¹ These social roles and pseudo-caste systems reproduce and continue to instill hegemony. Artists like A\$AP Rocky accept their roles as ordinary artists. In an interview with *Time Out New York*, A\$AP Rocky stated in response to the question: "Do you ever feel like you're being forced to address these issues?":

They're not forcing me to do *shit*. I'm just gonna stay black and die. Why, because I'm black? So every time something happens because I'm black I gotta stand up? What the fuck am I, Al Sharpton now? I'm A\$AP Rocky. I did not sign up to be no political activist. I wanna talk about my motherfuckin' lean, my best friend dying, the girls that come in and out of my life, the jiggy fashion that I wear, my new inspirations in drugs! I don't wanna talk about no fucking Ferguson and shit because I don't live over there! I live in fucking Soho and Beverly Hills. I can't relate. I'm in the studio; I'm in these fashion studios; I'm in these bitches' drawers. I'm not doing anything outside of that. That's *my* life.⁴²

Listeners, artists, producers, and CEOs all reaffirm the roles set in society while simultaneously disenfranchising themselves. Hegemony is the unseen, yet "self-evident cultural assumptions."⁴³

The argument against contemporary hip-hop stems from artists believing that their job is to be just artists and not participate in the political process. Even more so, the listeners also agree that artists should remain just artists. It is assumed that Black people do not participate in the

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, *Culture, the Media and the Ideological Effect* (Arnold, 1977), 333.

⁴¹ Philip Elliott, "Uses and Gratifications Research: A Critique and a Sociological Alternative," *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research* 3 (1974): 262.

⁴² "A\$AP Rocky Talks Dropping Acid, Ferguson and Being Intimidated by Women," *Time Out New York*, accessed September 18, 2016, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/music/asap-rocky-talks-dropping-acid-ferguson-and-being-intimidated-by-women>.

⁴³ James Lull, "Hegemony," *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, 2003, 62–63.

political process, are poor, or are just performers (athletics included). Hegemony feeds itself from stereotypes, daily functions, and seemingly consistent everyday stories about hip-hop. However, some people can see the hidden hegemonic strategies masked in normality. This is the case of counter-hegemony. As Hall illuminates, "it is crucial to the concept that hegemony is not a 'give' and permanent state of affairs, but it has to be actively won and secured; it can also be lost."⁴⁴ As mentioned prior, hegemony is not a direct influential cause; rather it depends on people's disinterest in determining why they do what they do. Like a parasite, its strength depends on the host being complacent with its presence.

Conversely, counter-hegemony attempts to bring dominant ideologies to the fore. Counter-hegemonic tendencies appear in various forms; as Nicola Pratt notes, ones that describe the "creation of an alternative hegemony on the terrain of civil society in preparation for a 'war of position.'"⁴⁵ This fight for representation and position in society is a struggle that is often mismatched. Due to the power and influence of music label parent companies, like Time-Warner (Death Row Records), the power and upper hand are given to the establishment. Nevertheless, the counter-hegemony happens everywhere; it happens in the cracks of culture, "mediated communications ranging from popular television shows to rap and rock music, even graffiti scrawled over the surfaces of public spaces, all inscribe messages that challenge central political positions and cultural assumptions."⁴⁶ This project focuses on the pockets of political resistance that function through the commercialized market. The opposition from artist and the

⁴⁴ Hall, *Culture, the Media and the Ideological Effect*, 333.

⁴⁵ Nicola Pratt, "Bringing Politics Back in: Examining the Link between Globalization and Democratization," *Review of International Political Economy* 11, no. 2 (2004): 322.

⁴⁶ Lull, "Hegemony," 65.

audience both function to create strong counter-hegemonic tendencies. If continued and not co-opted by the superstructure, counter-hegemony can become the dominant position.

What makes Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar important and essential to this study is their ability to utilize this power and influence to eloquently balance hegemony (commercial success) and counter-hegemonic (statements against the commonsensical dominant ideology of commercial success). In August 2011, Kanye West released his sixth studio album with Jay-Z, *Watch the Throne*. The release, three years after the stock market crash of 2008, was fitting. While the album was gaudy, sexual, and capitalistic, it also was prophetic and religious. This album flaunted and was drenched in capitalism and while the world tried to conserve and survive. In “No Church in the Wild”, Kanye says,

Thinkin' 'bout the girl in all-leopard
Who was rubbin' the wood like Kiki Shepard/ Two
tattoos, one read "No Apologies"
The other said "Love is cursed by monogamy"
That's somethin' that the pastor don't preach
That's somethin' that a teacher can't teach
When we die, the money we can't keep
But we prolly spend it all 'cause the pain ain't cheap, preach

Ever attentive to the current struggles of Americans across the nation, but specifically to Black Americans who have felt the pain of poverty, Kanye encourages spending to subdue the struggle. The album provides an opportunity for numbness and alternatives to sorrow. Instead, Kanye suggests celebration and indulgence as tools for escaping the pain.

Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” on his *TPAB* also connects to people’s pain. Lamar uses faith and spirituality as pillars of hope for the warriors of equality. He assures the constituted Black community and #BLM that if they place their confidence in God, HE will be there to have their

back. This faith in the Lord allows the Black community to have hope for a better tomorrow. He assures the listener that it will be alright. Lamar declares:

Alls my life I has to fight, Nigga
Alls my life I . . .
Hard times like: "God!"
Nazareth, I'm fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But, if God got us, then we gon' be alright

Like a preacher on the pulpit, Lamar constitutes a community that understands pain and suffering similar to the tribulations that Jesus experienced. The reference to Nazareth is not only an appeal to the Lord but also a reference to the struggles of Jesus when He proclaimed He was from Nazareth and the son of God. This struggle gives the constituted Black audience something with which to identify. Even though not all Black people are Christian, Jesus is widely referred to because his experiences most closely connect to the story of the Black American. Cummings and Latta argue that "Black American congregations give voice to a connection between oppressive conditions and the humiliation/death/promise of divine rescue offered by Jesus."⁴⁷ The congregation is the Black audience, and Lamar serves as the messenger of hope in the song. Kendrick Lamar uses his commercial success to preach to the congregation. The Black community and the #BLM are not one and the same, instead, they are composed of similar people. The message is given to both groups. Kendrick Lamar constitutes an audience that brings both parties together. Even though this song is an example of how he does this, looking at various texts from both artists allows for a richer analysis of the music and the audience of which they speak.

⁴⁷ *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), chap. "Jesus is a Rock": Spirituals as Lived Experience, 63.

Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar both exemplify the new age of hip-hop. They offer an alternate path forward in hip-hop that allows artists to use their lives to encode political messages in ways that artists of the past could not. As Dyson articulates, the connection between the conscious rapper and the Black Arts Movement (which came out of the social movements of the 1960's) share many similarities: music to inspire, social commentary, both are political. However, what makes them different is that as a byproduct of hip-hop, there was "relentless assault on young blacks for being apolitical and socially apathetic is also an indictment of the broader black culture."⁴⁸ This is not quite correct. Instead, the artists of today have found a new way to deliver similar messages while making a lot of money. Similarly, Kitwana, although he acknowledges the parts of hip-hop that are problematic, says, "until hip-hop is recognized as a broad cultural movement, rather than simply an influential moneymaker, those who seek to tap into hip-hop's potential to impact change should not expect substantive progress."⁴⁹ In addition to a shift in the message to productive self-advocacy, artists like Lamar and West are participating in a new type of social movement targeted at the Black community, but supported by the world. The creation of the #BLM reignited the flames that motivated people around the country and the world to fight against social injustice. These artists balance their commercial success and the ability to create messages of self-advocacy. As Collins mentions, Black women's political involvement and ability to change and move forward social issues is clearly articulated in #BlackLivesMatter. The movement was founded by queer

⁴⁸ Dyson, Michael Eric. "This Dark Diction Has Become America's Addiction." Essay. In *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop* ; Intro by Jay-Z, Outro by Nas, 66-67. New York: Basic Civitas, 2010.

⁴⁹ Kitwana, Bakari. "The New Black Youth Culture: The Emergence of the Hip-Hop Generation." Essay. In *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, 206. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2008.

Black women, spread within communities, and gained international traction, illustrating the Black community's ability to serve itself and take care of its people. This balance intends to inspire the constituted Black people to help themselves and their communities. Unlike the pervasive narratives of past protest movements, these artists use their commercial success as a platform to amplify their messages of self-advocacy.

Texts and Method

To uncover the productive self-advocates artists, I offer two case studies: Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar. Although these two artists are not the only ones who do it (Jay-Z, Common, Noname to name a few), they are great examples because they have surpassed national success. West and Lamar are international superstars with hands in multiple cultural impact spaces (music management, fashion, and video production). Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar are still revered as cultural icons and legendary figures in the genre after more than a decade. I offer two artists who approach productive advocacy differently but still try to achieve a similar goal, thought-shifting. This project is also unique as one could say it is positioned right on top of another social movement: #BlackLivesMatter. There is a relationship between hip-hop and #BLM, and vice-versa. For this project, I am concentrating on the year before Trayvon Martin's murder (2011) and subsequent years up until 2016. Focusing on albums, performances, and interviews, I use Kanye West's *Yeezus* (2013), Kanye's tweets from Twitter, and the Yeezy fashion line as primary analysis texts. Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) is the centralized text for his analysis. Performances on talk shows, concerts, and music videos of both artists will serve as supportive texts. These texts are critical to understanding how they

got the audience they currently have and how productive self-advocacy goes beyond just music, and may be pervasive.

The albums serve more of a chronological purpose. They depend on one another rather than being individual albums, songs, or videos. These albums build on each other; Kanye West is intentional with his artwork. They are timely and timeless; they speak to situations in his life or in society, but simultaneously describe another time in American history while pushing the sonic boundaries of hip-hop. For Kendrick Lamar, his 2016 release of *TPAB* is a culmination of growth. He became more in tune with his responsibilities. At the end of his song (and continues in all the other songs on *TPAB*) “King Kunta,” he recalls, “I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence.”⁵⁰ As he reflects on his influence on hip-hop audiences, he contemplates and recognizes that he has not used his power in a way that benefits the people. These texts are crucial to understanding artists’ development to provide productive self-advocacy for the Black community.

For these auditory, visual, and written texts, conduct a close-textual analysis and rhetorical critique. Kanye West has and will continue to have a strong and boisterous personality. This allows for immense and in-depth analysis of his role in creating spaces for hegemony and counter-hegemony. Using his albums and alternate texts, a close-textual analysis reveals West’s ability to balance his fame and lavish hip-hop style to role model productive self-advocacy. Less ostentatiously, Kendrick Lamar considers himself a Black hippy, but at the same time still is signed to a label and receives enormous profits from album sales, concerts, and song features. Using Afrocentricity and constitutive rhetoric as foundational theories, I

⁵⁰ *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

conduct a rhetorical analysis of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," to illustrate his encoded message of productive self-advocacy and challenging the Black community to look within.

The #BLM movement serves as a contextual point of a revival of protest rhetoric in hip-hop. These two places of investigation are not only diverse, but they are also crucial to understanding the way that hip-hop fights and sometimes work with commercialism to get a political message across. Hip-hop, like punk rock, is counter-hegemonic. This project is concerned primarily with the music and how it connects to and is influenced by the #BLM movement. The culture itself finds a way to crawl out of the gentrified music spaces to create new and unregulated territory. Artists like Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West are master nomads and craftsmen; they utilize their tools to seek new ground in the hip-hop landscape. To postulate commercialism as the death of hip-hop is a mistake; rather, it can be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen the power of the art. That is not to say that hip-hop does not profit from this arrangement, essentialized and deprived to the point that anyone with decent looks and a microphone can make it. However, there is still hope which is right in front of us. These texts provide the basis for looking at the hip-hop landscape and reimagining what it looks like and where it can go. Writing about and exploring the political power of hip-hop to change mindsets even if the actual environment has not changed is critical—from Chicago to Compton, hip-hop has power.

Overview of Chapters

Productive self-advocacy derives from the Black American experience from slavery into the Civil Rights movement through the many songs that sought to offer an alternative reality from the ones they experienced. Additionally, these songs offered an opportunity for folks to

unite against racial oppression. Hip-hop offered a new opportunity to use music to report what was happening in communities in the 80s and 90s, diverging from their predecessors. In discussion with other scholars, it is agreed that there is political power and the possibility for Hip-hop to function as a social movement. However, it is important to acknowledge that hip-hop is not absolved from society's problematic nature--masculine, misogyny, and perpetuation of violence. Additionally, a complicated relationship exists between the genre and commercialism: can we trust or believe what these artists say and who controls the narrative? I conclude that these complicated questions and the contemporary hip-hop moments offer a new opportunity to investigate the effects of hip-hop on communities. Deep dives into Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar's music and entrepreneurial endeavors can give us a view into the possibilities of productive self-advocacy as a social movement or as a method for shifting disposition. This thesis concludes that there needs to be a resurgence and concentration on hip-hop as we saw in the 90s at the height of gangster-rap and hyper-violence. I argue that this hip-hop moment is equally or more interesting because of the global impact, and larger implications on culture as well as the individual social movement that productive self-advocacy may induce. Lastly, this thesis is also an exploration and affirmation that Black discourse functions as a strong influence on global communities and is worthy of continuous investigation.

Chapter one focuses on Kanye West as a case study. In this chapter, Kanye West, a cultural icon and hip-hop innovator, is explored to dig into his varied ways of using the foundations of traditional hip-hop: DJing, MCing B-Boying, and Graffiti. Kanye West has been able to explore and utilize these foundations in his artistry—producing, rapping, fashion designing, and creating videos/concerts are his contemporary equivalents. Looking at these

different facets of his life including his Twitter, Kanye role models productive self-advocacy by creating opportunities for himself and conveying the message through his music.

Chapter two explores Kendrick Lamar's ability to channel messages of productive self-advocacy primarily through his music. Molefi Asante's three pillars of Afrocentricity (human relations, the relationship to the supernatural, and the relationship to self-being) are used in conjunction with constitutive rhetoric to explore how Kendrick Lamar, like Fannie Lou Hamer and other artists of the Black Freedom Movement, uses his voice to attempt to show the Black community how to liberate themselves from oppression. "Alright" is closely analyzed through the lens of Afrocentricity to demonstrate the complex facets of Lamar's message. "Alright," which became an anthem for the #BLM movement, made more visible to a community that often gets ignored. This chapter seeks to explain and understand how "Alright" resonated with the #BLM and their supporters.

Chapter 2: The Contradiction: Kanye West as a Model of Productive Self-Advocacy

One could argue that Kanye Omari West is one of the most dynamic and prolific artists in hip-hop. His presence has dominated since his days of producing soulful tracks under the tutelage of No I.D. In his own right, West has changed the way that scholars and fans understand hip-hop and set forth new grounds for upcoming artists. Kanye demonstrates the ability to use his success as a platform to deliver messages of productive self-advocacy. These encoded messages seek to promote change within the community without the assistance of outside government agencies. Pride and culture are at the epicenter of the messages that Kanye West produces. In the case of Kanye West, he uses multiple platforms to deliver his message in contrast to Kendrick Lamar who is clear in his encoded messages about productive self-advocacy. As a basic framework for understanding and analyzing Kanye West, it is important to understand that productive self-advocacy as advocated and demonstrated by West heralds a complex negotiation of balancing hegemonic commercialism and disruption of the status quo by leveraging his celebrity to create counter-hegemonic opportunities via fashion, public statements, and call to action in his music. West is possibly one of the messiest examples of productive self-advocacy.

