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“A Bone to Pick:” Hip-Hop Culture’s Claim for Academic Exploration

I won’t mince words—in those of Kendrick Lamar: “I’ve got a bone to pick.” As a college undergraduate, the wall of literary academia looms before me. It’s intimidating. The ideas being proposed, expounded upon, and transformed debate everything from life to death—all we know, and all we do not know. It’s unconquerable. The written works deemed educationally “important” are far more in number than can ever be read in a lifetime. But more significantly (for this essay), it’s white. Canonical literature is oversaturated with old, wealthy, white men who write things whiter than the sparse white hair sporting from their big white heads stacked on their big white bodies. To get literary—canonical literature is whiter than the picket fence Tom Sawyer was supposed to paint for punishment[[1]](#footnote-1). Whiter even though Tom’s cronies gave their fence three full coats, whiter because the scholars that made this wall didn’t paint it white—they built it that way. Or, to be more direct, the Black slaves that built it for them used immortal white bricks under their masters’ orders. It’s the Blacks that metaphorically make up, and literally make the White. This wall I speak of is, just like Ralph Ellison wrote in *Invisible Man*, only the whitest white because of the added splash of black—that is the greatest irony of the whole situation[[2]](#footnote-2). What are the bits of Black culture that hold a place in the White wall of academia, you ask? Certainly a few works from the Civil War era have been deemed legitimate, while Martin Luther King Jr. and his Civil Rights contemporaries reside on the recent side of history. But I would direct your attention to what lies in the middle of these two book ends: The Harlem Renaissance.

This is where intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and authors like Langston Hughes take up their crosses, which will eventually be given to the aforementioned Ellison. I think it safe to say that somewhere along your education you’ve encountered one or more of these fine Black gentlemen and their ideas. I’ll give your schooling the benefit of the doubt, and say that it probably gave you the pleasure of reading *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. I will also accredit academia with exposing you to Maya Angelou—but I’d venture to say you know nothing more than her simple existence, and her talent for lyricism. Your knowledge of that one Pinterest post that quoted Angelou is more complete than your knowledge of the actual Angelou. After this, academics starts to go out on a limb. For the sake of embodying a generation obsessed with irony, let’s just say this limb is from a tree that is a particular species of the genus *Populus*, namely the poplar[[3]](#footnote-3). They start relatively safe with Zora Neale Hurston, who published works that centered around the poeticism of Black culture and language. They venture out further with Octavia Butler, whose science fiction pushed the boundaries of sexuality and race to the next level. And most recently, the academics have taken another step onto foreign territory by entitling Nella Larsen to her own Black brick. They finally figured it was Black enough to whiten their impeccable wall. But—and this is a big but(t)—I think they might have gone too far out on the limb with Larsen; I see the poplar branch quiver and start to splinter under the weight of their ethnocentric, ignorant bodies. They underestimated the impact Larsen would have on their perfect wall of Whiteness—which has turned the most delicate shade of off-white. And yet in the grand scheme of things, this is a small victory. We’re beginning to make progress, but why should we stop now? We should not. We *cannot*.

People think we should, though. That’s my bone to pick. They think because we have finally added the female Black struggle to the list of important literary themes, we have broken even. Some people think we can and should stop now. I’m not trying to discredit any of the aforementioned authors and their contributions to society. On the contrary, I argue that we can build on the base they have given us by admitting an even larger, more marginalized group of people who need their voices heard. While Harlem may have been the center of blossoming Black culture in the first half of the twentieth century, society has largely ignored—if not demonized—the city of Compton. Home to some of the greatest advocates for racial equality beginning in the 1960’s and continuing through today, Compton is Harlem’s younger, outwardly uglier brother. But I’d like to help you all find the prince in the Hippity-Hop frog of the Blood-run, Crip-crippled city in the South of Los Angeles.

