

CENTERS AND PERIPHERIES IN THE EXPRESSION AND ENACTMENT OF RELIGION, SOCIOPOLITICAL SIGNIFIYIN(G), & THE RECEPTION OF KENDRICK LAMAR'S *DAMN*.

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Abstract

This article examines the political and social struggles of rap music in the twenty-first century through the lens of Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN*. Focusing on the intersections of rap, religion, sampling, and the cultural politics of music, I examine how *DAMN*, as a model for identity, grants a way to navigate constructions and common understandings of religion, race, and politics in American hip hop culture and how rap music, as Loren Kajikawa defines it, "sounds race." By analyzing sampling, religion, and racial tension in the development and reception of *DAMN*, I argue that the album presents a revolutionary symbolic narrative of sonic resistance and struggle in the United States that ambiguates the cultural centers and peripheries of religion, artistic ownership, and American institutions. Although it cannot be essentialized with a single racial meaning, *DAMN* reflects, constructs, and seeks to explore the diversity of identities that ethnic minorities embody in this world—it is a sonic force that helps listeners to understand hip hoppers and their relationship to others. Exploring specific artistic decisions and paying attention to stylistic differences and transformation in the genre and culture of rap and hip hop, this article analyzes and interprets how artists create and sound identities in the realm of religion, music, and politics in what Daniel White Hodge terms the "wild."

Keywords

Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN*. — Hip Hop — Relation to Signifyin(g) — Religion — American Racial Tensions

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DAMN.: An Introduction

It's part of what makes listening to *DAMN.* a somewhat agonizing, if enlightening, experience: Are we damned by our existence in America? Or are we damned by our reliance on a theology that paints us a cursed people? Is it the inherent wickedness of America's racialized politics or our weakness as a people that we must overcome? Or is our faith predicated on a false binary that only feels like free will while leaving us judged by our nation and cursed by our God?¹

Music as commentary, as Rodney Carmichael illustrates, provides a framework for engaging socio-political dialogue. This quote from Carmichael's NPR article, "The Prophetic Struggle of Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN.*," speaks to the complex and differing experiences that one can have while listening to *DAMN.* Considering Carmichael's aforementioned questions, how might scholars interrogate the ways that *DAMN.* describes the regulation and empowerment of bodies? Whose bodies are being regulated and empowered, and why? What then might those scholars make of the religious and social context of this regulation and why it matters? Lastly, what are the potential outcomes of different approaches to textual and sonic interpretation?

This article examines the political and social struggle of rap music in the twenty-first century through the lens of Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.* Focusing on the intersections of rap and religion, signifyin(g), and the cultural politics of music, I plan to explore how *DAMN.* creates ways of navigating constructions and common understandings of religion, race, and politics in U.S. hip hop culture and how rap music, as Loren Kajikawa suggests, "sounds race."² By analyzing sampling, religion, and racial tension in the development and reception of *DAMN.*, I argue that *DAMN.* presents a revolutionary symbolic narrative of sonic resistance and struggle in the U.S. that ambiguates the cultural centers and peripheries in religion, artistic ownership, and institutions.

To develop a more expansive description of the intersection of hip hop and religion, I draw on the work of Daniel White Hodge in *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context* (2018). I will analyze how sampling and signifyin(g) are used in order to enact a political and social resistance in the album *DAMN.* by discussing the Fox News clips sampled within the tracks, "BLOOD," "DNA," and "YAH." and by considering the aesthetic ideology and cultural politics of the Fox News criticism that Lamar samples. Lastly, I will highlight centers and peripheries in the cultural politics of music, focusing on the album's win of the Pulitzer Prize award in 2018.

The concept of signifyin(g) makes apparent the ways in which the symbolic narratives embedded within *DAMN.* are part of larger rhetorical practices popularized by Black literary traditions. In his classic *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates describes the practice of signifyin(g) as a mode of coded communication intended to convey multiple meanings. Gates's discussion of the act of signifyin(g) is specific to Black in-groups that have access to specialized information that help them understand the individual, object, or concept that is being signified.³ Although the concept was originally

¹ Rodney Carmichael, "The Prophetic Struggle of Kendrick Lamar's 'DAMN.,'" *NPR Music*, December 12, 2017, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/12/568748405/the-prophetic-struggle-of-kendrick-lamars-damn>.

² Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015). See also Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Civitas Books, 2005).

³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University, 1988).

applied to literary and rhetorical practices noticed by scholars in Black studies, signifyin(g) has also been widely used to analyze hip hop sampling, jazz improvisation, and the blues.⁴ Musicologist Robert Walser, for example, applies signifyin(g) to Miles Davis's music to explain the social production and negotiation of meanings at play in his improvisational techniques.⁵ As will be seen, signifyin(g) illuminates how the use of certain samples in *DAMN.* connect to Lamar's ability to "sound race."

Rap and Religion

Daniel White Hodge presents hip hop theology as a missiological tool for engaging adult populations in the "wild."⁶ Hodge insists that hip hop provides a space for youth and emerging adults to (1) find God in a contextual manner, (2) have room for lament, ambiguity, doubt and the profane, and (3) find diversity within Christianity while remaining true to their own cultural heritage.⁷ The post-soul era that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s rejected dominant structures, systems, and metanarratives that tended to exclude ethnic minorities, especially those in the "hood." The post-soul era in this context does not solely adhere to linear functional narratives but instead questions authority, challenges the status quo, asserts self-identity in the public sphere, and questions group leaders.⁸ In this section, I argue that Kendrick Lamar is a post-soul rapper who helps articulate concerns for the oppressed and marginalized voices of the "hood" by fusing the sacred, secular, and profane in order to create an argument with and about God.

Lamar's mode of wrestling with such religious concerns exemplifies the expression of religion as a cultural code, or as the practice of signifyin(g). In *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning* (2019), various authors point to several patterns of Black meaning-making from across his four albums.⁹ As Anthony Pinn and Christopher Driscoll observe, "Lamar matters for the study of religion because of the manner in which his art and the topic of religion exist in a matrix that helps demonstrate the way

⁴ For more examples, see Christopher Jenkins, "Signifyin(g) within African American Classical Music: Linking Gates, Hip-Hop, and Perkinson" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 4 (2019): 391-400.

⁵ For Walser's analysis of Miles Davis's music, see Robert Walser, "Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis" in *The Musical Quarterly* (1993) 77: 343-65.

⁶ Hodge explains, "Hip hop culture is an urban subculture that seeks to express a lifestyle, attitude, and urban identity. Hip hop at its core--not the commercialization and commodity it has become in certain respects--rejects dominant forms of culture and society and seeks to increase a social consciousness along with a racial-ethnic pride. Thus, hip hop uses rap music, dance, music production, MC-ing, and allegory as vehicles to send and fund its message of social, cultural, and political resistance to dominant structures or norms. Therefore, hip hop theology is derived from this latter definition and from the bowels of oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. It rejects normative and simplistic responses to such issues[...] Hip hop theology is composed of a theology of suffering, a theology of community, a theology of a Hip Hop Jesus, a theology of social action and civil disruption, and a theology of the profane." Secondly, Hodge describes his use of the word "wild" in relation to Kanye West's song "No Church in the Wild" and how it is more of a symbolic term used "to describe things outside of tradition or even a stereotypical missiological lens rooted in Western Christianity." The purpose of his use of the term is to create a healthy deconstruction of what it currently means to be Christian in the United States. Daniel White Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 13.

⁷ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 90.

⁸ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 183.

⁹ Christopher M. Driscoll, Monica R. Miller, and Anthony B. Pinn, eds. *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning* (Routledge, 2019).

[Black] meaning is made.”¹⁰ Even outside disciplines such as musicology and music theory, Lamar’s music is known for his acts of signifyin(g) religion, religious expression, and religiosity.