Being an independent thinker and innovator has been a philosophy of Kanye West since he was producing and selling beats to rappers before he became famous.⁵¹ Time and again, artists consider West an innovator and trendsetter in hip-hop. His production prowess has paid

⁵¹ "Kanye West's 'The College Dropout': An Oral History," *Billboard*, accessed September 12, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5893976/kanye-wests-the-college-dropout-an-oral-history>.

off and produced singles for artists like Lil' Kim to R&B singers like Mariah Carey's "Stay the Night."⁵² From there, he made his way into rapping. Many were doubtful of his success as a rapper, but his persistence to prove people wrong prevailed. Yet, that is not to say the undoubtable future Rock and Roll Hall of Fame artist is without complication. It is also fair to say that Kanye West is one of his era's most publicly complicated artists. From speaking out against Former President George W. Bush's in-action during Hurricane Katrina, stating that "George Bush doesn't care about Black people" next to a stunned Mike Myers, Kanye West spoke the words the Black public felt about Bush's actions during the hurricane Katrina tragedy. Eleven years later in 2016, Kanye West offered a tirade of rants during his concerts asserting at one point "if I would've voted, I would've voted for (President Donald) Trump." In eleven years' time, the world has witnessed and engaged in a love-hate relationship with Kanye West. However, it is unmistakable that Kanye West is worthy of study due to his complex relationship with politics and artistry.

Kanye West is not afraid of inserting political ideas into his music. That is not to say that no other hip-hop artists have done this, but in the new millenium, West has taken musical risks while not being pigeonholed as a conscious rapper. As his stardom increased, his music, as well as his political views, also changed and developed. In 2004, he released "The College Dropout." This album occurred after West "survived a car accident that nearly killed him."⁵³ Rapping through wires that held his jaw together, he rapped about similar topics of the negro spirituals. Flying away from current circumstances, walking with Jesus, and always getting back up when

⁵² *The Emancipation of Mimi*, Audio CD (Island, 2005).

⁵³ "Kanye West's 'The College Dropout.'"

all seems dystopian. However, it is also important to note that West is a contradiction particularly because of his songs and public persona.

On the one hand, his music attempts to lift the Black community, and on the other, West seemingly endorses the politics of President Donald J. Trump. The lavish lifestyle the West lives and promotes is contrary to the discourse that is perpetrated in the music. On the other hand, West is not unique in this area of complicatedness. Like West, Black history in America is also complicated.

The Black condition is political; it describes and attempts to provide an escape from the current situation. Discussions about poverty in the Black community, commercialism, drug addiction plaguing his neighborhoods, all resonated with the experience of many listeners and the politics of his songs here fit the common narrative of the “Black CNN” reporting what happens in the inner city. This transformative album led Kanye West on a trajectory to stardom. With songs like “Through the Wire” where he raps through the wires that kept his broken jaw in place.⁵⁴ This level of chutzpah to rap with an unclear sound allowed Kanye West to transform and push boundaries that other artists were afraid to enter.

However, as West matured, so did his ideas. West’s next six albums were not all well-received as *The College Dropout*, but he was unafraid to take risks. Albums like *808 Heartbreak* and *Yeezus* toyed with the definition of hip-hop and how you can critique the situation of Blackness that did not resonate well with some members of the hip-hop community. Kanye West also demonstrated that Blackness can be illustrated and fought for

⁵⁴ archive-Shaheem-Reid 12/09/2002, “Kanye West Raps Through His Broken Jaw, Lays Beats For Scarface, Ludacris,” *MTV News*, accessed September 12, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1459071/kanye-west-raps-through-his-broken-jaw-lays-beats-for-scarface-ludacris/>.

through fashion. Fashion is a form of argument and messaging. Fashion can communicate and respond to culture, politics, and people that have limited voices in society. There has been a lack of exploration of fashion in the communication studies scholarship, which can benefit from an alternate persuasion and argumentation strategy. Kanye West's Yeezy fashion line (and his style in general) has reshaped popular fashion and how the fashion industry can make a statement about societal issues.

I contend that West has redefined what it means to be a hip-hop artist that is also a spokesperson for the Black community. Instead of just providing a report of what is happening in the community or what he wishes the future to look like, he calls listeners to take it upon themselves to produce change. As mentioned prior, productive self-advocacy is a separation from hope and wishes for racial equality and justice but a demand for it. Even though Kanye West may demonstrate boastfulness, egotistical tendencies, and hip-hop flair, his actions prove that he is a role model of productive self-advocacy. Unlike previous movements, advocates for Black Nationalism do not need to constrain their beliefs and thoughts to fit dominant ideologies of the movement. West has created space for other advocates to push the envelope on what it means to be Black and promote Blackness through alternative means such as the production of music, actions, and fashion.

Although critics may say that Kanye West does not have the interest of the Black community at heart, his actions say the contrary. His actions promote autonomy both personally and politically. He continues to acknowledge and problematize race concerns in America and acknowledges that Black people must pull themselves out of despair. West has justified and supported his music by going out and supporting the causes that he describes.

West's actions outside of the music are just as important as the music he creates as a point of exploration.

This re-emergence of Black Nationalism focuses on making sure that the Black community takes care of its own. Change and advocacy for oppressed people never came through the establishment; rather the people rose to design strategies for change because there was no other support. Hip-hop, since its creation, had a strong following with a political message even if the artists themselves did not regard themselves as political. The voice of the genre represents symbolically and materially the way members of society view Black people. Reiland Rabaka, among others, acknowledges that hip-hop can be considered both a generation of sorts and a movement. He states, "to invoke hip hop as a 'movement,' rather than merely a 'generation,' is to conjure up and consciously conceive of hip-hop as the accumulated politics and aesthetics of every African American movement and musical form that preceded it."⁵⁵ It is important to note that it is carried on by its previous versions or influences like every other musical genre. Hip-hop is no different; however, the difference from other genres lies in that hip-hop is a musical genre and a culture. This means the influences of this hip-hop era also depend on the shared history of the people involved as well as the genres that preceded it.

This chapter seeks to explore the case study of Kanye West as an exemplar of productive self-advocacy. Other artists also send self-advocacy messages, like Kendrick Lamar, who we will discuss in the next chapter, use productive self-advocacy messages to lead the community to self-dependency. However, Kanye West's approach is subversive. He uses his platform to shock, confuse, and disorient the listener. If you double click and look at his words, actions, tweets,

⁵⁵ Reiland Rabaka, *The Hip Hop Movement: From R&B and the Civil Rights Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Generation* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2013), 285.

and overall persona from the macro view, we are able to see the possibility that he has a long history of employing productive self-advocacy messages and actions. In comparison, Lamar is more direct and concentrated with his use of productive self-advocacy messages. Although these two artists have different ways of advocating for the community, scholars have noted that hip-hop has and continues to be a tool for political messages. However, they also note that hip-hop cannot be a salvation for change because artists too are products of hegemony. The scholarship also notes that fashion has been a political statement since the beginning of time—clothes represent cultural values and norms. In this chapter, I conduct a close reading of Kanye as a musician, public persona, and fashion designer. It is crucial to look at Kanye from multiple perspectives to understand the way he models productive self-advocacy.

It is for this reason, people are attracted to hip-hop. There is a lived culture that is inexplicable to the naked eye. There are shared experiences—pain and struggle—that artists put in the music. In conversation with scholars who discuss how hip-hop is political, the inherent flexibility and nuances of the craft allow for more opportunities to talk about political content without feeling out of place.⁵⁶ Lester K. Spence states it well by saying, “Although hip-hop encompasses more than rap music, rap is not only the most consuming aspect of hip-hop but is arguably the easiest form to infuse with politics.”⁵⁷ The power of rap music in

⁵⁶ Dyson, Michael Eric. “This Dark Diction Has Become America's Addiction.” Essay. In *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop*; Intro by Jay-Z, Outro by Nas, 49–49. New York: Basic Civitas, 2010.

Msia Kibona Clark, “Hip Hop as Social Commentary in Accra and Dar Es Salaam,” *African Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 24.

Forman, Murray, Mark Anthony Neal, and Bakari Kitwana. “The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power.” Essay. In *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 341–50. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012.

⁵⁷ Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 5.

hip-hop is the easiest to incorporate politics with, not only because it is the most digestible but also because it mirrors the American art form: poetry. However, what Spence subtly points out is that there are various concepts built into hip-hop: b-boying, mc'ing, graffiti, and DJing. Some argue that a fifth is the knowledge and understanding of the culture, but I argue that it is embedded in the other four. Even though these four elements take different shapes now in the new era of hip-hop, it is essential to acknowledge that they still exist and that politics has and continues to be infused in all elements of hip-hop. What makes Kanye West intriguing is his ability to capture multiple elements of hip-hop culture—rapping (mc'ing), art (graffiti), fashion (b-boying, which still includes dancing), and producing (DJing)— while he incorporates politics into all areas of the craft.

However, that is not to say that rappers like Kanye West are immune from influences from the establishment when developing their craft. As much as Kanye West could be perceived as a political spokesman, he should also be considered an instrument of the establishment. As Timothy D. Taylor discusses in *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present (Big Issues in Music)*:

And yet hegemony is hegemony. The hegemony of capitalism has meant a radical altering of just about everything. Capitalism as a social form is made by people, but it also shapes people, their thoughts and practices. Goods such as music increasingly become produced and consumed under a capitalist rubric. Workers are alienated from their labor, and the products of their labor can be produced and distributed and consumed on so vast a scale that those products can seem to take on lives of their own. All this does not sound much like a system anyone would willingly participate in. And yet it continues, becoming even more widespread and virulent in the last few decades.⁵⁸

West, knowingly or otherwise, is a product of the hegemonic goods (music) that he produces.

⁵⁸ Timothy Dean Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology: Big Issues in Music (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 42.

However, his mainstream and dominant position on the global market positions him in this hegemonic world because the music takes a life of its own.

West receives and depends on the corporate model as motivation, making him a commercial or “mainstream” artist. Spencer states, “Rap MCs, like other black cultural workers, both accommodate and criticize mainstream norms and values. They are not dominated in the traditional sense of the term because they have relative artistic and political autonomy. They use and reproduce contemporary ideas about urban space, black masculinity and black representation writ large but do so in a way that grants them access and modicum of political and cultural power.”⁵⁹ The political power and influence that these artists have are still contained and constrained within the power that their status permits. Luckily the social influence in some instances trumps the constraints placed upon them by corporate powers. The dominance that Spence speaks of is no longer traditional but lies in the creases of the music industry. Profit margins are still at the epicenter because the hip-hop industry is still a business. This leads one to wonder about the motivations of a hip-hop icon like Kanye West. Alternatively, do the motivations of the artist matter if the messages presented promote productive self-advocacy?

At the core of these productive self-advocacy messages is the sense that these messages are encoded but do not necessarily translate to direct decoded messages for some. Stuart Hall articulates:

Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. Not talking about a one-sided process . . . It consists of the ‘work’ required to enforce, win . . . A legitimate decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 9.

⁶⁰ Hall, Stuart. *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Routledge, 1980., 134–35.

As Hall discusses, there is a sense in which the non-dominant discourses must fight for legitimacy in a particular type of decoding. Especially considering that “customer base is the 45 million hip-hop consumers between the ages of 13 and 34, 80% of whom are white. This group has \$1 trillion in spending power.”⁶¹ In any other situation, the codes in most instances would have to have the consumer in mind. However, hip-hop is a different phenomenon. As mentioned prior, hip-hop culture has a shared history, experiences, and understandings. Kanye West and others like him function within the professional code; Hall states, “the professional code is ‘relatively independent’ of the dominant code, in that it applies criteria and transformational operations of its own, especially those of a techno-practical nature.”⁶² In this way, we are to understand that hip-hop is a dominant cultural position for Black folks who listen to, participate, and help create hip-hop culture. Some cultural norms and practices are not necessarily fighting against a cause or position but exist as is. Kanye West is neither just a rapper nor a political figure; rather, he exists in the space between.

Although Yvonne Bynoe seems to denounce the idea of a raptivist, “a rap artist who dabbles in activism on the side,”⁶³ I contend that West “dabbles in activism” In all aspects of his career. And yet, Kanye West, as well as Kendrick Lamar, do not fit any of the labels prescribed. Rather, Kanye West integrates politics into his hip-hop stardom in various fashions—that is not enough to call him a politician or artist in the technical sense. Bynoe describes at the beginning of hip-hop into the 1990s, “the media, instead of identifying the emerging leadership of the

⁶¹ Julie Watson, “Rapper’s Delight: A Billion-Dollar Industry,” *Forbes*, February 18, 2004, http://www.forbes.com/2004/02/18/cx_jw_0218hiphop.html.

⁶² Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 172.

⁶³ Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2004), ix.

post-civil rights generation, simply deemed rap artists, the most visible young Blacks in society, the new political spokesmen.”⁶⁴ While this is true of the time, it also demonstrates a fixation and datedness of scholars of social movements and hip-hop. The new age of social movements, especially as it pertains to #BlackLivesMatter or the Occupy Movements, the common misconception is that these movements need a single leader. However, in the new era we are seeing that there are many leaders and everyone at any given time is a leader—empowering the movement members to take charge of their condition. Therefore, it is also the case that because the movements are full of leaders, they are leaderless, which is the power of the new era of social movements. It also follows that artists like Kanye West are eligible to use their platform to promote political platforms that seek to empower Black folk.

In some sense, the Black leaders of the past are not held to the same regard that they once were: Jesse Jackson, for instance. Keli Goff reports, “51 percent of post-civil rights generation black Americans do not believe their community needs a ‘black leader,’ while 37 percent think it does. But one thing the respondents were almost universally united on is that the high-profile leaders often dubbed “black leaders” by the media do not represent them.”⁶⁵ It is critical to understand that the new generation does not look for leaders. Rather leaders emerge and respond to current times based on their inclination, even artists who people feel are obligated to speak out. Additionally, from the lessons learned from past social protest groups, today’s landscape movement does not assign leaders. Rather, some exist in the realm between leader and member. Even though West can be considered a spokesperson, he is not a

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Keli Goff, *Party Crashing: How the Hip-Hop Generation Declared Political Independence* (Civitas Books, 2009), 128.

leader of any movement. In this way artists like West are not obligated to do anything, except produce music and receive a paycheck, because remember, unlike the previous eras, the hip-hop generation has a predominantly white consumer base and these productive self-advocacy messages are aimed toward the Black community. West uses his platform to integrate politics of productive self-advocacy with the profits that he accumulates. He contributes to the conversation rather than starting the Black social protest movement.

The Relationship Between Black Nationalism and Hip-hop

Looking at hip-hop through a political lens is complicated because politics is wrought with contradiction, compassion, and confusion. Some artists may create moving messages to the audience about freedom and independence but still are making profits and governed by label regulations. However, these contradictions should not detract from the fact that everyday life is in many ways political. Although one would be hard-pressed to consider West to a feminist, there are relevant conversations to be had regarding his ability to circumvent the hyper-masculine nature of hip-hop while being vulnerable to the public. As Collins articulates, the political is personal,⁶⁶ and possibly, Kanye West has perfected channeling his emotions, thoughts, and the most vulnerable parts of himself to make political statements while attracting crossover markets.

As a political spokesperson (intended or otherwise), Kanye West has and continues to have a long career filled with twists and turns, criticisms, and praise; however, one consistent

⁶⁶ Collins, Patricia Hill. "Is the Personal Still Political? The Women's Movement, Feminism, and Black Women in the Hip-Hop Generation." Essay. In *From Black Power to Hip Hop Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, 161–96. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006.

thing is his unwillingness to silence himself. West has debuted seven studio albums, one collaborative album with Jay-Z, and two live albums since 2004. Most of West's albums were well received by the hip-hop community, yet, one of the most experimental and controversial albums has been *Yeezus*. Most notably was the title, which reflected and seemed to emulate "Jesus." Critics and some fans felt that West's ego has inflated to an immeasurable degree to which he believes he is "a god."⁶⁷ An alternative reading of the title suggests a return to Black Nationalism.