My first task then, is to establish Hip-Hop culture as just that—a culture, just as rich in history as the mainstream White America we were taught about as children. After this, when I convince you that Compton authors are as legitimate as people like the newly un-marginalized Larsen, I will provide close analysis of lyrics from Kendrick Lamar—one of today’s leading Hip-Hop authors. While Larsen and her contemporaries can be said to expose one side of the disenfranchised coin of the Black experience through their “high-culture” literature, it can be said that Lamar’s “low-culture” rap exposes the other, more rusted and damaged side. And ultimately, if we are ever to transform this wall into the balanced shade of grey it should be, I seek to undermine the frightened fools who insist on its Black for White nature. These whitewashers teeter dangerously on their breaking branches, frightfully flinging around claims that Hip-Hop reflects a Black dysfunctional ghetto culture and destroys America’s values. And they—and you, I’m sure—are confused as I applaud them slowly, loudly, beaming with amusement because I know they are right. One hundred percent correct. Unequivocally accurate. But what they don’t realize is that their case against Hip-Hop will bring them crashing down from the poplars. What you don’t realize is that they twist the truths of Hip-Hop into terrible tall tales in order to scare off subordinate educators and concerned parents. Underneath it all, they are just afraid of what Hip-Hop might do to their wall—and they should be. Lamar’s got a bone to pick. I got a bone to pick. Let’s pick(et).

Your current ideas on the history of Hip-Hop and its artists probably hit all The Notorious, B.I.G. names in The Game. You’ve got 2Pac and you’ve got P. Diddy from the past, and you know that in the Future, Kanye West and Drake are going to continue to be prominent rappers. If you saw *Straight Outta Compton*, you maybe know a little about N.W.A.—a prominent West Coast rap group I will be addressing later—but anything further than that is Pusha(-T-)ing it. You might have guessed there was more to the genre of rap music, but you probably just didn’t care. I hope all this talk of white picket fences and bigoted buffoons at the head of academia has made you a little defensive—just enough to make you care *now*, because I’m here to tell you there’s more. Yes, there’s more to Hip-Hop than Rap. Journalist Jeff Chang wrote a whole book on it called *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. His “Loop 1” and “Loop 2” masterfully detail the four pillars of Hip-Hop (DJing[[4]](#footnote-4), B-boying[[5]](#footnote-5), graffiti[[6]](#footnote-6), and MCing[[7]](#footnote-7)) and the New York[[8]](#footnote-8) backstory that we know so little about, we choose to ignore. I could go on about how Chang demonstrates these pillars’ distinct contributions to a history that is a mixture of cultures and perspectives, but unfortunately I only have the space to discuss the misunderstood art of MCing, also known as Rap[[9]](#footnote-9).

So let’s begin with Los Angeles in general. Chang first introduces the city to us on page 210 through the words of rapper Tracy “Ice T” Morrow: “Niggas on my left and niggas on my right/Yo I Cr-Cr-Cr-Cripped every nigga I see/If you bad enough come fuck with me.” These unrecorded rhymes provide us with the most prominent theme of West Coast Rap: the gang rivalry[[10]](#footnote-10). The Crips, founded in 1969, and the Bloods (aka the Pirus), founded in 1972 originally to provide protection from the Crips, took over the streets with their blue versus red war[[11]](#footnote-11). But it wasn’t always that violent. It wasn’t always a purple stream of blood from dead Black bodies. It started as a response to what Hip-Hop scholar Eithne Quinn calls a “moral panic” (46). She writes in her explanation of Gangsta Rap that conservatives (our old white fools again) “introduced horribly inappropriate sentences for possession of crack cocaine” in the wild spirit of the war on drugs (46). Their fear of rampant substance abuse generated what Cordozar Calvin “Snoop Dogg” Broadus, Jr. called “a vicious cycle, a revolving door,” that had crippling consequences for the convicted youth. Quinn summarizes a scholarly article[[12]](#footnote-12) by John Hagan and Ronit Dinovitzer when she writes, “Not only does imprisonment remove earnings, both legal and illegal, and strengthen the inmate’s connection with gangs and illegal activity, but also youths with criminal records were found to have ‘exceptionally’ low chances of employment thereafter” (46). So let it be known that these white fools were the source of their own demise, their xenophobia muddling perceptions and fabricating false judgments. I am hesitant to call them fools even, for fear of alleviating them of the responsibility they had in the destruction of countless young Black lives, which were led ignorantly misguided, but the only way known. Quinn laments, “In 1990, 33 percent of young black males in California were somewhere in the criminal justice system’s ‘revolving door’” (47). That sounds like a nicer way of commenting on an eternal hell by which the black youth was held captive. Here, I am not trying to absolve the gangs of their sins, I am simply positing that there is more to the base, brutal image that often defines them—namely, the impact of the Los Angeles law enforcement. When Chang discusses the LA street wars, he cites ex-Crip Sanyika Shakur who said that the gangs rose out of “the ashes and the ruins” of history (307). The gangs were birthed as red and blue phoenixes, beautiful and new with the intent to protect and serve the people whom the police would not. But, as previously mentioned, they turned violent and competitive, erupting into fiery flames themselves. The new phoenix borne from these ashes would attempt to reconcile its distraught realities with America’s popular narrative. The new phoenix would be named N.W.A.