By refusing to deal with binaries that are common in theology (especially Evangelical Christian theology), Lamar highlights and embraces the doubt, ambiguity, and complexity of being a hip hop missiologist.¹¹ In tracks of *DAMN.* such as “FEAR.,” Lamar addresses issues that are etched with hate, racism, misunderstanding, and overall disregard for Black people.¹²

Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Pain in my heart carry burdens full of struggle
Why God, why God do I gotta bleed?
Every stone thrown at you restin’ at my feet
Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Earth is no more, won’t you burn this muh’fucka?¹³

The idea of suffering, pain, and struggle is not new in the sphere of Black theology.¹⁴ Anthony Pinn questions the common notions of suffering and challenges the idea that a good God would allow suffering for a specific group of people.¹⁵ In “FEAR.,” Lamar asks these complex questions of God and looks beyond simple answers to explain the injustice, pain, and racism that minoritized people experience on a day-to-day basis. It is significant that tone policing holds no place in the missiological work of hip hoppers (the artists themselves as well as the broader community of audience, critics, etc.) such as Lamar. Explicit language is used to express the pain, which, as Hodge has noted, is a crucial element of post-soul missiology at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular.¹⁶ Speaking about the song “FEAR.,” in which he delves through the genesis and development of this emotion in his own life, Lamar said: “It’s not easy telling your truths and stating your fears from when you were seven, seventeen and a couple years ago. But I know at the end of the day, the music is not for me, it’s for somebody else.”¹⁷ In songs such as “FEAR.,” Lamar acknowledges the importance of owning fears in the process of overcoming them, and by speaking truth demonstrates his refusal to be silenced.

¹⁰ Driscoll, Miller, and Pinn, *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*, 6.

¹¹ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 181.

¹² Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 200. Hodge asks intriguing questions: “Lamar, in that sense, places these issues at the altar but without trying to create a solution rooted in a mythic imagination of harmony, accord, and unity so often given to those in impoverished conditions. No, Lamar takes all of those issues and holds them next to God and begins asking: Why? How long? Can we ever see peace? He also walks with the listener on a journey of fearing death, love, hate, violence, and ultimately God.”

¹³ Kendrick Lamar, Lyrics to “FEAR.,” *Genius*, accessed March 3, 2019. <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-fear-lyrics>. It is important to note that I do not provide a comprehensive analysis of the full lyrical content of the album, and the profundity of religious allusions, mostly rooted in passages from the Old Testament and the book of Deuteronomy, is beyond the scope of this paper. For hermeneutic comparisons of the album’s association with these texts, see Rodney Carmichael’s “The Prophetic Struggle of Kendrick Lamar’s *DAMN.*”

¹⁴ For more on suffering, pain, and evil within Black theology, see Anthony Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

¹⁵ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 93.

¹⁶ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 191.

¹⁷ “Kendrick Lamar, *DAMN.: Behind the Album*,” Lamar interviewed by Zane Lowe, Beats 1 radio, Apple Music, accessed March 10, 2019, [YouTube link no longer available].

Lamar further elaborated on his connections to speaking truths and to God in an interview with Zane Lowe: "I always felt like God used me as a vessel, whether to share my flaws, my intellect, my pain..." making it clear that he considers himself to be a conduit for a message larger than himself. "[I've] always been a vessel. I can say the nastiest thing on record, but I still feel like that's [being] a vessel. You need to hear it. I can't sugarcoat the reality."¹⁸ Here, Lamar is aligning himself and his music with post-soul ideology by developing a hip hop theology that is rooted in the wild, in the 'hood. In this ideology he is a voice, a Black male body that demands attention and forces religious people to focus on a theology that acknowledges the lived realities of Black people in the United States today.

As a messianic figure who embodies and expresses the oppressive conditions emanating from hegemonic institutions, Kendrick Lamar is a representation of "Hip Hop Jesuz." Hodge describes the concept of Hip Hop Jesuz, which has roots in African American Christology, as someone who constitutes the *figura* of Christ.¹⁹ Seen as a liberator and a mediator for Black people, Hip Hop Jesuz is a contextualized image of the deity figure Jesus through which hip hoppers can grow both spiritually and theologically. Hip hoppers have several pathways in which theological and spiritual growth can be experienced, including the persona of the artist themselves, performances and concerts, music, and spoken poetry. In the messianic narrative framework of *DAMN.*, post-soul missiologist Lamar can be seen as a Hip Hop Jesuz who "brings voice, shelter, identity, hope, dreams, love, and passion to a community seeking a higher consciousness" to those in the wild.²⁰