The Five-Percent nation is an extended cultural movement derived from the Nation of Islam. They believed that Black people were direct and most closely related to the creation of the earth. Men were referred to as "Gods" and women "Earths."⁶⁸ This belief still exists and lives within popular culture. In the traditional sense, a return to leadership and kingdom dominates the popular discourse in Black communities about what should be expected from Black men. Therefore, a common line from "New Slaves" that is often overlooked and seen as not worthy has deeper meaning: "You see, there's leaders and there's followers / But I'd rather be a dick than a swallower." From this reading, we see a return to a deep Black Nationalism, and productive self-advocacy indicates that control and machismo are imperative despite the consequences.

This return to empowerment and taking back the power dynamics does require neglect of consequences. The album is repulsive, contrary to what people expect from West's usually

⁶⁷ Alexis C. Madrigal, "The 6 Things I Needed to Appreciate Yeezus," *The Atlantic*, July 6, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/the-6-things-i-needed-to-appreciate-em-yeezus-em/277556/>.

⁶⁸ "God, the Black Man and the Five Percenters," *NPR.org*, accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5614846>.

smooth and soulful tracks. As Ryan Dombal points out, “For Kanye, there's purpose in repulsion. And on *Yeezus*, he trades out smooth soul and anthemic choruses for jarring electro, acid house, and industrial grind while delivering some of his most lewd and heart-crushing tales yet.”⁶⁹ While the artist's intent should not be discovered and defined, one could see that repulsion was a central theme of *Yeezus*. This repulsion is necessary to understand what taking pride and ownership of one's self looks like. On “I Am a God (feat. God)” (title speaks for itself), the track is an ode to himself and God:

I am a god
Hurry up with my damn massage
Hurry up with my damn ménage
Get the Porsche out the damn garage
I am a god
Even though I'm a man of God
My whole life in the hands of God
So y'all better quit playing with God
Soon as they like you make 'em unlike you
Cause kissing people ass is so unlike you

Respectability politics is at the core of this song and traces the debate between peace and civil change versus aggression and uncivil change that was debated in the Civil Rights Movement. This divergence from non-violent approaches is a divergence from W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of agitation and fight for racial uplifting. However, as demonstrated in Jacqueline M. Moore, Booker T. Washington, although equated with conservatism, actually advocated racial uplifting as well by acknowledging the harsh reality that the country would never escape racism—therefore, the Black population should solve issues independent of white politicians.⁷⁰ In other words, productive self-advocacy has been advocated by Booker T. Washington and

⁶⁹ “Kanye West: *Yeezus*,” *Pitchfork*, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://pitchfork.com>.

⁷⁰ Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, Del: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 28.

flowed through the Nation of Islam and other pro-Black movements. In this return to Black Nationalism and actualization of self-worth, the lyrics in the song advocate for a lack of admiration but of respect.

One reading of this song is of the luxurious life and respect that is often paraded in the hip-hop industry. Another reading is that commercialization and hegemony is a vessel of change and productive self-advocacy. The church for Black folk, as argued by scholars, falls outside of the hegemonic practices in many ways because it is used as a gateway into a paradise where racism and hate does not exist. It represents a way out of despair and retribution by white faith. It can be said that “American-American religious historiography has defined the Black Church against cults and sects, setting them up as foils for its idealized self-representation.”⁷¹ The politics of Kanye West and some other artists, like Kendrick Lamar, also includes religion, faith, or spirituality. As is seen in *Yeezus*, faith is a political maneuver to support and revolutionize.

Respectability politics is at the core of this song and traces the debate between peaceful civil change versus aggressive uncivil change that was debated during the Civil Rights Movement. In this return to Black Nationalism and actualization of self-worth, the lyrics in the song advocate respect for oneself and a return to realizing self-worth. There needs to be respect for the power that lives within Black people; there exists a need to realize the god that lives within the people that are being oppressed. But until people realize the true conditions of the existence of Black Americans, change cannot occur.

⁷¹ Stephen C. Finley, ed., *Esotericism in African American Religious experience: “There Is a Mystery,”* Aries Book Series. Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism, Volume 19 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2015), 83.

Ironically, these messages of self-actualization and power can be seen in the opening statement produced from West's "Black Skinhead" and "New Slaves". These tracks, juxtaposed to one another, reveal the thesis of sorts of this album. The title, "Black Skinhead", seems to be a misnomer considering the content; however, the title of the track insinuates a need for Black people to be as extremist as skinheads:

For my theme song
My leather black jeans on
My by any means on
Pardon, I'm getting my scream on
Enter the kingdom
But watch who you bring home
They see a black man with a white woman at the top floor
They gone come to kill King Kong

The hard-hitting, distorted first few lines of the song illustrate anger with the status quo and a rebellion against the non-changing social conditions. Kanye West refers to Malcolm X's 1964 speech and the Black Panther Party's credo "by any means necessary". West advocates literally wearing these ideologies--becoming them and living them. As the song continues, he enters a call and response (screaming) indicating, "If I knew what I knew in the past/ I would've been blacked out on your ass". The listener is called to assume that the intended receiver of this message is the white elite. The song in its entirety calls for illumination of the self and one's place in the world. West describes learning and evolving into a self-actualized Black man, who, now with his eyes open is "blacking out on [their] ass." *Yeezus* promotes productive self-advocacy messages by advocating aggression and destruction of the traditional everyday perspectives about life.

Kanye West's Public Persona

West's public persona supports the music that he creates. Kanye West has continued to support Black people through music but also in his everyday life. It is not clear whether it is for appearance or for his own integrity, but he is making efforts to support the community. While it is unclear how involved he was with the following examples, it is important to note that his music, and his actual life seems not to be contradictory, but complementary. In July of 2016 Alton Sterling was shot and killed by police officers for selling CDs. This, like the copious number of shootings of unarmed Black men and women across the nation, ignited #BLM protests across the nation. Among the victims of the casualty was Sterling's wife and children. Sterling's son, Cameron Sterling, was the most vocal after the murder of his father. On November 2nd, Kanye West and Kim Kardashian-West met with Cameron for his 16th birthday.⁷² However, this is not the only time he has supported Black lives. On December 15th, Kanye West tweeted, "600,000 people rallied for justice on Dec. 13th #blacklivesmatter" followed by three Black power fists.⁷³ This is significant not only because he is supporting the movement but because "he rarely tweets."⁷⁴ To date, Kanye West only has about 900 tweets since creating his account in 2010. To put that into perspective, President Trump started his account in 2009 and has over 34,000

⁷² "Justin Bamberg, Esq. (@JustinBamberg) | Twitter," accessed February 11, 2017, https://twitter.com/JustinBamberg?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

⁷³ KANYE WEST Verified account, "600,000 People Rallied for Justice on Dec. 13th #blacklivesmatter," microblog, @kanyewest, (December 16, 2014), <https://twitter.com/kanyewest/status/544726027243491329>.

⁷⁴ "Kanye West Supports Black Lives Matter Protests With Tweet," *BET.com*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.bet.com/news/music/2014/12/16/kanye-west-supports-black-lives-matter-protests-with-tweet.html?cid=facebook>.

tweets. Kanye West is selective in his messaging and is critical in understanding the cultural importance of the tweet.

Furthermore, West's tweets are just as culturally important as the things that he says—political or otherwise. In 2016 during his *Life of Pablo* Tour, West began to go on rants and tangents away from his performance to discuss the political climate and things that have happened in his personal life. Of interest to this project, is West's comments about President Trump. He stated:

I told you. But if I would have voted, I would have voted on Trump. Now there's people that I love that did vote, that voted for Hillary and I don't love them no less because they have they opinion. . . And guess what? That entire team still put together this show tonight with people with differences of opinion, still put this show together tonight and still came together and made this show for y'all. They told me, "Ye, do not say that out loud. Whatever you do, do not say that out loud." And I just said it! I wanted to say that before the election and they told me, "Do not say that out loud. Whatever you do, do not say that." That don't mean that I don't think that Black Lives Matter. That don't mean I don't think that I'm a believer in women's rights. That don't mean I don't believe in gay marriage. That don't mean that I don't believe in these things because that was the guy I would have voted for.⁷⁵

It is important to preface that Kanye West was ultimately admitted into the hospital for "temporary psychosis"⁷⁶ as reported by *Rolling Stone*. However, Kanye's thoughts were his thoughts, but saying them then may have been due to him being overworked and lacking sleep as reported. Additionally, it is critical to look at what he said in relation to his music and actions. Kanye has been and continues to be vocal and controversial. West is a living contradiction; he vocally supports Donald Trump, but as reported by *Pitchfork*, "FEC records reveal West Donated

⁷⁵ "Kanye Says He Still Believes in 'Black Lives Matter, Women's Rights, Gay Marriage' in Extended Trump Rant Video," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://pitchfork.com>.

⁷⁶ "Kanye West's Hospital Stay: Inside Rapper's Troubled Recent Weeks," *Rolling Stone*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/kanye-wests-hospital-stay-rappers-troubled-recent-weeks-w453465>.

thousands of dollars to Hillary Clinton's campaign, as well as to the Democratic National Committee."⁷⁷ We can continue to gather that West's opinions on the topic is in an attempt to get people to become free and unrestricted to the metaphorical binds that constrain them. To self-advocate, one must begin to understand the constraints that keep them from being productive. Interestingly, since President Trump's first week in office, Kanye West has since deleted all tweets endorsing President Trump.⁷⁸

Rap, more specifically, allows those that need to be heard a voice and opinions, even those that are not dominated in the Black community, to still be validated. In this sense, one can say that although hip-hop upholds hegemony, West and others like him promoting productive self-advocacy produce counter-hegemonic messages calling for independent thought and voice by challenging every opportunity.⁷⁹ In 2004, West started G.O.O.D. (Getting Out Our Dreams) Music, Inc. This label focuses on signing young local artists such as: Common, John Legend, Big Sean, and Desiigner. He utilized his platform to start a label and bring local rappers onto the mainstream platform. West has used his position to show more intricate parts of his complicated persona as a rap artist. On September 2nd, 2005, he stated his famous line, "George Bush doesn't care about Black people." On national television, West takes a stance and defends the Black community while holding former President George W. Bush accountable for the events in New Orleans. West's actions speak for themselves but coupled with his music and

⁷⁷ "Kanye Says He Still Believes in 'Black Lives Matter, Women's Rights, Gay Marriage' in Extended Trump Rant Video."

⁷⁸ Deena Zaru CNN, "Kanye West Deletes All Tweets Defending Trump Meeting," *CNN*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/06/politics/kanye-west-deletes-donald-trump-tweets/index.html>.

⁷⁹Lull, "Hegemony," 65.

rants; one is left piecing together West's fragmented self. Spence describes, "given that the voices rap enables the ones that were not traditionally heard within the black parallel public, rap plausibly expands the number of participants within black discursive spaces."⁸⁰ Kanye West's controversial life and political voice promote productive self-advocacy messages by creating space for opinions that are not allowed in the hegemonic space using a hegemonic platform. Above all these different and often controversial topics find a space through fashion. Through fashion, people can wear their politics, and West can continue to model and prove that productive self-advocacy is possible.

Kanye West--Performing Politics Through Fashion

In the Black community, like other communities and cultures, fashion has always been a point of interest because it defined the said group. On a fundamental basis, fashion is designed for practical purposes: hats to keep the sun out of one's eyes, shoes to keep the feet from blistering, and so on and so forth. However, there was a time when fashion became a political statement. Whether we are thinking about fashion to restrict, contain, and desexualize women throughout history into the 1920s-flapper's era, fashion has always been connected to politics.⁸¹ Fashion is as important as the speeches that are written, the songs that are played, or the other artifacts that we leave behind particularly because unconsciously for some, fashion are worn ideologies. Brian McVeigh explains, "State substructures may be described as the 'deep ideology' or 'invisible institutions' that animate social life ('surface ideology' are the more

⁸⁰ Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 27.

⁸¹ Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2003).

explicit “isms” of political life and “visible institutions” are the more obvious forms of state, such as organs, parties, security forces, etc.).”⁸² In this way, as McVeigh explains, fashion is a continuation of the deep ideology of the country. Even though McVeigh focuses on Japan in his analysis, this idea of ideology being actualized in fashion is pertinent to this discussion. I contend that although Japan and the United States of America are two different countries, fashion still plays a similar role in societal, political beliefs and attitudes.

It is particularly important to acknowledge the detail of fashion as they may indicate specific political beliefs and attitudes even if two pieces of clothing look similar. There are instances where dress can indicate not only political beliefs, but also faith and the two are interwoven and interlocked often attributed to some fashions in the middle east, Emma Tarlo explains, “Many (Muslim women) will have wardrobes containing a variety of options. Attention to such details offers the possibility of moving beyond the veiled/unveiled dichotomy to create more variegated and complex understanding of the contemporary Muslim dress practices. There is no such thing as a clear-cut category of Muslim dress.”⁸³ The key here is that we need to further examine how fashion expresses particular differences among people in ways that run deeper than we perceive on the surface. Especially for the Black community, fashion has and continues to be of the utmost community.

The integrated example of Blackness and fashion can be illustrated through the explosion of gangsta rap of the 1990s. This moment of politics and identity was personified in the lyrics, but worn on the body. As Todd Boyd argues, Jean Baudrillard's hyperrealism can serve

⁸² Brian J. McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan*, First Edition edition (Oxford; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 42.

⁸³ Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, First Edition edition (Oxford ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 5.

well to understand the imagery of the gangsta rapper. The hyperreal describes" a situation where the 'contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced' (142), we can see in gangsta rap the continued blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction."⁸⁴ These artists make real their political messages in their music. Artists like N.W.A. lived or attempted to make a hyper-reality in the life that they described in their music. As illustrated by Boyd, "With one of the most popular images of Black masculinity being the gangsta, it is necessary to unravel this complex scenario in order to understand the simultaneous infatuation and repulsion that has characterized the public's response to this cultural movement."⁸⁵ These intentional, ideological, and political visual representations demonstrated by hip-hop artists need to be investigated to understand what types of messages are being advocated. It is also critical to understand the contemporary fashion statements made by West to illustrate productive self-advocacy.

The fashion of hip-hop has been and continues to be critical to marking space for oneself and establishing a class difference between the artist and those who are not in the same class distinction. This phenomenon is not new to the contemporary moment; as it relates to the African diaspora fashion was not only a way to establish one's self socially, but was also a political maneuver. "Transhistorical and transatlantic movements in literacy and visual culture [demonstrates] black male subjects understanding, manipulating, and reimagining the construction of their images through the dandy's signature method: a pointed redeployment of clothing, gesture, and wit," Monica L. Miller articulates. This dandyism as described by Miller still is alive, if not more than before. Artists are reinventing fashion to illustrate and more

⁸⁴ Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

accurately reflect how they see themselves. In hip-hop culture, there is an obsession with designers and manufactures that are “foreign” which attempts to elevate and disrupt fashion elites and allow their audience base to imagine or in some cases live the lavish lifestyles that were once reserved to the one percent. Kanye West has begun to use fashion to be an elite designer that is catered also to those who are not the elite but are fans of him and hip-hop. He has attempted to turn the industry on its head. But, at its core,, the idea behind high fashion still undermines the fact that for some members of the underprivileged community these clothes and brands remain out of reach.