An abbreviation for “Niggaz Wit Attitudes,” N.W.A. was founded in the wreckage of Compton by Kim “Arabian Prince” Nazel, Andre “Dr. Dre” Young, O’Shea “Ice Cube” Jackson, and Eric “Eazy-E” Wright. Antoine “DJ Yella” Carraby and Lorenzo “MC Ren” Patterson would join the cast of all-Compton natives on their Hip-Hop adventure. It all began because Young and Jackson weren’t allured by the supposed wealth and prestige gang membership brought; they could see the flames and destructive violence of the fire that birthed them. Chang describes Jackson in the summer of 1988 as “hopeful” that “his architectural drafting degree from the Phoenix Institute of Technology might get moms and pops off his back for a few months” during which he could “write some rhymes, make some records, cash some checks and soon move out of his folks’ house” (299). Notice that Jackson attended college—ironically named “Phoenix”—and received some sort of degree, even if it was to please his parents. Chang makes it clear that “[a]ll [Jackson] ever wanted to do in life was rap,” which demonstrates his passion for writing and performing that he hoped to turn into a viable source of income (299). Notice that Jackson plans to use this income to seek out independence from his parents, as other mature adults do. The unfortunate reality is that Jackson’s inner character was not a reflection of his outer environment. The neighborhood he grew up in was the battleground for the drug war’s biggest raids, like “the LAPD’s Operation HAMMER 1988-1990, a police super sweep of suspected crack houses and homes, which resulted in the arrest of 1,500 people” (Quinn 47-48). She continues, “Many were picked up merely for ‘looking suspicious,’ their civil liberties infringed as they were forced to spread-eagle” after which “many were charged with petty offenses” (48). You might be thinking, “Ohhh, so this is what ‘Fuck Tha Police’ is about,” in which case, you’d be correct. The Jackson and Patterson authored anthem was not simply a disturbing defamation of the Los Angeles Police Department, it was an even more pointed reflection of the disturbing defamation Black males suffered at the hands of the LAPD. Is it still antagonizing? Certainly. Is it still excessive? Perhaps a bit. Does that make it any less valid? No. I’m assuming anyone who would say yes to that question stopped reading this essay the moment I started talking about fat, old White men with white hair and White agendas. I’m sorry they left, because this is the point in the paper where I have convinced you I have a point—more importantly that Hip-Hop, and Rap as a direct extension of Hip-Hop, are not without cause either. With the discussion of Compton’s and N.W.A.’s history, I have proved that Rap is founded in political activism—a need to express the underground struggle of America’s ignored and vilified. I have proved to you that MCs have something to say, something underneath the quick quips and often rude rhymes. I have proved to you that we must begin to put Hip-Hop’s artists on the same plane as the aforementioned literary scholars if we are ever to even out this educational imbalance. So let’s begin.