The "neo-secular" is a mixture of sacred and profane spiritual journeys and experiences in pursuing God outside spaces of traditional forms of worship, such as institutional religious centers like the Evangelical church.²¹ Post-soulists such as hip hoppers construct an ideology and theology in the sociopolitical conditions of the urban and ghetto domain, developing a contextual theology that is relevant for the current generation.²² Arguably one of the most notable effects of this contextual theology is its accessibility and inclusiveness. As Hodge points out, in the wild, sacred space embodies city corners, alleyways, clubrooms, cocktail lounges, and spaces/places that are extraneous to many who call themselves Christian, creating an inclusive and accessible soundscape for those hip hoppers who engage in theology.²³ Lamar's Hip Hop Jesuz persona reflects the fluidity of the secular and the sacred, and *DAMN.* gives its listeners space to flourish in neo-secular ways.

¹⁸ "Kendrick Lamar, *DAMN.: Behind the Album.*"

¹⁹ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 127-28.

²⁰ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 128.

²¹ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 183. The author describes how many of today's prominent evangelical theologians contend that Americans live in a secular culture. However, Hodge argues that in contextual relationship with post-soul ideals, spirituality reemerges and seeks to discover God in the ordinary. The neo-secular, then, is "a mixture of sacred and profane spiritual journeys pursuing God in a space outside traditional forms of worship."

²² Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 21.

²³ Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 184. Hodge goes into further detail on this, especially regarding Tupac, in other writings: see Hodge *Heaven Has a Ghetto: The Missiological Gospel and Theology of Tupac Amaru Shakur* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Academic, 2009); White-Hodge, "Methods for the Prophetic: Tupac Shakur, Lauryn Hill, and the Case for Ethnolifehistory," 24-37, in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, ed. Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); and Hodge, "No Church in the Wild: An Ontology of Hip Hop's Socio-Religious Discourse in Tupac's 'Black Jesuz'" *Nomos* 10 (2013): 1-5.

Reverse Troping and Signifyin(g) in Sampling

The racial categories that are applied to music obtain meaning through various social practices. In *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (2015), Loren Kajikawa argues that race materializes and becomes audible in music when distinct aesthetic ideologies become interconnected with particular ideas about social reality.²⁴ *Sounding Race* searches for a greater understanding of rap music as a locality of conflict and contestation, as a genre whose history is replete with revolutionary shifts guiding an era that embraces a multitude of contradicting identities that support an art form where sound plays a pivotal role. It is noteworthy that Kajikawa asserts that there is no straightforward connection between the racial identity of artists (or fans) and the meaning of musical texts. Instead, she believes that a sense of identity is created from the encounters that people have with music.²⁵ In this section, I consider how the sampling of a clip from Fox News and Lamar's criticism of the clip found in tracks such as "BLOOD.," "DNA.," and "YAH." are employed to ambiguate the roles of sampling in hip hop by subverting the clip's original message in order to use music as a weapon against white supremacist tropes.

As historian Michael Denning noted in his analysis of the relationship between music and politics, determining and differentiating the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies within "protest music" is a complex process.²⁶ In the history of hip hop culture and rap music, sampling has been used to generate diverse musical identities. From the earliest days of hip hop in the Bronx during the 1960s and 70s to the music of Kendrick Lamar today, breakbeats have provided producers a method to guide how sound is structured.²⁷ Rappers that came before Lamar such as Public Enemy, Dr. Dre, and DMX emphasized the "noisiness" of the beat by employing various sound effects in order to convey and articulate, or, as Kajikawa would say, "sound" race.²⁸ Similarly, the sampling of the Fox News clip embodies the cultural politics of the music by evoking the audible tension and conflict within the racist and classist undertones of Geraldo Rivera's description of hip hop today: "This is why I say that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years."²⁹ Rivera speaks to

²⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), xix, 115. Denning defines the term aesthetic ideology as the intrinsic political sensibility embedded in a text.

²⁵ Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 10.

²⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xix-xx, 115. As Denning explains, cultural politics is "simply the politics of letterheads and petitions, the stances taken by artists and intellectuals, the pledges of allegiance and declarations of dissent" that reveal the social consciousness of the individual artist.

²⁷ DJ Kool Herc first began isolating and featuring breakbeats at his parties in the South Bronx in 1973. Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 13.

²⁸ "Sonic characteristics that animated militant Blackness were rerouted and effectively transposed onto its sound effects of police sirens, gunshots, and screeching tires depicting a generation that still faces issues of discrimination." Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 95. Similarly, the track "XXX" from *DAMN.* goes from heavy harmony vocals to a downbeat rap over glitching, stuttering samples, to a frantic juncture where it erupts into a cacophony of screeching tires, sirens, and swelling basslines.

²⁹ Kendrick Lamar, Lyrics to "DNA.," *Genius*, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-dna-lyrics>. The sample was of Fox News host Geraldo Rivera criticizing Lamar's performance of "Alright" at the 2015 BET Awards. The specific lyrics referenced in the discussion are: "And we hate Popo, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure," which criticizes police brutality towards African Americans. For this footage, see Unruly YouTube Channel, "Geraldo Rivera Rips Kendrick Lamar's BET Award Set" (news clip, Fox News), accessed March 10, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3_hi8eWdbY..

the defiant, youthful, and “resilient” stereotyped image of rap music that still exists today.³⁰ The image of rap as “aggressive” and “dangerous” is part of an ongoing history of racial oppression in the United States. In the case of the group Run-D.M.C. in the 80s, publicists and defenders of their music praised and promoted rap as an authentically rebellious alternative to rock and roll. Although Run-D.M.C.'s music was being promoted, this form of marketing left rap music vulnerable to discourses that construct Blackness as a threat. Kajikawa describes inner-city gangs and the crack cocaine “epidemic” as two issues that became associated with the mainstreaming of rap—issues that news media, law enforcement agencies, and state and federal politicians then began to turn their attention to. These related issues became distinctly racially coded in public discourse as Black. For artists such as Run-D.M.C., these associations took form in mainstream media outlets, such as *People* magazine, that accused Run-D.M.C. of “attracting violent ‘ghettobred street gangs’ to public venues.”³¹ In a similar manner, Rivera’s quote about hip hop today perpetuates these stereotypes that have become associated with rap music.

The construction of the sample in “DNA.” and the dialogical interaction with it in “YAH.” emphasize the importance of sonic and textual discourse in relation to the racial politics about hip hop. Lamar articulates concerns for the oppressed and marginalized voices of the ‘hood while simultaneously sampling criticism of rap music that is etched with hate, racism, misunderstanding, and disregard for Black people. Similar to “FEAR.,” Lamar provides a voice for the oppressed in “YAH.,” but with a twist of irony and a sound of protest. Intertextuality and repetition are two ways in which Lamar famously engages in signifyin(g) to convey larger themes about race, religious expression, and politics in the United States.

Musicologist Felicia Miyakawa describes “reverse troping” as a practice that uses snippets of borrowed material to comment on new texts and music, as opposed to classic troping, which is a form of commentary in which new material comments on older material. Miyakawa states that “lyrical samples... reveal intertextual tensions between the borrowed source and the new song.”³² Such intertextual tension is illustrated in the track “DNA.” in the juxtaposition between the evocation of Geraldo’s voice and Lamar’s high-energy delivery of the lyrics “I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA.” Moreover, due to the placement of this reverse trope in a repetition of the chorus, “DNA” follows a general pattern

³⁰ It is interesting to note how these terms and ideas about rap music have been used against it, yet when other groups such as the Beastie Boys and other white rockers embodied this anti-establishment rebelliousness, there was no pushback. See Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 65-71. It is also worth thinking about the significance of racially coded genre expectations of music. As Kajikawa notes, Run-D.M.C.'s predicament was deeply ironic given that their publicists and defenders “were the same people currently praising and promoting rap as ‘aggressive,’ the kind of music that “says ‘fuck you’ to society,” an ‘authentically rebellious’ alternative at a moment when rock and roll had become ‘sleepy’ and ‘safe’ Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 71. See also William Cheng, “Black Noise, White Ears- Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis,” *Sounding the Break: Music Studies and the Political*, special issue of *Current Musicology* 102 (Spring 2018): 115-89, accessed March 9, 2019, <https://journals.library.columbia.edu/index.php/currentmusicology/article/view/5367/2596>. For detailed description of constructions of race as “soundtexts” (for the way that they become intelligible through an articulation of sonic and textual discourse), see Ronald Radano and Phillip Bohlman, “Introduction,” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Phillip Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.