Fashion is often seen as a creative space and rarely is fashion considered hegemonic in the public dialogue. However, it has not been until recent years that critics have begun to break through and call out the fashion industry for its limited scope. For instance, Ashley Mears reports, “As workers in cultural production, agents and clients face intense market uncertainty when selecting models. In the absence of objective standards, they rely on conventions, imitation, and stereotypes to guide their decisions. Producers hire fashion models to articulate market-specific versions of femininity. In the commercial market, they emphasize demographics, racial inclusion, sex appeal and attainable beauty; in the high-end editorial market, they seek distinction, sexual unavailability and rarefied beauty. As cultural producers, agents and clients ultimately reproduce culture by fashioning femininity along race and class lines.”⁸⁶ Reports like this demonstrate the need for fashion creators and producers to create new and inventive standards for beauty and high fashion. Models like Ashley Graham, body advocate and plus-size

⁸⁶ Ashley Mears, “Size Zero High-End Ethnic: Cultural Production and the Reproduction of Culture in Fashion Modeling,” *Poetics* 38, no. 1 (February 2010): 1, doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.002.

model, are trying to push the boundaries of beauty in the fashion industry. Similarly, but differently, Kanye West and his *Yeezus* collection (fitting title) attempts to change the definition of high fashion and what is beautiful.

On multiple occasions, Kanye West has called the fashion industry, racist and discriminatory. On July 4th, 2014, West gave a fifteen-minute speech at the Wireless Festival in Finsbury Park, London; he stated:

When I take these meetings and shit, people talk to you like you're stupid or something... I'm not gonna call no names. I'm not going to mention Nike or nothing like that," he said. "I'm not dissing Luis Vuitton, I'm not dissing the Gucci group and shit. I'm just saying, don't discriminate against me because I'm a black man or because I'm a celebrity and tell me that I can create, but not feel. 'Cause you know damn well there aren't no black guys or celebrities making no Louis Vuitton nothing. "They let Pharrell make those glasses, and we liked them, right? They let me make those shoes, and we liked them right? And they say, "No no no nigger. Not no more. That's too much. That's too much. No no no no no no nigger not no more. That's way too much. That's way too much. Stay in your place. Sit in the front of that show and wear this jacket I made you. Stay in your place. Do what you get paid to do. Stay in your place. Don't embarrass yourself trying to chase your dreams. Save face. Save face.⁸⁷

Kanye West continues throughout the years to call out the industry for not giving him a chance. On the face of it, this seems like an entitled artist angry that he is not given an opportunity; however, West brings to attention a valid point, there are few creators in the high-end fashion industry who are Black.⁸⁸ For West, being able to create high fashion and to demonstrate the urban, Black perspective has been a part of his persona since he entered the hip-hop industry. He was known as the Louis Vuitton Don—he would wear the label all the time whether it was

⁸⁷ "Kanye West Sounds Off on Racism, Fashion," *Rolling Stone*, accessed February 12, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/kanye-west-sounds-off-on-racism-fashion-industry-at-wireless-festival-20140705>.

⁸⁸ "The 25 Greatest Black Fashion Designers Shayne Oliver," *Complex*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/style/2013/02/the-25-greatest-black-fashion-designers/shayne-oliver>.

back packs or jackets. Kanye West has continued to strive for his creativeness in fashion. His clothing line is focused primarily in earthy colors; they are down-tone and mostly loose fitting. What this says about politics is unclear. However, what is clear is that he is making a statement that is rocking the fashion world. West's Fall 2016 ready-to-wear line featured all Black models and even rapper Lil' Yachty (a rapper early in his career).

West has on multiple occasions featured more Black models in his shows. It is to be said that he still adheres to the "model image" of thinness and misogyny and patriarchy even though his show featuring Black and Brown representation is promoted in his shows. In September of 2016, Kanye West posted a casting call on Twitter that did not go over well with many Black fans: "SEASON 4 CASTING. MULTIRACIAL WOMEN ONLY. NO MAKEUP PLEASE COME AS YOU ARE." Followed by the date. Many, like Ivie Okechukwu-Ani—writer for Complex Magazine, were confused as to what "multiracial women" meant. Some perceived it as a knock against, Black women, others were outright just confused. There were protest of colorism and discrimination, but at the end of it all the show "Ultimately, Kanye West's Yeezy Season 4 show was filled with models of all shades. West is, after all, a visionary."⁸⁹ Even though among the critics, the Yeezy Season 4 was a failure, that season's sales were higher than his previous seasons. Events like West's Yeezy Season 4 show affirm what scholars like Rebollo-Gil, Moras, and hooks describe as the need for men to control, pimp, and perpetuate racist/sexist propaganda against women, specifically Black women. For Kanye West's fashion line, it is a statement that to rise above the factors that work against Black folks, they must continue to innovate and create memorable

⁸⁹ "A Firsthand Account of the Yeezy Season 4 Casting Call," *Complex*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/life/2016/09/yeezy-multiracial-casting-call-black-woman-model>.

products at the expense of women. Even though West's fashion line serves as an example of a productive self-advocacy message of going out and doing it even when there is little support, it shows the systematic neglect of women. Additionally, the clothes that he features are often at odds with the standard of the industry which is why critics dislike it and consumers love it.

Audience Reception of Kanye West's Productive Self-Advocacy

Kanye West could be considered one of the most polarizing, disliked, and most culturally impactful hip-hop artists to have picked up a microphone. That being said, a figure like this also requires some additional work to ensure that the messages that I have discussed in this work are bolstered by journalistic coverage, audience feedback, reviews, and/or scholarship. If you do a quick search on Google for Kanye West, you will find a myriad of articles, journal publications, videos, and commentary that highlight his inflammatory comments about slavery, departure from the "old Kanye" and Kim Kardashian. Interestingly, finding folks who either agree with his antics, or call forward the work he has done in the community, or question the standing perception of him takes a bit more work.

This is all to say, there has been overwhelming agreeance online that Kanye West has lost some of the defenses of that past due to his MAGA (Make America Great Again) hats, comments on slavery being a choice, belligerent speeches, and public breakdowns. However, despite these writings and overwhelming negative press, 41-year-old West is still on top of the charts. His release of *Donda*, an album named after and dedicated to his mother, launched with "the biggest first-week debut of 2021 (outside of Drake's *Certified Lover Boy*), as his new set

amassed more than 341 million streams and close to 37,000 sales.”⁹⁰ So, are his fans the only ones listening to his music, or is there more here? Taking a look at articles, Reddit, and conversations on Kanye West show a different narrative about West’s productive self-advocacy and dedication to the Black community.

On the album dedicated to his mother, Kanye returns back to his roots and dedicates the last 2 minutes and 30 seconds of the album to Larry Hoover, leader of the Gangster Disciples (GD) and currently serving six lifetime sentences. However, this is not the first time that Kanye West has been working on behalf of the GD co-founder. Back in 2018 at the height of West’s endorsement of President Donald Trump, “the rapper asked trump to commute Hoover’s lifetime sentence.”⁹¹ In the meeting alongside Jim Brown and Jared Kushner, Kanye explains, that the real reason Hoover is in jail:

“is because he started doing positive for the community. He started showing that he actually had power. That he wasn’t just one of a monolithic voice, that he could wrap people around. . . [wearing a Make America Great Again hat] “it’s very important for me to get Hoover out because in an alternate universe, I am him and I have to go and get him free. Because he was doing positive inside Chicago just like I’m moving back to Chicago, and it’s not just about, you know, getting on stage and being an entertainer and having a monolithic voice that’s forced to be a specific party.”

Despite the feelings about Kanye West, he is doing the work of actually trying to get a Black man, who some may call a beacon of hope, out of jail by any means necessary. On the song

⁹⁰ Leight, Elias. “RS Charts: Kanye West's 'Donda' Earns Biggest Debut of 2021.” Rolling Stone. Rolling Stone, September 7, 2021. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/rs-charts-top-200-kanye-west-donda-1221314/>.

⁹¹ Gajewski, Ryan. “The Juiciest Moments from Kanye West's Latest DONDA Album Listening Event.” E! Online, August 6, 2021. <https://www.eonline.com/news/1296901/the-juiciest-moments-from-kanye-west-latest-donda-album-listening-event>.

“Jesus Lord pt 2” the last minutes of the song is a voicemail left by Larry Hoover Jr. who has been on a mission to get his father out of prison. In there he thanks Kanye for

“takin' the fight for my father to the Oval Office. You might not have been the only one that could've did that, but you were the one that did do that. And with your assistance, we can continue to let the world take part in this fight. . . Even though it is not seen that way for some of us, but for many of us, Larry Hoover is a beacon of hope for his community, who deserves to breathe free air. Free my father (Jesus), Mr. Larry Hoover Sr. (Lord).”⁹²

There is material impact to the productive self-advocacy messages and actions of Kanye West.

Kanye, along with Kim Kardashian and others like Van Jones (political commentator and prison reform advocate), worked together to get bipartisan support on the prison reform, the “First Step Act.” Specifically, they had to convince President Trump as the Times notes.⁹³

Interestingly, the story misses to include how Kanye’s endorsement and public support for Trump may have gotten him over the line, but a writer by the name of Viral MVP on OnSMASH.com points out,

“Back in 2018, Kanye West took the heat from the entire world, when he partnered with Donald Trump. The plan from Yeezy was to get Larry Hoover free from prison, who’s been locked up for almost 50 years. Under the First Step Act, Hoover will soon be eligible for a new sentencing hearing. So, in essence, Kanye West put his entire career on the line and support from black people to help get someone out of prison that has serious power.”⁹⁴

⁹² "Donda - Album by Kanye West | Spotify."

<https://open.spotify.com/album/5CnpZV3q5BcESefcB3WJmz>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2021.

⁹³ Bennett, Brian. “The inside Story of How Prison Reform Got Done.” Time. Time, December 21, 2018. <https://time.com/5486560/prison-reform-jared-kushner-kim-kardashian-west/>.

⁹⁴ MVP, Viral. “Feds Discusses Larry Hoover, Trump Kingpin Bill 2021.” OnSMASH, January 28, 2021. <http://onsmash.com/lifestyle/feds-discusses-larry-hoover-trump-kingpin-bill-2021/>.

Now, can we attribute President Trump signing the bill to Kanye's public endorsement and wearing the hat; I'm not sure, but it is something to ponder. But, what we can say is that West is willing to risk it all for what he believes. Now that we have established a real life example of the perception of his work and material impact to the Black community, we can dig into perceptions from his fans and supporters of his music.

Many of the criticisms of West also come from what folks call his departure from the "old Kanye" which is a dig at the fact his new sound, lyrics, and personality is somehow different than that of the past. Particularly around the hat, and comments about slavery. However, if we take a listen to his previous albums, commentary in previous interview including the infamous "George Bush doesn't care about Black people"⁹⁵ in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina which killed nearly two thousand. He discusses his own participation in not helping enough, portraits of Black people by the media, and violence in the Black community. His rants have always occurred, his reflexivity is also apparent, and his bold statements that are not contextually sound is also abundant. The public perception of Kanye is a peculiar one because it seems to isolate his actions to a specific time period only when his opinions do not align with what folks expect him to say or does not support their world view. However, Kanye in all situations says and does what he wants. A reader on Reddit talks a bit about the Kanye, Maga hypocrisy that exists and that Kanye will always remain an artist in everything he does:

I really, *REALLY* don't like Trump, but I'll never get over the hypocrisy of the Kanye Maga thing. Literally no one cared when he prominently featured confederate flags in the Yeezus merch and design. Why? Because he was taking the meaning AWAY from those who use it for hate. He was reinterpreting the meaning of the flag for its BASE INTENTION of true freedom. Now I'm not supporting the confederate flag or any racist behavior. That's just not me. What I'm saying is that Kanye is using this hat in the same way he used the

⁹⁵ Shockroc1. "Bush Doesn't Care about Black People." YouTube. YouTube, April 17, 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLpO1kxl>.

flag. Disassociate Trump from the situation. Take the words for their base meaning. "Make America great again." At his core, Kanye has ALWAYS been about positivity and unity.

Listen to his recent radio interview returning to Chicago and his actual in depth explanation of the hat. He doesn't "support" trump. He doesn't support anyone. He supports the ideals of love and unity. turns out Kanye never directly voted. I believe his endorsement probably had more influence on the overall climate than a single vote would anyway, though. he wanted change of any kind. He wanted people to see that the system is corrupt and exposed, and he wanted this to give people initiative to go out and make actual change next time. And in a way, it's worked. I've never seen this much conversation about election and voter registration in my life.

Kanye is an artist in everything he does. Music, fashion, day to day life etc. This is no different. He's making a statement. He's here for the world. LOVE EVERYONE isn't just a marketing slogan for him and yeezy. he means it.⁹⁶

Another reader discusses how Kanye West does care about black people and is standing up for the community:

You probably have already heard about Kanye's claim that racism for 400 year probably meant it was a choice.

People are interpreting this as Kanye meant that black people literally made the choice to be enslaved, that they liked to have to have the masters.

But that's furthest from the truth, what Kanye meant is that people should've had an open mind, different views, if slavery was that bad perhaps even try to get out of it, think of ways to get out of it, perhaps even if that was bad die for a cause that's against it.

I'm gonna leave Plato's theory here

<http://www.philosophyzer.com/the-allegory-of-the-cave-by-plato-summary-and-meaning/>

<https://steemit.com/philosophy/@getonthetrain/plato-s-cave-why-some-people-want-to-remain-prisoners>

In this Theory Kanye is the human who got out of the cave and is now trying to warn others in the cave of the possibilities outside, but every one is shutting him down.

Kanye even tweets after to explain further:

the reason why I brought up the 400 years point is because we can't be mentally imprisoned for another 400 years. We need free thought now. Even the statement was an example of free thought It was just an idea

⁹⁶ n/a, u/jake10house. "R/Kanye - Kanye, Maga and Hypocrisy." Reddit, September 27, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/Kanye/comments/9jfb21/kanye_maga_and_hypocrisy/.

So basically says that the narrative, the hivemind most of black people have currently is holding them back, like the cries for racism in every corner, going into unnecessary things like 'institutionalized racism' or absurd things 'subconscious racism' and the left pushing this narrative both by media and act like they care about black people.

He's trying to say that's not the way to fight the racism, that black people need wake up and have **free thought**, be free thinkers, have new ideas, make profit out of those ideas, to get out there, to work, to better themselves, to make good deals, to have good moments alongside white people, to love each other, to not follow the fake monolithic narrative that's put in front of them that's based on hate and misinterpretation and exaggeration

Thank you for reading, I love you⁹⁷

In the comments, other readers agreed, disagreed, and said everything in between. This reader tries to tie Kanye's Slavery was a choice rant at TMZ⁹⁸ to Plato's allegory of the cave. What this commenter points out is that the message is aimed at getting folks out of the cave and into enlightenment. Only Kanye can tell this reader if his interpretation is correct; however, this line of thinking is consistent with the songs, rants, speeches, and interviews West has done in the past. The reviews from the fans and the public are mixed. But overall, what each of them did agree on is that Kanye West knew how to get the people going. In either direction, commenters had a strong opinion of his actions and statements even going as far as to mention where he donates and the proof that he cares about the community. But that's the point--Kanye West's productive self-advocacy is seen throughout his work. Although controversial and problematic he has remained consistent about free thought and being aligned to individualized sovereignty and spreading that message to his fans and world more broadly.

⁹⁷ n/a, u/nowthatsucks. "R/Unpopularopinion - Kanye West Deeply Cares about Black People and Actually Tries to Help the Community." Reddit, May 2, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/8gj265/kanye_west_deeply_cares_about_black_people_and/.

⁹⁸ TMZ, n/a. "Kanye West Stirs up TMZ Newsroom over Trump, Slavery, Free Thought | TMZ." YouTube. YouTube, May 1, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_M4LkYra5k.

Conclusion

Hip-hop offers many opportunities for voice, change, and advocacy; however, artists must be willing to go out of their comfort zones to explore those possibilities. Since West's inception as an artist rather than a producer, he has shifted gears to become one of the most prolific and controversial artists in the industry. His songs, actions, and fashion line contain rhetorical messages of productive self-advocacy. Kanye West's *Yeezus* album, regarded as possibly one of the most provocative, detailed the ability of music to call people to action. The album is one of Black Nationalism and extremism to protect Blackness and return to pride in Blackness. West has continued to show support for Black movements and Black people. And even though his thoughts may be controversial, contradicting, and disturbing they create space for new voices and change to happen. Those changes permeate through into the fashion industry as well, which on the surface does not always seem like the most political avenue, but West has found ways to make fashion controversial for different reasons: Blackness.