While I wish I could cover all of Lamar’s artistry, I will limit my focus to Lamar’s album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* whichpresents and even perpetuates the pitfalls of a gang-run society, only to reject the allure of the women, the money, the violence, and the booze in the end. Like his predecessors and idols in N.W.A.[[13]](#footnote-13), he has a bone to pick about the damage America has done to him—he too is aware of the role that white law enforcement played in the creation of the LA gangs. But unlike his predecessors in N.W.A., Lamar draws from real experiences in gang life. It seems his best friends from the hood were masters at what he later calls “The Art of Peer Pressure.” The internal conflict between his gang-affiliated alter ego “K-Dot” and the real Kendrick Lamar, and the latter’s triumph over the former, is the central theme of his hugely successful second studio album. To understand the disparity in identity that Lamar reveals here, we must realize the album in the context of its subtitle: “A Short Film by Kendrick Lamar.” He constructs a retrospective narrative that depicts a teenager’s conflicted life; half of the songs on the album present one side of the conflict, namely, the sexualized, materialistic, bloody, and boozy streets of Compton.

The opening track “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” provides context for K-Dot’s love interest and sexual fantasies. He blissfully recalls, “Ass came with a hump from the jump she was a camel/I want to ride like Arabians.” This is in reference to Sherane’s derriere and its likeness to the hump of an Arabian camel, which notably only has one hump, not two. Sexual fantasies and the temptation of women. Check. The third song “Backseat Freestyle” gets so nuanced that even pop culture magazine *Rolling Stone* couldn’t communicate its complexities. A one paragraph review provided on the 2012 release concludes, “Every so often Lamar lets loose a wild boast – ‘I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower/So I can fuck the world for 72 hours’ – but the triumphalism seems warranted” (Rosen). Author Jody Rosen correctly identified this particular lyric from “Backseat Freestyle” as a boast, but like many of you probably did, he entirely missed the sentiment behind the self-inflation. Rather than being authentically arrogant, K-Dot is making his clearest attempt to establish himself as a real gangsta. It can be summed up with the second half of the hook, where he states, “All my life I want money and power/Respect my mind or die from lead shower.” On the fifth song “Money Trees,” Lamar continues K-Dots approval and desire for the accumulation of wealth. He says, “Money trees is the perfect place for shade and that’s just how I feel,” and he admits that he enjoys living with the comfort of cash. But at the same time, it’s only shade, and Lamar also knows that sometime he will have to come out into the sun and face the heat. And that is precisely what he does with the other half of his album.

Because Lamar doesn’t split the album into two distinct halves that represent the distinct personalities of K-Dot and Lamar, the intertwined songs constantly conflict each other and show the simultaneous recognition of, rejection of, and participation in his gang friends’ activities. “The Art of Peer Pressure,” while it progresses the narrative with a story about K-Dot’s first federal offense, also gives us the first look into Lamar’s real personality. In the back of his friend’s car, K-Dot brags about “Smoking on the finest dope,” while he “Drank until [he] can’t no more,” but Lamar cuts in, claiming “Really I’m a sober soul but I’m with the homies right now.” Ah yes. How much clearer could it be? Lamar is an adolescent boy who feels the pressure of his peers, and wants to be accepted by the only friends he has. Therefore, although the real Lamar would never participate in substance abuse, K-Dot must maintain his bad boy persona. This introspective view on K-Dot’s behavior is even more prominent in the ninth track titled “Swimming Pools (Drank).” In his first verse, he recalls his childhood “‘round some people livin’ their life in bottles,” knowingly stating that “some people like the way it feels, some people wanna kill their sorrows,” while “some people wanna fit in with the popular, that was my problem.” Lamar acknowledges his own weakness as K-Dot, and seems to understand well the appeal of alcohol. Even with all this in his head, K-Dot gives in when his peers challenge him: “Nigga why you babysitting only two or three shots?” And so begins the night of drunken debauchery in order to try and forget his recent crime spree. Often, this hook mistakenly becomes the focal point of the song, and listeners, yourself included, often denounce it as an immoral proponent of alcoholism. It feels dirty and indulgent, but the introduction of Kendrick’s conscience presents the internal conflict that reveals the flaws of the very culture he is bending to. His mind says, “I am your conscience, if you do not hear me, then you will be history, Kendrick.” On the outside, K-Dot is throwing back shots, trying to fit in with the guys around him, but on the inside, his true identity as Lamar shines through with a wise warning. It speaks to his feelings on the problems with modern drinking, namely the idea that drinking’s only purpose is to get drunk, instead of a pleasurably “babysitting” a small cup.