³¹ “Despite their arguments, the association between rap and the threat of violence stuck, leading some venues to limit or stop booking rap acts, in part because of the higher insurance costs associated with them in the wake of the Long Beach melee. As Rose explains, “rap-related violence” became another “facet of the contemporary ‘urban crisis’ that consists of a ‘rampant drug culture’ and ‘wilding gangs’ of Black and Hispanic Youths.” Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 71.

³² Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 117.

Miyakawa has noticed in which samples of speeches, sermons, films, and television are strategically placed to extend a new meaning onto a song.³³ Kajikawa has noted that although hip hop producers often do manipulate samples with little regard for their original context or meanings, it is still important to acknowledge that it is also possible for producers to choose samples that comment on lyrics and, in turn, amplify other elements within a musical track. By sampling Rivera's quote, Lamar deliberately attempts to make a thematic and symbolic connection to the sampled source.

On the album's third track, "YAH." Lamar addresses Fox and Rivera again, but instead of the direct sampling and insertion of Geraldo's voice, Lamar provides commentary/response.

Fox News wanna use my name for percentage
 My latest news is my niece, she's worth livin'
 See me on the TV and scream, "That's Uncle Kendrick"
 Yeah, that's the business
 Somebody tell Geraldo this n**** got some ambition.³⁴

As a simulacrum of resistance, these words display Lamar's ability to comment and respond to the racist and classist allegations that Rivera makes about hip hop.

Beyond such examples of reverse troping in tracks that address Fox News, other moments of the album express Black meaning-making by signifyin(g) through the use of samples and iconography. At its conception, signifyin(g), as a rhetorical practice established by Afro-American literary scholars, was a cross-genre semiotic concept. The cross-genre nature of signifyin(g) supports its use within various Black spaces of cultural production, including but not limited to literature, music, and the visual arts. In many cases, these forms of expression are combined to add historical depth and complexity. For Kendrick Lamar, this is evident in the iconography of his music videos.

Lamar's music video for "ELEMENT." is a great example of the possibilities of signifyin(g) as a cross-genre practice. Paying tribute to renowned photographer Gordon Parks, Lamar re-creates some of Parks's most famous photos. Park's depictions of African-American life in the twentieth century and documentation of the Civil Rights movement have been memorialized by the Gordon Parks Foundation. Upon discovering Lamar's tribute to Parks in "ELEMENT.", the foundation announced a new exhibition showcasing Parks's photographs that inspired Lamar's music video.³⁵ The intertextual exchange between Lamar and the Gordon Parks Foundation illustrates the cultural significance of signifyin(g) as a mode of Black meaning-making, and of continuing cultural practices that were established in the 1970s and 1980s.

Signifyin(g) by sampling voices from other forms of Black expression reinforces ties between the past and present of Black meaning-making. "DUCKWORTH." is but one example that highlights the interplay between important moments in Black history. Producer 9th Wonder describes the samples in this final track of the album as having come "from three different countries, with three different generations, three different genres covering all parts of Kendrick's life involving three people: him, his

³³ Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap.*, 118.

³⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "YAH.," *Genius*, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-yah-lyrics>.