Understanding the multifaceted nature of how the new era of hip-hop is challenging the status quo, is critical in understanding the ways in which politics in the Black community may function in the future. Messages of self-reliance and retreating from dependence on government or white-dominated spaces are resurging. Artists like Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar, are pushing the message of racial uplifting, but from the Booker T. Washington, Black Nationalist perspective which understands the racial climate and history of the United States. These productive self-advocacy messages value underprivileged, underrepresented, and underestimated, to take the control back and give it to the Black community. The new era of

hip-hop is returning and calling for a type of segregation. Future research will continue to explore this move toward Black Nationalism that does not advocate segregation entirely, but rather a separation for equity. Furthermore, West and Lamar are benefiting from these messages of productive self-advocacy. Even though these artists are creating and disturbing music that is bought by multiracial audiences, their messages are encoded with Black Nationalist messages. How do these artists benefit from the hegemonic corporate landscape while distributing messages that seem to be counter-hegemonic? For whom do the messages benefit and how do these varied audiences decode the message? Further exploration into these questions will help the field understand how hip-hop commercialization reshapes the way listeners, specifically Black audiences, decode and believe these messages.

Chapter 3: “And We Hate Po-Po”: Afrocentric, Constitutive Rhetoric, and Productive Self-Advocacy in Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright”

Kendrick Lamar's career as a young hip-hop artist has been remarkable. At twenty-nine, Lamar has amassed seven Grammy awards, seven Grammy nominations, two for best album of the year: *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, and *To Pimp a Butterfly* two years later. His success level seems to derive from his ability to blend politically charged, socially conscious music through beats that listeners want to play in their cars and the club. He continuously grows and develops new ways of understanding the world while speaking out about the internal conflicts that he faces. Despite Lamar's family moving from Chicago to Compton, the gang life and strife followed his family. In an interview with *LA Weekly*, Lamar recalls his youth, “6 years old, seein' my uncles playing with shotguns, sellin' dope in front of the apartment. My moms and pops never said nothing, 'cause they were young and living wild, too.”⁹⁹ His upbringing defined his need to explore music and describe in vivid detail the pain of Compton and cities like it that exist across the United States.

In interviews, Lamar often describes his family's circumstances. These descriptions also articulate the lived familiar experiences of other kids in Black communities across the nation and what spurred the creation of protest groups like the #BlackLivesMatter movement. He recalls, “As a teenager, the majority of my interactions with police were not good. They wanna slam me on the hood of the car. Sixteen years old. [The police officer] literally put the beam on my boy's head. I remember driving off in silence, feeling violated, and him being so angry a tear

⁹⁹ Rebecca Haithcoat, “Born and Raised in Compton, Kendrick Lamar Hides a Poet’s Soul Behind ‘Pussy & Patron,’” *L.A. Weekly*, January 20, 2011,

dropped from his eye.”¹⁰⁰ These moments in Lamar’s life caused him to write and place messages in the music. The areas in-between activism and narration, he encourages productive self-advocacy. In his interview with Rolling Stone, Lamar recalls the moment where he needed to speak out in the music:

“He saw on the news a report that a 16-year-old named Trayvon Martin had been shot to death in a Florida subdivision. ‘It just put a whole new anger inside me,’ Lamar says. ‘It made me remember how I felt. Being harassed, my partners being killed.’ He grabbed a pen and started writing, and within an hour, he had rough verses for a new song, “The Blacker the Berry”: Coming 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. . . .”¹⁰¹

It is from this moment as well that the #BLM movement also ignited and began its crusade for justice. Lamar responds to and feels the pain of the death of Trayvon Martin and places it in the music. He should not be considered a political leader, activist, or spokesperson; rather he provides messages of productive self-advocacy being in between all those things to uplift the community, but also to make sense of the conflicting views that he also experienced. The death of Trayvon Martin uncovered a different element of Lamar’s creative artistry, and three years later, he released *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

¹⁰⁰ “Born and raised in Compton, Kendrick Lamar Hides a Poet's Soul” 20 Jan. 2011, <https://www.laweekly.com/born-and-raised-in-compton-kendrick-lamar-hides-a-poets-soul-behind-pussy/>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

¹⁰¹ “The Trials of Kendrick Lamar - Rolling Stone.” 22 Jun. 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-trials-of-kendrick-lamar-33057/>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

On the night of February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a pseudo-neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman. Trayvon Martin, born on February 5th, 1995. Martin, making his way back home from the local 7-Eleven, was considered a threat to Zimmerman, a pseudo-neighborhood watch member. With no judicial or law enforcement authority, Zimmerman found Trayvon's Blackness as a threat and took justice into his own hands. The result of the exchange was the death of Martin. His death gained national attention and revitalized the underlying racial tensions and discrimination in America since Jim Crow. Race and discrimination is a part of the United States identity; from slavery, Jim Crow (and institutional racism), despite protests, are still unresolved issues of the American society. As Jeff Chang points out, "At some point, the conversation evaporates or moves into magical-thinking territory. There's an exhaustion or a complacency that sets in . . . a cycle that's been repeated over the last 50 years, from 1965, 1992, and 2014 on up till now."¹⁰² The death of Trayvon Martin revitalized, solidified, unified Black Americans and their anger, bringing about a new wave of protests.

This moment sparked national discussions about race and violence toward Black citizens. The #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) brought discussions about racial profiling, discrimination, and police brutality against Black and Latino/a people in the public light, allowing the Black community to show an open and honest outrage towards Trayvon's death and the acquittal of Zimmerman. The outrage felt in the Black community spurred the creation of the #BLM movement in 2013. After Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri, the movement gained

¹⁰² "Here's a Really Smart Take on Racial Politics in America Right Now," *Mother Jones*, accessed October 12, 2016, <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2016/10/jeff-chang-we-gon-be-alright-race-resegregation>.

national attention and recognition after protesting in the streets. Per *the Atlantic*, “The movement forced presidential candidates to reckon with a legacy of racism and police brutality. It inspired student protests and demands.”¹⁰³ This movement has and continues to serve as a voice of advocacy from and for the Black community.

The #BLM movement and dialogue about race in America also reached such a prominent level that many Black celebrities felt compelled to engage it. For instance, NBA athletes like LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers, and the Brooklyn Nets players, sported black ‘I Can’t Breathe’ warmup shirts after Eric Garner’s murder by New York City police officers.¹⁰⁴ Jay-Z’s streaming service, *Tidal*, pledged 1.5 million dollars to #BLM and other social groups. Most profoundly, revered artist Beyoncé performed in Black Panther-esque attire at Super Bowl 50’s halftime show. This attire was not only a nod to the Black Panthers, but also an appreciation and recognition of the #BLM movement.¹⁰⁵ Some of the most influential and supportive voices for the #BLM movement has come from hip-hop artists; the *Rolling Stones*, reports “A new generation of artists are addressing racism, violence and disillusionment in a way that hasn’t been heard in decades,” citing artists, like Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, Common, and others. The culture of hip-hop is about being able to speak out about injustices and for those that are not able to speak for themselves. Productive self-advocacy focuses on that voice and action to

¹⁰³ Clare Foran, “A Year of Black Lives Matter,” *The Atlantic*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/Black-lives-matter/421839/>.

¹⁰⁴ “President Obama Endorses LeBron James’s ‘I Can’t Breathe’ Shirt,” *Washington Post*, accessed October 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2014/12/19/president-obama-endorses-lebron-james-i-cant-breathe-shirt/>.

¹⁰⁵ Lisa Respers France CNN, “Why the Beyoncé Controversy Is Bigger than You Think,” *CNN*, accessed October 10, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/23/entertainment/beyonce-controversy-feat/index.html>.

protect the communities from within to prevent exploitation. To build and maintain the resources to support the Black community from within has been a focus of hip-hop artists since the spark started from #BLM. The hip-hop community too realized its power and self-worth. Artists like Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West have used their platform to exploit this potential. As seen from Kanye West, there is potential within the artists to be a role model for productive advocacy by existing in the space between a political leader, activist, or spokesperson. However, differing from West, I contend that Kendrick Lamar uses his music to more explicitly describe and illustrate his views of productive self-advocacy. Instead of encoding messages that are unclear and making the listener pause, reflect, and decode, Kendrick Lamar is clear and masterfully utilizes the deep history and tradition of the Black sound and identity to encode messages of productive self-advocacy.

In this chapter, I will first explore Afrocentric rhetoric and theory as proposed by Molefi Asante (particularly three different themes that arise from Afrocentric works: (1) human relations, (2) humans' relationship to the supernatural, and (3) humans' relationships to their own being. Using these three themes and constitutive rhetoric, Lamar's "Alright" will be analyzed to understand how Kendrick Lamar encodes messages of productive self-advocacy for the Black community. Interrogating one of the songs picked up by the #BLM movement demonstrates the complicated and sophisticated messages encoded in "Alright" and how artists use music to change the community from the speakers.

Kendrick Lamar's second major-label album, *To Pimp a Butterfly (TPAB)*, has been one of the most concentrated and complicated conversations about race in America. In this album, Kendrick Lamar produces an almost cinematic exploration of a broad range of topics like Black

oppression, commercialism in hip-hop as blood money, and mental health as a Black man. Simultaneously, he is intentional about including Jazz artists (pianist Robert Glasper, producer/sax player Terrace Martin and on bass, Thundercat). His ability to use a commercial album like *TPAB* to call into question the very thing that has brought him success is illustrative of productive self-advocacy. He interrogates his own place in creating the issues that the Black community faces. This album, produced three years after *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, is said to be a pillar for Black politics. *TPAB* captured the feelings of the Black community while critiquing his own conflicts about being a Black man. Lamar advocates while simultaneously criticizing his own contradictions.¹⁰⁶ On the one hand, he is against police brutality and murder of innocent Black men, but, on the other hand, his past is filled with an intertwine of gangs, drugs, alcoholism, and violence. This album was released at the perfect time. With the escalation of racial tensions in the country, the political cycle on the horizon, and Black America still angry and at times confused about their place in the world, Kendrick provided an album that was “for-real Black music.”¹⁰⁷ This music felt like Black music because it followed the hegemonic structure of being misogynistic¹⁰⁸, capitalistic¹⁰⁹, spiritual, hopeful, and angry¹¹⁰ which contributed to the authenticity of Kendrick Lamar and the albums themselves.

¹⁰⁶. “Kendrick Lamar To Pimp a Butterfly Album Review,” *Rolling Stone*, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-20150319>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 60.

¹⁰⁹ Charnas, Dan. *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*. New York, NY: New American Library, 2011.

¹¹⁰ Bryan J. McCann, “Affect, Black Rage, and False Alternatives in the Hip-Hop Nation,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 5 (October 2013): 408–18, doi:10.1177/1532708613496392.

Like Tupac and Public Enemy before him, Kendrick pulls the community together and provides a rhetorical gospel that would make visible Blackness as it exists in America and uplift the community's spirits to continue pushing for equity through self-dependency. Lamar does this by first constituting a community of a Black community that, throughout history, has been oppressed by institutional powers and representatives. He then discusses how the Black community uses God to help them with their battle for self-advocacy. Lastly, Kendrick gives the Black community a revival of identity; he reinforces Blackness as a source of pride, not shame. It is important to juxtapose Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar's ways of expressing productive self-advocacy; West is a contradiction in his music. Therefore, it was necessary to look at his activities outside of the music to get a complete picture. On the other hand, Lamar is much more straightforward and allows his encoded messages to live complexly in the music while challenging the Black community to look within themselves for salvation. Productive self-advocacy for Lamar requires Black folk to look within themselves first and protect the culture. It is also critical to acknowledge that Kendrick's *TPAB* needs to be understood and filtered through an Afrocentric lens to understand the complexities of *TPAB* and "Alright."

Lamar's "Alright" captured the people's feelings of rage and exhaustion. After years of slavery, discrimination, and the civil rights movement, "Alright" became the anthem for the civil rights movement taken up by the great-grandchildren of those that marched with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and those who fought with Malcolm X.¹¹¹ The #BLM movement has been stimulated by this song. Like the music of the civil rights era and as far back as the negro spirituals on the plantations, the song joins a long tradition of Black music that has envisioned

¹¹¹ "Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' Was The Movement's Anthem In 2015," *Vibe*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.vibe.com/2015/12/kendrick-lamar-alright-protest-anthem-2015/>.

light at the end of a tunnel, yet rife with distress and despotism. “Alright” tells Black people that it will be okay. Discussions of race, police brutality, religion, togetherness, and Blackness are wrought throughout Lamar’s the album, but his message is best encapsulated on the seventh track of the album. Kendrick Lamar also translated this message through the video for “Alright,” and performances. As an ever-evolving artist, person, and now, regardless if he regards himself as one, Black activist, Kendrick delivered a sound that goes far beyond the entertainment value of Hip-Hop. It brings the community together and provides a voice for people in America that is often silenced.

Kendrick Lamar, #BLM, and the New Movement

Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar are both important and essential to study in this contemporary moment due to their unabashedly Black interests and their commercial success. Their connection to hip-hop and the #BLM movement is worthy of exploration; however, we need to examine its roots to understand the contemporary relationship between Black music and protest. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) is one of the most notable and infamous organizations for the advancement of Black people. They exalted strength, power, intimidation, and pride, most notably recognized for their all-black outfits: black boots, black gloves, black slacks, and, of course, the black berets.¹¹² The BPP started to combat the police brutality and fatalities of Black people across the country. They sought to combat the Ku Klux Klan, which at the time, still lynched people of color.¹¹³ However, in terms of Black protests, this

¹¹² Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Univ of California Press, 2016).

¹¹³ Ibid.

organization did not start the modern-day protest movements against injustice toward Black peoples. Because of the tensions between Black people (not just African-Americans) and the United States, BPP responded to protect Black citizens from the Jim Crow laws that replaced the laws upholding the enslavement of Black peoples.¹¹⁴ These laws restricted where Black people could eat, drink, shop, sit and learn. Combating these laws, of course, was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but on the opposite side of this televised protest was the Black Nationalists. Black Power movements spearheaded by the Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, created movements that encouraged pride in Blackness.¹¹⁵

Instead of waiting for changes to happen for them, leaders like Malcolm X (and later Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton) were in the business of attaining liberation from within and amongst the Black community. Currently, the #BLM leaders are combining the strategies of the in-your-face aggression by the BPP and peaceful protests by Rev. Dr. King. #BLM, founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, “is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”¹¹⁶ Despite the belief that the movement is solely about the Black diaspora, the movement is about all oppressed people: “When Black people get free, everybody gets free.”¹¹⁷ Like the movements before them, #BLM cares not only about extrajudicial killings and police brutality, but also about the institutional racism that plagues Black communities. In

¹¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1973).

¹¹⁶ “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

an interview with Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of #BLM, she voiced what she would like to see done in ten years' time:

In ten years, I'd like to see some law enforcement agencies be disbanded or abolished, as well the development of a national network of families and victims working together in tandem, pushing for reform in their own cities. Either getting rid of police departments or having some serious checks and balances. With a reduction of law enforcement money, we can then be putting it back into Black communities. We need a new vision for jobs for Black folks, housing, healthy food. In ten years, I'll be 41 years old; I really want all of this to happen.¹¹⁸

The movement makes it an organizational goal to assist with the advancement of communities that have been forgotten and mentioned in political debates about poverty in urban cities. #BLM wants national reform to help the communities self-advocate and self-develop. Like the Panthers, this movement focuses on Black folks helping themselves.

