

The Most Powerful Rap Song of Recent Times

“The Blacker the Berry” by Kendrick Lamar sends an efficacious and impactful message to the country

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The cover art of *To Pimp A Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar
Genius¹

Released in February of 2015, “The Blacker the Berry” by Kendrick Lamar, the second single of the lucrative project *To Pimp A Butterfly*, is one of the most powerful songs of the decade. Released during high racial tensions in the county, the song deals with a lot of sensitive issues.

King Kendrick vents his frustration with white-racist America and the injustices and institutionalized racism that drowns the country. Additionally, he comes to a revelation and questions the self-respect of himself and other African Americans like him. The track is even more fitting for recent times as the country is becoming more polarized. The intricate and very profound lyrics mixed with an addicting instrumental and a controversial message help Kendrick create the most powerful and impactful song of the decade.

The title of the track, “The Blacker the Berry,” is a reference to Wallace Thurman’s book, *The Blacker the Berry*. The complete phrase, “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” was originally meant to be a supportive and affirming message for African Americans.

¹ <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry-lyrics>

Kendrick twists it in the song and implies that the “blacker” you are, the more subject to racism and injustices you are. In the pre-chorus he also says “the blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot.” Here he is trying to exclaim the stereotype that racist people use to justify police shootings, the stereotype that all black men have and will use their guns destructively. The meaning of the title effectively portrays the inequities that African American’s experience.

“Everything black, I don't want black (They want us to bow)
I want everything black, I ain't need black (Down to our knees)
Some white, some black, I ain't mean black (And pray to the God)
I want everything black (We don't believe)
Everything black, want all things black
I don't need black, want everything black
Don't need black, our eyes ain't black
I own black, own everything black”

During the intro, Lamar is depicting the idea of double-consciousness². This concept is presented throughout the song and was created by the African-American writer W.E.B. Du Bois. It describes the internal conflict of black people in oppressive white America. He’s explaining that trying to show your pride for African heritage in an all-white society creates a lot of mental challenges as it is hard to fit into society doing such. Kendrick takes it to a more extreme level however and implies that in the mind of an African American they have to decide whether to stay safe and conform to the white society or be prideful of their heritage and reap the unfair consequences created by racist America.

In the first verse, Kendrick starts by discussing his realization of the unjust society at the age of 16³. Because of this realization, he even says “f*ck your friendship” to white America. He is implying that this relationship is only beneficial to one side. He continues and says “I’m African-American, I’m African.” This exemplifies the idea of double consciousness once again. Not knowing which culture to fit into, the psychological conflict. In the middle of the poetic verse, he asks the question

“You hate me don't you?”

This rhetorical question is repeated in the middle of each verse. This powerful quote is questioning the listener’s feelings towards Lamar’s race and culture. Kendrick feels like the world is against his people and community. He uses this throughout the song to develop the

² <https://dissectpodcast.com/2016/12/13/s1e15-the-blacker-the-berry-part-1/>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/kendrick-lamar-is-not-a-hypocrite/385384/>

idea that white Americans envy the creative black culture and hate the culture itself despite all it has given the country. He also uses it to exclaim his frustration with the unjust society and his feeling that everyone hates his race.

In the second verse, Kendrick adds on to his frustration. "I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society/That's what you're tellin' me, penitentiary would only hire me." He is explaining how black people are meant to feel "irrelevant" to this society because of how they are discriminated against and how their power is suppressed. He also touches on the unfair laws that cause extremely high incarceration rates for African-Americans. So many black citizens are put into jail, and the education system is also monetarily screwed over for them, that it feels like the only way they can get a job is the free labor that penitentiaries force.

"You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nia"**

He ends this verse like he ends the first. His is emphasizing the concept of institutional racism. The fact that this society and the stereotypes surrounding African-Americans created the perception of their communities and the idea that they are dangerous. Whether it's the influx of cocaine into black neighborhoods instigated by the CIA, or laws in the past to suppress the voice of African Americans such as the Jim Crow Laws, African Americans have been morphed into their perception by the white society around them. By "emancipation" Kendrick is referencing the emancipation proclamation by Abraham Lincoln which freed slaves in the south during the civil war. He is advancing the conviction that the white-racist American society has created the perception of African-Americans and has facilitated the violence that is sometimes apart of their culture, hence freeing the real n***a. The "real" being satirical as that isn't truly their culture but it is how they are forced to act because of the institutionalized racism that polarizes this country economically and socially.

Throughout the third verse, Kung Fu Kenny continues to explain how prideful he is to be black. He even says he is as black as the "heart of an Aryan." He is referring to the white supremacist Nazi's who genocided the Jewish People and juxtaposes their dark hearts with the color of his own skin. He also continues to exclaim his hatred and frustration towards white America by saying "excuse my French/ But f*ck you — no, f*ck y'all, that's as blunt as it gets." Later he even compares the bloodshed of the Zulu and Xhosa tribes in Africa, who have gone to war many times, to the rivalry and violence of the Crips and Pirus gangs in his hometown of Compton. This leads to the most pivotal point of the song.

The first line of all three verses starts with “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015,” and claims that after the song is over the listener will understand why he is saying such. This is quite literal as at the end of the song the reasoning for this conviction is displayed. During the end of the 3rd verse, Lamar starts suggesting that no matter how much he supports African Americans through ways such as preaching “with the Panthers,” a reference to the Black Power political organization in the 1960s The Black Panthers, or celebrating “February like it’s my B-Day,” a reference to Black History Month, that it doesn’t matter and is trivial. The next two lines are the most powerful of the song.

**“So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
When gang-banging make me kill a ni**a blacker than me?
Hypocrite!”**

Kendrick is referring to the shooting of an innocent 17-year-old African American kid, Trayvon Martin, by a white neighborhood watcher who felt he needed to out of “self-defense.” The killer was later acquitted of charges as well. This sparked outrage in the country as it was clear that the shooter was “scared” of the African American kid because of racist assumptions. This injustice caused African Americans to cry out in protest.

Lamar is saying that no matter how much he supports African Americans, he thinks he is hypocritical for weeping the unjust killing of an African American kid when he has killed a black person himself because of gang violence. He is asking a rhetorical question to all gangs that have African Americans in it, asking how can they cry for injustice for this boy when they cause the death of many black kids because of their violence themselves? He questions their and his own respect towards African-Americans.

The parallel structure of the verses adds to the lyrical genius of Kendrick Lamar. He includes the same beginning, middle, and ending lines in the first two verses and only changes the ending of the third verse. Each verse shows a slightly different perspective on the same issue and all show frustrations on the topic while including its own insight. The creativity of this structure and the recurring elements and theme that the song involves furthers the impact of it.

Kendrick’s examination of the topic of racism is remarkable. His disdain and anger at racism in our country is exclaimed. His references to countless examples of stereotypes and racist events creating the institutionalization of our society are voiced. The in-depth introspection he has to even call himself and others with similar experiences a “hypocrite” is

controversial and powerful. All this, accompanied with ingenious lyrics, a clever structure, and a politically apparent theme, produces a masterpiece.

“The Blacker the Berry” not only shed light on the racism in our country, but it also called for some to reflect on their pertinence and involvement that furthers this issue. “The Blacker the Berry” by Kendrick Lamar is the most powerful song of the decade

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