³⁵ For the Foundation's announcement, see Taylor Dafoe, "Kendrick Lamar Made an Homage to Gordon Parks-And Gets a Show at Parks' Foundation." on *Artnet News*, December 8, 2017, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kendrick-lamar-gordon-parks-1173287>.

dad, and Top Dawg.”³⁶ The three samples, from “Be Ever Wonderful” by Ted Taylor, “Ostavi Trag” by September, and “Atari” by Hiatus Kaiyote respectively, are thus seen by 9th Wonder as signifyin(g) samples that emphasize Lamar’s personal story-telling of a near-fatal encounter between his father and TDE CEO, Top Dawg. As Miyakawa notes, “sampling is one of the many bridges rap musicians [and producers] use to build a rap tradition firmly entrenched in the musical past.”³⁷ Within this album, Lamar uses the norms of hip hop and rap and their manipulation of sound (i.e. sampling) not only to question the constructs attached to the specific musical conventions and aesthetic ideology of the genre, but also to create a dialogue between and about historical temporality and sound. In this, Lamar uses reverse troping and signifyin(g) to express his intolerance for white supremacist allegations and his place in the history of Black musical traditions.

Centers and Peripheries in the Cultural Politics of Music

2018 marks the year that *DAMN.* made history by winning the Pulitzer Prize in Music.³⁸ Lamar has celebrated this win, and even embraced the “Pulitzer Kenny” background at his concerts during his tour in 2018. On the Pulitzer site page for Lamar’s win, a passage from *Pitchfork*’s author Matthew Trammell is featured: “Storytelling has been Lamar’s greatest skill and most primary mission, to put into (lots of) words what it’s like to grow up as he did—to articulate, in human terms, the intimate specifics of daily self-defense from your surroundings. Somehow, he’s gotten better.”³⁹ This passage highlights hip hop’s ability to incorporate nuanced readings of place, embodied knowledge of lived environments, and explicit references to sociocultural status in its narrative, or, more specifically in this case, the narrative of Kendrick Lamar’s *DAMN.*

As Hodge has shown in his argument for hip hop missiology, hip hop introduces marginalized voices and perspectives to address the problematic authority of whiteness that discernibly presides over America’s discourse on music, sound, and environment—a relatively homogenous and discriminative artistic discussion. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Lamar highlights what it means to him to be recognized in the academic world, and how “It’s one of those things that should have happened with hip hop a long time ago. It took a long time for people to embrace us—people outside of our community, our culture—to see this not just as vocal lyrics, but to see that this is really pain, this is really hurt, this is really true stories of our lives on wax.”⁴⁰ In this quote, Lamar refers to the importance of this storytelling ability, and more specifically to the importance of speaking to these concerns of pain and suffering in his community as well as the lateness of an academic institution such as the Pulitzer to acknowledge genres

³⁶ Chris Mench, “9th Wonder Breaks Down the Three Samples He Used on Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Duckworth.’” on *Genius*, April 8, 2020, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/07/825949896/9th-wonder-breaks-down-his-beats-for-kendrick-lamars-duckworth>.

³⁷ Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*, 122.

³⁸ “Recording released on April 14, 2017, a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life.” Official statement on “*DAMN.* by Kendrick Lamar,” on *The Pulitzer Prizes* website, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/kendrick-lamar>.

³⁹ Matthew Trammell, Review of “Albums: *DAMN.*, Kendrick Lamar, 2017” *Pitchfork*, uploaded April 18, 2017, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/23147-damn/>.

⁴⁰ Lisa Robinson, “The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar” [cover story], photography by Annie Liebovitz, *Vanity Fair*, uploaded June 29, 2018, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/06/kendrick-lamar-cover-story>.

such as rap. However, the recognition of *DAMN* in an academic world within this context is a complex issue. Herein lies a danger—if the only way white audiences see Blackness is through pain and suffering, the pain being perceived has potential to reify white supremacy. As for the acknowledgement of rap by the Pulitzer Prize Board, it is significant to point out that historically, this prize has mostly been awarded to classical compositions, with only three jazz compositions interspersed throughout: Wynton Marsalis's *Blood on the Fields* (1997), Ornette Coleman's *Sound Grammar* (2007), and Henry Threadgill's *In for a Penny, In for a Pound* (2016), making Kendrick Lamar the first non-classical, non-jazz winner in Pulitzer history.⁴¹

Musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg argues that genre is “better understood as a relational and hierarchical concept for addressing the way that music makers and music listeners negotiate shared expectations and cultural values. In other words, genres serve as sites where music’s meanings are contested.”⁴² In this way, genres represent more than a method of organization; in some cases, they represent revolutionary symbols. As a rap album (what many white audiences would consider to be “Black noise”), *DAMN* is a simulacrum of Black music that, by winning the Pulitzer, subverts the coded racialized expectations of an award-winning work within the hierarchy of a white patriarchal society.