Throughout these movements, the one thing that remained constant was Black music's response and ability to rejuvenate. During the time of the BPP, music gathered people and served to communicate with the people. Emory Douglas, the Minister of Culture in 1967, wanted to create a Black Power singing group to support the BPP.¹¹⁹ Elaine Brown, who eventually led the BPP after Newton fled to Cuba in 1974, made *Seize the Time*, which most of the anthems came from for BPP. These songs for the Black Power movement also made their way to the center stage of mainstream white America. Artists like Sly and the Family Stone, Rock and Roll Hall of Famers since 1993, were immensely popular during the Black Power era. Even though they were not outright political, their songs were responding to the times. Songs like

¹¹⁸ "Black Lives Matter / Black Life Matters: A Conversation with Patrisse Cullors and Darnell L. Moore," *The Feminist Wire*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/12/black-lives-matter-black-life-matters-conversation-patrisse-cullors-darnell-l-moore/>.

¹¹⁹ Emory Douglas et al., *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, ed. Sam Durant, First Edition edition (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 2007).

“Don’t Call Me Nigger, Whitey” and “Everyday People” discuss the social implications of race and their positions on the issue. These songs explore racial epithets and Black people’s lives in America, which still resonate with Black people dealing with these issues today.

Moving up on the timeline, hip-hop artists like Niggaz Wit Attitudes (N.W.A) dealt with social issues. Contrary to the growing field of dance and radio-sensitive rappers of the time, N.W.A specialized in making people uncomfortable. As Todd Boyd recalls, “this era began receiving marginal attention with the release of NWA’s *Straight Out of Compton* in 1988, reached national recognition with the Los Angeles riots following the first Rodney King verdicts, and has currently evolved to the status of societal threat.”¹²⁰ Boyd continues to point out that these artists were targeted and deemed a societal threat by right leaning politicians. Rising tensions between Black Americans and police officers as well as politicians reached a climax in 1991, with the recording of Rodney King being beat to death by Los Angeles police officers.¹²¹ The beating was not only an appalling use of police brutality, but it also captured the sentiments of racism that were felt by Black people at the time. That same year, N.W.A released an album titled *Niggaz4Life*, which sold close to a million copies its first week.¹²² Taking after their predecessors, Public Enemy, this album, like their previous albums, dealt with racism and abuse from police officers. However, unlike anything before, N.W.A in “Real Niggaz Don’t Die” were extremely direct in the confrontation and dislike of the police force:

‘Real Niggaz Don’t Die’ Die nigga!
We are born to die nigga

¹²⁰ Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 18.

¹²¹ Chelsea Matiash and Lily Rothman, “What Happened to Rodney King 25 Years Ago,” *Time*, March 3, 2016, <http://time.com/4245175/rodney-king-la-riots-anniversary/>.

¹²² Brandon Gaille, “25 Good Hip Hop Demographics,” *BrandonGaille.com*, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://brandongaille.com/25-good-hip-hop-demographics/>.

You've been dyin for 400 years
Niggas know how to die
Niggas don't know nothin else, but dyin
Niggas dream 'bout dyin
"I'm a motherfuckin nigga" - "with an attitude"

Lyrics like these dig deep into the perpetual feeling of distrust and lack of emotional stability when it comes to life in America. Songs like this serve as productive tools to self-advocate for Black people. These songs work within movements and bring about movements that need fuel to fire them up again. At the center of the songs are still the communities that are survivors of injustice. As these historical precedents indicate, the continued fight for voice and equality has been a long and difficult one. However, the journey continues; hip-hop is the new voice for a new movement with the hope of changing life for Black Americans.

This new era of hip-hop and identity politics has been called forth to create music that speaks to the continued American affliction: racism and systematic slavery. Kendrick Lamar is the voice on the timeline that continues the tradition of his predecessors but also challenges the norms of just reporting. Rather, Kendrick Lamar provides criticism of the community to provide clarity moving forward to create productive self-advocacy. Unlike previous artists like Sly and the Family Stone and N.W.A, Lamar wants the Black community to rely less on the police, politicians, and government and create opportunities for their community. This direction speaks to Kitwana¹²³ and Dyson's¹²⁴ points that hip-hop is not only political but has the opportunity to create change through a new hip-hop social movement. Productive self-advocacy messages can

¹²³ Kitwana, Bakari. "The New Black Youth Culture: The Emergence of the Hip-Hop Generation." Essay. In *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, 206. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2008.

¹²⁴ Dyson, Michael Eric. "This Dark Diction Has Become America's Addiction." Essay. In *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop*; Intro by Jay-Z, Outro by Nas, 66-67. New York: Basic Civitas, 2010.

help produce a type of social movement that is personal yet societal. Although it does not call for the masses to move on a particular social issue, it begs the listener to think about their contribution to change (internally and externally).

Kendrick Lamar--Afrocentricity as a Vehicle for Productive Self-Advocacy

Kendrick Lamar differs from West in his ability to be clear, integrate the Black auditory experience and lineage while being comfortable questioning his contributions to inequality. Although it may have been accidental, like the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement, Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" served as a celebratory marching song for #BLM. Lamar may be a good example to showcase how Afrocentricity continues to show up today. He contributes to the idea that the spoken word has deep meaning and connection to influence people to see beyond the moment. Kendrick Lamar in "For Free? (Interlude)" makes reference to "Uncle Sam", a caricature and personification of American capitalism, in juxtaposition to Christianity and alignment to evil. This important context is central to how he uses productive self-advocacy to show that the government (Uncle Sam) is not here to bring salvation or change but rather to entrap Black people. Afrocentricity serves as a major strategy for how Lamar encodes his messages of productive self-advocacy.

Afrocentricity has been a part of all Black art forms that have preceded hip-hop. Blues, soul, jazz all find foundations in the African tradition; it is nonsensical to analyze and interpret these genres through any other lens before Afrocentricity because these forms are inherently and foundationally non-western. To understand how hip-hop artists have found a voice to explore and resist oppression, one needs to understand Afrocentricity. It is important to note

that it is difficult to comprehend hip-hop which is inherently based upon African American orature. It is by necessity that we discuss art through an Afrocentric lens and not a Eurocentric one. Best articulated by Asante:

Attempts to understand African American orature have failed because they [White scholars] misconstrue the nature and character of African American discourse, written or spoken. Often ignorant of African philosophy and culture commentators have imposed Western constricts and values on material that grows out of coherent, albeit different, traditions. The result has been a failure to understand or value that material, as well as an inability to recognize or correct that failure.¹²⁵

Asante provides us with the tools to investigate these African rhetorics through the theory of the Afrocentric idea. To be clear, Asante is displaying an alternative way of thinking about rhetoric and the world, not the dismissal of another. Afrocentrism is the process of allowing the African ideology and thought process to be embraced in a discussion of rhetoric.

Afrocentricity seeks to advocate for Africans and other marginalized groups through the criticism of structures that oppress: Eurocentrism as an example. This type of thinking seeks to “create a new world, to find an escape, to liberate those who see only a part of reality.”¹²⁶ It is the process of placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior. This analysis method is important because of its obvious value to place the African diaspora as the center of discussion. It also unmask the Eurocentric illusions as to the global standard. Afrocentric rhetoric allows us to see the interweaving of language and culture.

To discuss this Afrocentrism is also to acknowledge that language (rhetoric) is itself theoretical. Asante discusses that Afrocentricity is metatheoretical because “rhetoric. . . is the productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in

¹²⁵ Molefi K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Temple University Press, 1987), 19.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

the midst of disharmony and indecision. The uses of rhetoric are varied, and it is necessary to include the production of disharmony in its unity.”¹²⁷ To form unity and to solve issues of the world, one must be able to use language to invent ideas that are not yet spoken or thought. This is the prime example in African American culture. To create words, manipulate the phonetics, and to change definitions is to develop new language from the old. Kendrick Lamar uses the power of nommo to give productive self-advocacy messages to the Black community that is constituted. This concept, nommo, is the word of creation. It is the Dogon people’s idea of meaning and creation. As Karenga states, “It is through the word [nommo], that weaving, forging, cultivating, building family and community, and making the world good are made possible.”¹²⁸ Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” is a song of motivation, and support. Lamar uses the power of the word to unify the metaphorical, yet literal African family. The theory of Afrocentrism allows scholars to investigate the unknown and the forgotten, while giving power and agency to the people of the African diaspora.

There are three different themes that arise from Afrocentric works: “(1) human relations, (2) humans’ relationship to the supernatural, and (3) humans’ relationships to their own being.”¹²⁹ My rhetorical study of Lamar’s “Alright” will be grounded in the three themes of Afrocentric rhetoric described by Asante. Human relations refers to how we interact with other people around us. For Lamar, human relations are emphasized through his depictions of Black’s relationship to law enforcement, the judicial officers, and the people that are in control of the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁸ Ronald L. Jackson and Elaine B. Richardson, eds., *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2003), chap. Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice: Bringing Good into the World, 8.

¹²⁹ *The Afrocentric Idea*, 168.

oppressive structures that exist. This aspect of the Afrocentric idea deals with who we are in context to other people. This second condition concerns itself with faith and spirituality which is found in most African-American discourses. As it is shown in "Alright," the supernatural often references religion to answer questions and reveal the truths of the world. Finally, the third condition of Afrocentrism deals with determining one's place in the world. As the racial tensions rise in America and protesters are voicing their concerns and little is changing, people begin to question the meaning of life. Lamar addresses these concerns in the song, and provides a better alternative to the current one. Afrocentric orature should be able to utilize all three qualities of the Afrocentric discourse. Asante's three tenets of Afrocentrism allow critics to determine if and how work, such as Kendrick Lamar's "Alright", is Afrocentric and promotes productive self-advocacy.

This focus on Afrocentrism can be seen in Cummings and Roy's *Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music*. This piece served as an example for those who wish to use Afrocentricity as a method for rhetorical analysis. For Cummings and Roy, employing Asante's framework involved focusing on Nommo. The spoken word, the implications, and variations in how Nommo is used in rap music were explored through songs such as: KRS-One's "Stop the Violence," Big Tymers' "Get Your Roll On," Outkast's "So Fresh, So Clean." By analyzing these songs, their chorus, and the general rhythms of these songs, Cummings and Roy analyze the various manifestations of the spoken word. The discussion of the Afrocentric idea manifests itself through varied means, but in the end, the key is focusing on Blackness. It is my aim to demonstrate that we can analyze a song like Lamar's "Alright" using the Afrocentric model and

incorporate theories from more mainstream communication theory to make the symbolic meaning of “Alright” more accessible to non-African diasporic theorists.

Kendrick Lamar and the Productive Self-Advocacy of Constitutive Rhetoric in “Alright”

Linking together our discussion of how Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” utilizes Afrocentricity to encode productive self-advocacy messages using Asante’s three qualities of an Afrocentric work. We can conclude that Kendrick Lamar does create Afrocentric work; furthermore, he is able to have an impact with his music because it feels experiential. He includes skits and stories on *TPAB*, pulls from real stories with people in his life, and the experiences that Black Americans can both resonate with and recall in their own personal lives to create a visual story through music. Connecting and intertwining Afrocentricity and constitutive rhetoric allows us the opportunity to unpack how these messages of productive self-advocacy are encoded and decoded by listeners.

Hip-Hop is a living, breathing rhetoric that impacts not only the listener, but also those who engage and practice it. Kendrick, like his listeners, is impacted by the music. James Boyd White’s theory of constitutive rhetoric is a useful lens to investigate how Hip-Hop rhetorically functions. Constitutive rhetoric is to look at said rhetoric “as a rhetorical activity.”¹³⁰ For White, the “law can be seen, as it is experienced, not as a wholly independent system of meaning, but as a way of talking about real events and actual people in the world.”¹³¹ Lamar’s “Alright” creates a message that is not fictitious and is about people who experience life as he describes.

¹³⁰ James Boyd , “Law as Rhetoric, Rhetoric as Law: The Arts of Cultural and Communal Life,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 52, no. 3 (1985): 688, doi:10.2307/1599632.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 691.

Hip-Hop, like rhetoric (law as White describes), is a culture, a community, a genre, a way of life, and something that is participatory. To be engaged in Hip-Hop is to place oneself in a cultural immersion. Most importantly, constitutive rhetoric is communal. The rhetorical activity does not and cannot take place in the absence of community, “it always takes place in a social context and . . . is always constitutive of the community by which it works.”¹³² Hip-Hop brings to existence the people that it speaks about; not that Black Americans do not exist, but are invisible and marginalized. The art brings and evokes new life into the community. Because constitutive rhetoric is unfixed, the limits and bounds of meaning and persuasion are in constant flux. It expands, grows, solves, and addresses problems that were not thought of in its inception.

These fluctuating meanings and interpretations leave us with questions with which to answer. When we are thinking about how an author or in this case rapper, constitutes an audience White leaves us with three questions to answer regarding constitutive rhetoric: 1. What is the language being used to convey and constitute said audience? 2. How is the author remaking the language into something new and inventive? 3. Who is being spoken to and how does the speaker portray themselves?¹³³ These questions allow us to investigate who is being constituted, how, and who is constituting the community.

This investigation of constitutive rhetoric has been taken up by Marice Charland. For Charland, “theories of rhetoric as persuasion [could not] account for the audiences that rhetoric addresses.”¹³⁴ As White discusses previously, rhetoric brings into existence people, ideas, and

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 701–2.

¹³⁴ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (May 1, 1987): 134, doi:10.1080/00335638709383799.

communities that may have not been brought forth before. Charland discusses the new political party that was created in Canada. In 1967, Quebec wished to be free from Canada and become a sovereign nation, calling themselves the *Movement Souveraineté-Association (MSA)*. He contends, the new political party is a way by which we can see, in a real way, how constitutive rhetoric functions.¹³⁵ Previously these people from Quebec were called French-Canadians. Charland contends that audience members are interpellated through identification. This interpellation calls the audience members to realize that they are the ones that are being spoken to. This is not to be confused with calling specific people out, but to use the language in the text to deduce that the audience member is the one being spoken about. The speaker and the audience share something that allows the audience to be heard before the actual message is sent out.¹³⁶

From both Charland and White, the theme of bringing audiences into existence and inviting them to join in the conversation is not only important, but inherent in constitutive rhetoric. In this investigation of “Alright,” we are prompted to find out how Lamar uses Afrocentric language to constitute his African-American audience. Because constitutive rhetoric changes and manipulates language to reach its goal in creating rhetoric that the audience can identify with, Lamar must be able to change how audiences understand his message; in other words, how does Kendrick Lamar creatively use language to interpellate and identify with his audience? Lastly, as discussed by Charland, we must ask how these audience members are constituted? Who are they? What are they like? It is to be clear that when “Black community” is used in this analysis it is referring to the constituted community Lamar calls forth. These are the

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 138.

members that are concerned with social justice, that concern with faith, and those who want to be proud of being Black.

“Alright,” Making the People Visible

This study of Afrocentricity finds itself in a similar exigency of the 1960s, the crescendo of the Civil Rights Movement, of which the theory was created. The racial tensions of the 60s and 70s and the quest for equal rights are being mirrored today. Kendrick Lamar, like Fannie Lou Hamer and other artists of the Black Freedom Movement, uses his voice to liberate the Black community from oppression. *TPAB* serves as a piece of art that speaks to the consciousness of the Black community. “Alright,” which became an anthem for the #BLM movement, made more visible a community that often gets ignored. Kendrick does this by abiding by the three tenets of Afrocentrism: human relations, the relationship to the supernatural, and the relationship to self-being. Lamar first makes evident the oppressive entities that discipline Black people, which is how he examines human relations. He then discusses the relationship with the supernatural through faith and spirituality which guides and supports Black people in their fight for equality. Finally, he encourages the constituted Black community to be unabashedly Black and proud of their self-being.

Kill Us Dead in the Street: Human Relations

Kendrick Lamar constitutes a community throughout “Alright” using the power of the word: *nommo*. Karenga argues that “it is through the word, that weaving, forging, cultivating,

building family and community, and making the world good are made possible.”¹³⁷ *Nommo* is the ability to bring together the community to develop and share ideas. *Nommo* can construct, deconstruct, and give emotion.¹³⁸ It is the way that people of the African diaspora understand each other. For Lamar to make visible the institutions that oppress Black Americans, he must speak the language of the people. To constitute an audience, the rhetorician must use the language of which they are familiar. As described by White, “rhetoric, is at once a social activity. It is always communal, both in the sense that it always takes place in a social context and in the sense that it is always constitutive of the community by which it works.”¹³⁹ Lamar uses *nommo* to use words that already exist in the language, but utilizes them in a way that constructs community.

The word “Nigger” and its other “Nigga” is one of those words that existed in the community. Throughout American history, as far back as slavery and as recent as epithets being used to describe and depict Black people in court, the word “Nigger” has been used to oppress Black people.¹⁴⁰ The word “Nigga,” although has a positive connotation in the Black community, is being used both negatively and positively. For instance, when Lamar discusses being hurt and loss of pride he uses “Nigga” as a way of examining Black people’s place in the world. Lamar uses this history to make visible how Black people feel that the world perceives them. This history is impactful because the power of the word, *Nommo*, has force. “Nigga” for Lamar is a

¹³⁷ *Understanding African American Rhetoric*, chap. Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice: Bringing Good into the World, 8.

¹³⁸ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 17.

¹³⁹ “Law as Rhetoric, Rhetoric as Law,” 691.

¹⁴⁰ Lincoln Caplan, “Racial Discrimination and Capital Punishment: The Indefensible Death Sentence of Duane Buck,” *The New Yorker*, April 20, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/racial-discrimination-and-capital-punishment-the-indefensible-death-sentence-of-duane-buck>.

tool that has multiple uses because the term is loaded with history and emotion. That sensation allows Lamar the ability to use the negative connotation of “Nigga” in conjunction with the police brutality that is seen throughout the country.

In “Alright,” Lamar uses the word “Nigga” 18 times. On the face of it this is not new information for a three-minute rap song. However, most the uses of the word “Nigga” are used in the pre-hook and hook. Our attention here is specifically, in the use of “Nigga” in the pre-hook:

Wouldn't you know we been hurt, been down before, Nigga
When our pride was low, lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go, Nigga?"
And we hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street fo' sho', Nigga
I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow, but we gon' be alright

The word “Nigga” is juxtaposed with “po-po” (police officers). Lamar uses the word “Nigga” in a similar way to the above-mentioned examples. However, this juxtaposition is further contextualized in the historical relationship the Black community has with law enforcement on all levels. As Dyson argues:

The peculiar complexions or racial identity, which inherit, their distinctive hues from the specific and cumulative condition of Black life from plantation to suburb, mean that Black folk do have a history and memory in common. The incalculable grief and titanic inhumanities of chattel slavery; the unsayable trauma brought on by the erosion of embryonic liberties after Reconstruction; the sometimes acoustic, sometimes muted pain borne in response to the chafing indignities imposed by Jim crow law . . . all form, in part the content of common racial history and memory from which Black culture is fashioned.¹⁴¹

Black America’s interactions with the law have seldom been positive. The ramifications of neglecting Black people from the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and most U.S.

¹⁴¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (U of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvi.

documents created a ripple effect on those who create law and those who enforce them. The racial injustices have not been forgotten by Black Americans. These cultural memories have pinpointed police officers, judges, and government officials as representations of institutions that perpetuate discrimination. So, for many in a time where police brutality is being uploaded, shared, and most importantly, experienced, police officers are evil and untrustworthy. As Kendrick Lamar states, “And we hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street fo’ sho’, Nigga.” The contrast of police and Black is the difference between life and death, further constituting a community that is positioned against law enforcement.

As Burke describes in *On Symbols and Society*, the invention of the negative is a way by which a rhetorician can create identification with an audience by placing them in opposition to what they are not.¹⁴² Even though Burke warns us of the dangers of placing ideas and people in these opposites, this narrative is true to the Black experience. There are historical and contemporary experiences that justify this polarization. It is for this reason that “Alright” provides the audience with adequate equipment for living. Burke argues that literature prepares its reader with tools to understand life and the people within it. Hip-Hop, like poetry, is read, but also felt. There is an interaction between the reader and the poet. Lamar makes visible the oppression that Black Americans experience and feel daily. He constitutes a community that has long been plagued by racist ideology and justified by oppressive laws. Lamar describes the human relationship between Black people and the United States has been one of neglect and injustice; “Alright” brings those experiences to light to bring the issues visible to the public.

¹⁴² Kenneth Burke and Joseph R. Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 62–67.

This public display of the Black experience is also a tool used to solidify the need to strengthen the belief in one's self and the community. Productive self-advocacy presented by Lamar is also one of self-actualization. The continued presentation of these facts, police brutality, and the discrimination the Black community faces solidifies the need to protect the culture. Additionally, this call for a change and a non-secure belief in the law has let down the community time and again. There needs to be a dependence that is different than the law: religion and faith.

If God Us, Then We Gon' Be Alright: The Supernatural

Lamar uses faith and spirituality as pillars of hope for the warriors of equality. He assures the constituted Black community that if they place their confidence in God, HE will be there to have their back. This faith in the Lord allows the Black community to have hope for a better tomorrow. Black America has a long tradition of using spirituality to overcome struggle. In the days of physical slavery, the spiritual served as a way for slaves to criticize the master and the conditions that they lived; it provided the slaves an opportunity for Black people to imagine themselves fleeing from the plantation into free territories.¹⁴³ So then, the spirituals served a critiquing and healing function for the slaves. For today's Negro, Hip-Hop allows the people to critique the social conditions while providing the people with positive hopes of a better tomorrow.

In a discussion of Lauryn Hill as a lyricist and womanist, Dangerfield argues that "Hill's music tends to emphasize the more positive aspects of Black culture (i.e., self-love, Black love,

¹⁴³ John Lovell, "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual," *The Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 4 (1939): 638, doi:10.2307/2292903.

spiritual relationships with God).¹⁴⁴ Spirituality and music serve major roles in the Black community and hip-hop allows the combination of the two. For instance, in “Alright” Lamar starts the song in the voice of the people reminiscent of the slaves on the plantation; then assures that it will be alright. Lamar declares:

Alls my life I has to fight, Nigga
Alls my life I . . .
Hard times like: “God!”
Nazareth, I’m fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But, if God got us, then we gon’ be alright

Like a preacher in the pulpit, Lamar constitutes a community that understands pain and suffering comparable to the tribulations that Jesus experienced. The reference to Nazareth is not only an appeal to the Lord, but also a reference to the struggles of Jesus when he proclaimed he was from Nazareth, the son of God, giving the people something with which to identify. Even though not all Black people are Christian, Jesus is widely referred to because his experiences most closely connect to the story of the Black American. Cummings and Latta argue that “Black American congregations give voice to a connection between oppressive conditions and the humiliation/death/promise of divine rescue offered by Jesus.”¹⁴⁵ The congregation is the Black audience and Lamar serves as the messenger of hope in the song.

Observing the music video that accompanies the song, we see Kendrick floating through the streets of Compton. He is sometimes upside down. Most notably, in the last two minutes of the video, Lamar is on top of a street light. As the song is ending, a White police officer exits the car and shoots Kendrick with his hand shaped like a gun that sends Kendrick slowly falling to the

¹⁴⁴ *Understanding African American Rhetoric*, chap. Lauryn Hill as Lyricist and Womanist, 215.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. “Jesus is a Rock”: Spirituals as Lived Experience, 63.

ground. When he reaches the ground, we presume that he is dead; however, Lamar gives the camera a smile. This imagery of the prophet, Jesus, and the common man all merge together to create a symbol of hope that reinforces the song's lyrics. The smile at the end of the video is the key to the message that everything will be alright regardless of what happens to the Black community. This ability to merge seemingly different messages, eras, and experiences is possible because the narratives that are told constitute a community that can connect those ideas and form meaning. Charland states, "The distinct acts and events in a narrative become linked through identification arising from the narrative form. Narratives lead us to construct and fill in coherent unified subjects out of temporally and spatially separate events."¹⁴⁶ For the audience, these events are not all that separate and distinct; rather, due to the connection to these seemingly distinct ideas, the Black community finds deeper identification. The identification Lamar creates with the audience is a strong one because he provides a narrative of hope that includes the good and the bad.

Hope for the Black community is not all about showing only the positive, but allowing the community to engage in the realities of the struggle. This hopefulness for a better future finds itself embedded in faith and spirituality. For a community that continually strives for social justice, religion becomes an identity that is a part of the Black fabric. Hunt and Benford state that "collective identity is conceptualized as individuals' identifications of, identifications with, and attachments to some collectivity in cognitive, emotional, and moral terms."¹⁴⁷ These collective identities are also reliant on the shared social experiences of the participants. For the

¹⁴⁶ Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 139.

¹⁴⁷ David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), chap. Collective Identity, Solidarity, and Commitment, 450.

soldiers of the Black Liberation Movement (i.e., #BlackLivesMatter) these collective identities include a shared belief in the supernatural. The supernatural allows the people that have been wronged an opportunity for retribution even if they are not the ones that can physically conduct justice.

The supernatural, in the Afrocentric sense, provides balance in an imbalanced world. Karenga describes the meaning of the ancient Egyptian concept of *Maat*, which provides “‘rightness in the world,’ that is, in the divine, natural, and social realms.”¹⁴⁸ God provides this justice to the people in a way that is more powerful than any judicial system or any law written by man. Lamar discusses how no matter what happens in the physical world there is one judge at the end. The appeal to the supernatural allows the people of the Black community to continue living. He states:

I’m at the preacher’s door
My knees getting weak and my gun might blow
But we gon’ be alright

Lamar acknowledges that, even though things in the physical realm are difficult and might cause some to consider suicide, everything will be alright if you place your trust in the hands of God. Hope for Lamar is not about just the good, but acknowledging that things are horrific and traumatizing. Spirituality and faith continue to serve as a unifying foundation for the Black community. As indicated by Asante, the second condition for Afrocentricity is a connection to the supernatural. Lamar connects the tenet of the supernatural to bring the community together and illuminate the conditions of the Black diaspora in America. Collectively and with the help of God, the community can strive to find a better alternative. #BLM and other Black

¹⁴⁸ *Understanding African American Rhetoric*, chap. Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice, 11.

Liberation groups look toward the supernatural to assist in the fight for equality and justice in the world.

Black liberation is reminiscent of the Panthers and Black Nationalism of before. These warriors are fighting for not only survival but a life where they can thrive. Kendrick calls for help from God, but not in despair rather for the courage to fight for what is right. Productive self-advocacy depends on the people being able to stand up for what they believe in. Kendrick serves as the mouthpiece to motivate and spread the message that #BLM has already started. As encoded in "Alright", the Black community in America needs to focus on the Black community rather than seek salvation.

Pet Dog, Pet Dog, Pet Dog, My Dog: Relationship to Self Being

Kendrick Lamar provides meaning to the lives of Black people in a time where activist groups like #BLM claim that society undervalues Black lives. Throughout "Alright", he describes the conditions of Black Americans without dissipating the pride one should take in being Black. In Ralph Ellison's book, *The Invisible Man*, the narrator describes his life as a Black man. Although the book is fictional and set in the early 20th century, the content of the story is pertinent to the conditions in which Lamar finds his song. The reason the narrator considers himself invisible is because of his color. Being Black is like being invisible because people choose to ignore the conditions of Black America. Kendrick is making visible all that is subdued and ignored in the Black community by white America. Lamar states in his first verse:

Uh, and when I wake up
I recognize you're looking at me for the pay cut
But homicide be looking at you from the face down
What Mac-11 even boom with the bass down
Schemin'! And let me tell you 'bout my life

Painkillers only put me in the twilight
Where pretty pussy and Benjamin is the highlight
Now tell my mamma I love her but this what I like, Lord knows
...
Drown inside my vices all day
Won't you please believe when I say

This entire verse is necessary to illuminate because it illustrates a call for help. Drugs, sex, and money dominate the daily lives of some members of the Black community. These activities are what people look forward to everyday because, within communities that are politically and economically oppressed, there is not much else to look forward to. The social situation of the community is that of disparity. With unemployment rates and education gaps through the roof the Black population is facing dire conditions.¹⁴⁹

Additionally, Lamar targets white America's desire to take money from his music that includes narratives about Black community and its conditions. The conversation among hip-hop enthusiasts articulates what "real hip-hop" is and looks like will always continue. But, what hip-hop scholars describe as the commercialization of hip-hop is an interesting one as the art often describes not having it and being on the quest for the male American dream.¹⁵⁰ What makes hip-hop such a unique rhetorical medium and subject area to explore is the ability for artists to speak about their wealth, fight to retain it, glorification of capitalism while

¹⁴⁹ Gillian B. White, "Education Gaps Don't Fully Explain Why Black Unemployment Is So High," *The Atlantic*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/12/Black-white-unemployment-gap/421497/>.

¹⁵⁰ Collins, Patricia Hill. "Is the Personal Still Political? The Women's Movement, Feminism, and Black Women in the Hip-Hop Generation." Essay. In *From Black Power to Hip Hop Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, 161–96. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2012), chap. Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots, and Amnesia.

simultaneously discussing poverty, violence, societal political issues and believing in oneself to make the changes they want to see in their lives as well as their community.

This ability to constitute a community that has been abused and hurt by an identifiable force can be explained using the theory of the ego function of social movements. Richard B. Gregg describes that the ego-function of rhetoric concerns itself with trying to identify and preserve the self. He states that the members, leaders, or spokesperson of a social movement “needs to recognize and proclaim that one’s ego is somehow ignored, or damaged, or disenfranchised. A second posture, proclaims, extols, and describes the strengths and virtues of the ego sought after. A third posture, decries and attacks the ignorance or malicious qualities of an enemy.”¹⁵¹ The experience of the Black diaspora throughout history has been ignored and misrepresented. Today, we see a wave of racial neoliberalism which says that race is a problem of the past. The conditions of racial neoliberalism ask the public to “erase race and not have its histories of destruction haunt.”¹⁵² Because race cannot be totally demolished, racial neoliberal efforts concentrate on combating its histories. The goal of racial neoliberalism is to say that the race issues of the past are no longer affecting the present. Lamar uses “Alright” as a vehicle to combat racial neoliberalism and bring the experiences of the people, no matter the ills, at the epicenter of discussion. The ego-function unites those that share the same hurt pride:

Wouldn’t you know
We been hurt, been down before, Nigga
When our pride was low
Lookin’ at the world like, “where do we go?”

¹⁵¹ Charles E. Morris III and Stephen Howard Browne, *Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest, 2nd Edition*, 2nd edition (State College, Pa: Strata Pub Co, 2006), chap. The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest, 48.

¹⁵² David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 26.

The feeling of being disoriented and adrift is captured within the song. Lamar converts those feelings to tap back into a source of Black power and self-love that has always existed. Before this though, Kendrick allows the audience to understand the plight of Black Americans and the continuous fight to fight the demons that plagues them.