Simon Ghebreyesus, a Yale student who was in attendance at Lamar’s Pulitzer award ceremony, shared his experience of being in a setting in which the boundaries of genre were being broken:

The juxtapositions of the situation were palpable: In a room full of mostly rich, white men in suits and ties, here was Kendrick Lamar, accompanied by Jay Rock and other family and friends, some dressed in sweatshirts celebrating Lamar’s Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE) record label, Los Angeles Lakers jerseys, and red TDE beanies. When you take a minute to consider the ways our spaces are policed—dress codes, noise violations—and the racial valence of such spatial politics, it made the moment even more jarringly poetic.⁴³

Many observers have questioned what this means for the future of the Pulitzer Prize, and whether classical and jazz music will lose an important platform with the acceptance and recognition of other genres within this institutional setting.⁴⁴ While the impact of this decision is still unfolding, what is clear

⁴¹ Simon Ghebreyesus, “Pulitzer Kenny: A Name Well-Deserved” on the blog, *Musiqology: Where Musics Past and Present Collide*, uploaded June 28, 2018, accessed March 2, 2019, <http://musiqology.com/blog/2018/06/28/pulitzer-kenny-a-name-well-deserved/>. Ghebreyesus also points out how it is possible that the genre limitation (as the Pulitzer is known for favoring classical works) has led to a dramatic lack of Black Pulitzer recipients. “In the 72 years the award has been handed out, Kendrick is only the fifth Black artist to hoist it. Miles Davis, Michael Jackson, and so many others were overlooked for the prize meant to reward ‘distinguished musical composition.’ A certain plateau—reserved for the highest excellence in music—was unreachable for Black artists and their art, itself.”

⁴² Kajikawa observes this in regards to disco and rap in *Sounding Race*, 44. See also Jeffrey Kallberg, “The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin’s Nocturne in G Minor,” in *19th-Century Music* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1988), 238-61.

⁴³ See Ghebreyesus, “Pulitzer Kenny: A Name Well-Deserved.” It is also noteworthy that in this article, Ghebreyesus aligns himself as a “disciple in the Church of Kendrick.”

⁴⁴ Columbia’s president Lee Bollinger (Columbia is the institution which holds the Pulitzer Prize) said America’s democracy faces its biggest challenge since the journalism and arts prizes began. “We are living in an era that demands of us a new understanding of and confrontation with the abuses of power,” Bollinger told the audience. David Beard, “Inviting Someone New to the Pulitzer Party,” on *Poynter*. news website, uploaded May 31, 2018, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2018/inviting-someone-new-to-the-pulitzer-party/>.

at this point is that *DAMN.* has crossed genre classifications, muddling the divisions so often prescribed for awards and recognition.

Conclusion

Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.* emphasizes how the articulation of sounds, symbols, and ideas are inherently linked to one's presentation of a sense of identity. However, an understanding of musical meaning requires knowledge about the context in which the music emerged, the language used to create discourse about the music, and the ways institutions in authoritative positions interpret the importance of a work. Hip hop culture and rap music have been points of contingency in which racial difference can be heard and expressed. Although it cannot be essentialized with one single racial meaning, *DAMN.* reflects, helps construct, and seeks to explore the diversity of identities that ethnic minorities, and specifically Black people, embody in this world and how bodies can be regulated and empowered. It is a sonic force that helps listeners understand the meaning of the existence of hip hoppers and their relationship to others within the social context of the regulation of religious bodies in the wild. Exploring the specific artistic decisions and paying attention to stylistic difference and transformation in the genre and culture of rap and hip hop in terms of textual and sonic interpretations, we can continue to analyze and interpret how artists create and sound identities in the realm of religion, music, and politics in the wild.

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