The second verse of the song continues to engage the drug epidemic in the Black community. This is not to say that being Black is to be a drug addict, rather, being Black is to understand the conditions in which Black people find themselves. Goldberg discusses that “the increasing stress on individualized merit and ability in the name of race-lessness was coterminous with structural shifts in state formation away from welfare-ism and the caretaker state.”¹⁵³ Racial neoliberalism attempts to blame the conditions of the Black community, and other marginalized groups, on the community. Per this logic, the deplorable conditions of a community are justified because they were not good enough. For Lamar, to have pride, like to have hope, is not to talk about all the good, rather it is to reveal the hidden truths and to be honest about the struggles that Black persons (citizens or otherwise) face in America. Lamar states in his second verse:

Anything, see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog
...
Digging in my pocket, ain't a profit big enough to feed you
Everyday my logic, get another dollar just to keep you
In the presence of your chico... ah!
...
If I got it then you know you got it, heaven, I can reach you
Pet dog, pet dog, pet dog, my dog, that's all

Kendrick uses the metaphor of a dog to illustrate drug addiction. The name Lucy, although usually referenced to marijuana, is used to talk about drugs at large. The entire verse describes

¹⁵³ Ibid., 331.

addicts' need to keep their habit alive. He describes the life of an addict; from trying to maintain their habit to protecting their kids from seeing them use drugs, the feeling of euphoria when using drugs, and the habitual dependence on the drug, "Lucy." Lamar, in creative fashion, brings to focus the conditions in the Black community. Kendrick uses this strategy in his other works to discuss problems in Black neighborhoods. Songs like "Swimming Pools (Drank)" which discusses the issue of alcoholism in Black America and "i" which talks about mental illness in the Black community both contribute to making visible the problems that plague the Black community.

These songs are what Karenga calls *Kawaida*, which "poses culture as a unique and instructive way of human being in the world and a fundamental framework for self-understanding and self-assertion."¹⁵⁴ The *Kawaida* philosophy assists Black people to find themselves in a world that dictates what it means to be Black. Songs like Tupac's "Brenda's Got a Baby" or Childish Gambino's "Worldstar" help the Black community define and contextualize their Blackness. They acknowledge the good and the bad in hopes of providing the community perspective to become unabashedly Black. The chorus of "Alright," sung by Pharrell Williams, solidifies the Black experience. It reassures the community of their place in the world, and allows them to be proud of a term that has long been used to oppress them. Lamar and Williams, assures Black people that:

Nigga, we gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
We gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright

¹⁵⁴ Jackson and Richardson, *Understanding African American Rhetoric*, chap. Nommo, *Kawaida*, and *Communicative Practice*, 4.

“Nigga,” the racial epithet that was repurposed to subjugate Black slaves on the hot, southern plantations by white masters and overseers, is used in the Blackest way: to celebrate one’s self. It can, and has been argued that “Nigga” is an expression of self-hate.¹⁵⁵ This expression is of affirmation and self-love. Lamar uses “Nigga” these many times in the song, repetitively, because it aims to counter the notion that it is not a source of pride. It is a strategic use to affirm that Blackness is good. Black pride and “Nigga” are synonymous in this context.

“Alright” addresses the problems in the Black community in a direct way. By doing so, Kendrick brings into focus that the Black community faces tribulations that contribute to long-term problems. The song brings into light these issues because it provides a step toward the healing process by acknowledging the issues. By committing to productive self-advocacy, the audience can fully embrace being Black without feeling ashamed. Blackness, as described in Lamar’s song, serves as a place of pride, but rife with struggles. He constitutes an audience that is self-aware and uses those difficulties as a source of motivation. Development of the self, a key tenet of Afrocentrism, is central to Lamar’s constitutive rhetoric and to the community of Blackness he constitutes through his lyrics.

Self-development is also a critical part of productive self-advocacy precisely because to advocate for one’s self and their community. It is important to know what is plaguing the community. Kendrick weaves the issues that concern the Black community with the need to address the issues from within rather than from government agencies. It is possible to blame the government (which would not be completely unjustified), but it is more productive to solve

¹⁵⁵ J. Angelo Corlett and Robert Francescotti, “Foundations of a Theory of Hate Speech,” *Wayne Law Review* 48 (2003 2002): 1071.

the issues amongst each other. From these understandings, the community can continue to build, and create better opportunities for the disenfranchised.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to capture why the Black community, specifically the #BlackLivesMatter movement has taken the song “Alright” as an anthem for liberation. Using the Afrocentric paradigm and constitutive rhetoric, the paper aimed to show how “Alright” aimed to make Black people visible to a neoliberal society. Race still matters. Songs like “Alright” seek to place minority voices at the heart of the dialogue in hopes to bring attention and assistance to an otherwise disregarded population. This analysis of Kendrick’s “Alright” is only a glimpse into an Afrocentric rhetoric that aims to bring good into the world through thoughtful discussion of lived realities. This analysis shows that although on the surface of hip-hop, the art seems to be about misogyny, wealth, extravagance, and the slew of other negative conceptions used to describe it, many artists seek to rebuild and shape the community through hip-hop. Hip-hop at its core is inherently Afrocentric by its conception and language. Hip-Hop attempts “to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony and indecision.”¹⁵⁶ This genre creates opportunities for the creation of self-sustaining communities independent from the macro-context. There needs to be more scholarly work that seeks to illustrate the constructive aspects of Hip-Hop and its artists. The freedom of expression allows a multitude of interpretations. The surface meaning of a message may very well be contrary to the perceived message of the community for which it is intended. This paper provides insight as to how rap

¹⁵⁶ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 35.

music is not inherently destructive, but rather, may in fact create a home for those that feel like there is not enough representation for what it means to be Black.

This rhetorical declaration of Blackness, if continued by other artists like J Cole and Kanye West, can create a new generation of Black children that are proud and self-aware of their Blackness. This type of rhetoric gives a reemergence of Black power and advocacy. Like the college students of the 1960s and 70s, this new generation has the potential to upset the imbalance of power. It will be interesting to see how social movement rhetoric takes a new shape through different mediums such as music, art, and television. Now, there exist platforms that are free and accessible to a multitude of audiences of all backgrounds. The way artists interact with these platforms and how they function in this new technological world is worthy of investigation.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In late 2016, Rick Ross, featuring 2 Chainz and Gucci Mane, released “Buy Back the Block.” Rick Ross, 2 Chainz, and Gucci Mane are all not considered political spokesmen by any means; however, this song indicated a change in the messages that usually were encoded in their songs: women, liquor, and bravado. “Buy Back the Block” is about buying back the properties and businesses (or lack thereof) in the inner-city neighborhoods that they came from to help stimulate the economy in their communities instead of exploiting these areas and taking the money to the suburbs. The chorus of “Buy Back the Block” states repeatedly, “It’s time to buy back the block, buy back the block (x3)/ It’s time to buy back the hood, buy back the hood (x4).” The song centralizes the need for Black artists to go back and buy back the real estate and businesses to bring commerce and dependability to the neighborhoods. This song is the continuation of productive self-advocacy messages that have been pronounced in hip-hop after Trayvon Martin’s death and the renewal of Black Nationalism. This thesis sought to track a few examples of how hip-hop artists have realized their power and influence to move people that may look up to them. The youth especially invest in the music—these songs and the hip-hop culture is that of rejuvenation and rebellion. Artists have actualized their influence to incorporate more poignant messages in their music.

Additionally, it is important to understand the context in which these artists are performing. The contemporary hip-hop landscape is fundamentally different from hip-hop in the 1980s, 1990s where political messages and Black Nationalism were prevalent throughout the genre unforgivingly by artists like Public Enemy who “positioned themselves as heirs to

James Brown's loud, Black and proud tradition."¹⁵⁷ Artists in the current hip-hop landscape have attention like never before, there are international fans, sponsor deals worth insurmountable amounts, and the attention of the President of the United States (visits to the White house where they once were infamous), and on occasion, classes being taught at Universities.¹⁵⁸ The amount of money and notoriety associated with artists now are major reasons for not speaking out or speaking in favor of identity politics. However, as exemplified, artists like Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar may be utilizing an alternate way to make change through messages of productive self-advocacy.

The case studies presented in this thesis seek to demonstrate examples of how Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar incorporate productive self-advocacy messages in their songs and public personas. I proposed a new way to investigate the current hip-hop landscape: productive self-advocacy. Productive self-advocacy messages do not offer hope for fairness and redemption; rather, they provide an understanding that the system will never change. They suggest that the Black community must shift their thinking to form a new system that values Black people. The community must be built from the inside, not the outside government. There were two goals for this thesis:

1. Using West and Lamar as case studies to understand a larger phenomenon about how hip-hop artists call for productive self-advocacy in their music
2. To understand how communication changes and develops in hip-hop as well as African-American culture.

¹⁵⁷ Jeff Chang and D. J. Kool Herc, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Reprint edition (New York: Picador, 2005), 263.

¹⁵⁸ "You Can Now Take a College Class on 'The Politics of Kanye,'" *Time*, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://time.com/4639422/kanye-west-college-course/>.

This thesis seeks to understand the role Black communication plays in shaping and responding to contemporary social protest in the form of hip-hop.

To understand the complex rhetorical strategies deployed by Kanye West, chapter one is a close-textual analysis of West's *Yeezus* album, public persona, and Yeezy fashion line. This chapter focuses on West as a cultural icon, hip-hop innovator, and his encoded message of exemplified productive self-advocator. He utilized production, rapping, fashion designing, and creation of videos/concerts as methods of sending messages of productive self-advocacy.

Despite West's overwhelming ego and extravagant lifestyle that he portrays in his music, the chapter explains that his actions and contributions outside of his music demonstrate a deeper need to connect and help the communities that assisted him to get to this place in his life. Chapter two focuses on Kendrick Lamar, who has always placed his Compton, California roots in his music. As opposed to Kanye West, Lamar concentrates his productive self-advocacy messages in his music. Utilizing Molefi Asante's three pillars of Afrocentricity (human relations, the relationship to the supernatural, and the relationship to self-being) in conjunction with constitutive rhetoric, this chapter explores how Lamar uses music to provide methods for achieving productive self-advocacy. Specifically, this chapter conducts a rhetorical analysis of "Alright." This song, which became an anthem for the #BLM movement, is explored to understand the complex and ranged meaning encoded in "Alright."

Implications

These case studies are symptoms of a larger trend in hip-hop today. This thesis is also important to solidify the need for scholars to investigate hip-hop and Black communication. The

work illustrated in this thesis calls for further investigation into contemporary hip-hop in contrast to the heavily concentrated works of 1990s hip-hop that focus on gangster rap. These works also focus on hip-hop in the 2000s, emphasizing gangster rap and the overabundance of wealth in music videos. However, this thesis seeks to demonstrate a shift in hip-hop which acknowledges and places value on Black people. Similarly, as productive self-advocacy has been demonstrated in the case studies presented in this thesis, scholars can use this concept to understand minority groups that seek to thwart the status quo.

Social protest groups like the #BLM movement seek to hold and utilize the power of their own without the dependence on white centralized authority; productive self-advocacy gives a name to that effort. The concept of productive self-advocacy can analyze the motive, strategy, and goals of the said artist of social movement. Additionally, with this knowledge, scholars can track the effect of the encoded messages on the audience; this audience analysis historiography can dramatically affect the future scholarship of cultural studies, communication studies, and media studies. However, it is equally important to use these case studies as a starting point to evaluate other artists in the future. Additionally, it is paramount not to pigeonhole this thesis for only hip-hop; encoded messages of productive self-advocacy have also appeared in social movements like #BLM and literary works like “Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nahisi Coates.

Although some scholars may believe that hip-hop is a limited art form with limited influence and restricted ability to change the status quo, as illustrated by Lester Spence, this project explores the alternate possibility. Spence’s *Stare in the Darkness* seeks to answer the question: How much does hip-hop influence the Black public’s perception of political issues? He

discovers that “rap consumption is correlated with attitudes that go against the American grain (attitudes toward the police are a notable example. However, in several instances, rap consumption is correlated with very mainstream American racial and gender attitudes.”¹⁵⁹ Intriguingly, Spence’s book explores issues that hip-hop artists and the community typically agree upon. However, what is missing and underdeveloped is inherent challenges to the Black community’s notions of identity. Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar are examples of self-reflexive challenges the community can do to support itself. As seen by protest movements of the day, there appears to be a link between the music and the movement. These messages correlate and respond to one another to illustrate the need for a focus on Black Nationalism and self-dependence. Contemporary communication scholarship must address how music and social movements in the current era works differently than the previous and Civil Rights Movement. Hip-hop and #BLM are just examples of the many movements and genres that exist in the global landscape.

In relation to the scholarship, this thesis begins with a track to look at a dystopian and educated generation of social protesters (including rappers) who learned from their predecessors. So, in other words, this thesis informs and expands current literature about social movements and, more specifically, hip-hop’s connection to social protest. Additionally, it informs the literature about the flexibility of music to influence the audience’s perceptions and positions. The literature rarely discusses the ability of hip-hop or music to criticize its listeners. Criticism is and can be used as a persuasive tool to influence the listener to self-reflect. Communication needs to continue to explore this type of persuasion. These case studies

¹⁵⁹ Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 6.

illuminate (at least in hip-hop) potential examples of encoded criticism for productive self-advocacy. Furthermore, this analysis also can form a new genre of communication: productive self-advocacy.

Scholars can ask the question: how do artists encourage or discourage productive self-advocacy? Productive self-advocacy goes beyond the scope of this thesis, #BLM, and hip-hop. This concept focuses on a community's ability to concentrate intrinsically to solve social issues. This concept can serve well to analyze minority communities and voices. Especially in the western hemisphere, revolution and overturning of dominant powers are especially poignant for social movements. These moments like Nat Turner's rebellion or the Haitian revolution, are underrepresented in the discourses. Productive self-advocacy will not create a revolution but can create a new way to observe history and set a new course for future discourses.

Recalling the past and future directions in the field of communication regarding hip-hop and its commercialization, this project seeks to complicate and problematize scholarly conversation. It is fair to make the statement that hip-hop does not merely report as the "Black CNN," but instead also criticize, discover, and set new trends in the community (or attempt to). This thesis entertains the idea that hip-hop artists can also produce new ideas to influence public conversations. As mentioned prior, due to the newfound notoriety of hip-hop artists, they are allowed new freedom to set agendas. Hip-hop artists are developing and growing into businessmen, the concept of selling out or even crossing over is nonsensical in this era due to the differing and expanded fan base of hip-hop. Artists are no longer constrained to just music.

They are public figures that may venture into other forms of business or fashion. Hip-hop and the field of communication alike are complicated and need to be explored further.

This thesis produces many questions that are needed and can hopefully be explored. A few questions that can be asked and explored are:

1. How many artists produce productive self-advocacy messages?
2. Can we trace the manifestation of productive self-advocacy through the life of hip-hop (does this message occur in other genres such as jazz, blues, soul, R&B)?
3. Do other non-Black-originated genres have productive self-advocacy messages?
4. What effect do encoded messages of productive self-advocacy have to set agendas in the Black community (if any)?
5. Are the youth more prone to adhere to these messages? These questions explore the power of communication (music) to take this project out of the theoretical and analytical to testable projects that illuminate hip-hop's connection to its listeners.

This project sought to answer as many questions as possible with the available means to explore those questions. To that point, this thesis had limitations that constrained further exploration and arguments. With only two case studies, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar, examples of productive self-advocacy were not explored to their fullest extent. These examples were by no means the exhaustive list of artists of this hip-hop era that have been encoding messages of productive self-advocacy. However, these prominent and well-known examples should lay a foundation for future research and exploration. Additionally, this thesis assumes that these messages are accepted, but that may not be the case. The analysis laid out in this thesis would have benefited from having audience analysis or interviews with people who listen

to hip-hop. Data from the people represented and constituted in these songs would have provided more insight into how these messages are decoded. It is also possible that these messages were not received in the way that I have described. Moreover, the project would have benefited from additional songs being included in the analyses from both artists, especially Kendrick Lamar. Lamar's entire album has encoded messages of productive self-advocacy; future research should analyze the album in its entirety. Finally, there needs to be a stronger female presence in the examples of productive self-advocacy; especially since #BLM began with queer Black women. It is important to understand or interrogate hip-hop women's opinions on these topics of social protest and equity.

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