“Compton,” the conclusion of Lamar’s twelve-track album, features N.W.A. cofounder and fellow Compton native Dr. Dre. Formula IV’s “What’s This World Coming To” is sampled throughout, but the lamentations of “What’s this world coming to?/How long can this go on?/People must face that were all one human race” are left behind for more a hopeful attitude. Lamar begins, “Now everybody serenade the new faith of Kendrick Lamar/This is King Kendrick Lamar.” He wants everybody to join him in rejoicing over his newfound persona: the poetic, mature individual that is the result of all his past struggles and experiences. Truly, Lamar emerges as King of the hip-hop genre, but this is also a subtle nod to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., who was referenced in an earlier track “Backseat Freestyle.” As Lamar and Dre take turns speaking realities of their beloved hometown, the former gives recognition to the latter, pointing out that “We can all harvest the rap artists of N.W.A.” even though “America target our rap market, as controversy and hate.” Lamar credits Dre as a father figure of sorts, who was able to provide him with inspiration and advice having already gone through Lamar’s struggle from the bottom; but, he stresses that the influence of N.W.A. is not one of sole importance to hood adolescents, but to all of America as a representation of the underrepresented.

And here is where our old white fools come in. Hip-Hop scholar Tricia Rose accurately deems that Hip-Hop’s reflection of Black dysfunctional ghetto culture, and Hip-Hop’s destruction of America’s values as two of the biggest claims against the legitimacy of Hip-Hop. I hope by now it’s clear that Hip-Hop undoubtedly reflects Black dysfunctional ghetto culture—from N.W.A.’s “Fuck the Police” to Lamar’s “The Art of Peer Pressure,” these artists are rapping about the only bloody, conflicted realities they know to be true. The fact that we as middle class, American citizens look at this narrative and are so wholly repulsed and offended by it means something is wrong. It means the White academics have succeeded in convincing us that Hip-Hop’s nature is destructive by choice, when it has been White America all along that gave Hip-Hop no other alternative. And I hope by now, that as you see these academics scramble to explain why the perpetuation of an underrepresented group of people—our fellow citizens—is a bad thing, you hope they fall off their branches, too. And they will. Because the second claim that Hip-Hop destroys America’s values? True beyond all reasonable doubt. But ask yourself what American values are. They are arbitrary, ambiguous things that have somehow become analogous to good, prosperity, and success. Who cares who owns a home or not? What if I want to live in an apartment in the city, where there isn’t a lawn for me to mow, or a picket fence for me to paint? What if I don’t want a family? Does that make me a bad person? And in Compton’s case, what if the society around you has bred a city filled with gangs, where fathers are killed, and sons and daughters are raised by mothers. Is their tattered family a sign of immorality? Is the absence of white picket fences from their brown lawns a sign of barbarity? I hope not. If you answer with a no, thank you. I have done my job. If you answer with a yes, come find me. I got a bone to pick.

Works Cited

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1. It should be noted that the “white picket fence” is often a quintessential symbol and trope of the “American Dream.” The concept is a construction of the predominantly white, ethnocentric middle class which also promoted often ambiguous and arbitrary things like “family values,” and home ownership. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Ellison’s novel, the unnamed protagonist known as an “invisible man” spends time working at The Liberty Paints Plant, a factory that produces “Optic White,” which they claim is the whitest paint in the nation. The protagonist is shocked to discover later that part of this process includes adding dark, murky chemicals that somehow leave the paint whiter than before. This is one of the most prominent symbols regarding the subjugation of Black workers in a White-run world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In American History, poplar trees were often used for the lynching of Black people. The most well known pop culture reference to the poplar is “Strange Fruit,” a poem originally published by Abel Meeropol in 1937, then performed and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. Hip-Hop artist Kanye West samples the anti-lynching anthem in his own song from *Yeezus*, entitled “Blood on the Leaves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. DJing was the result of the “insatiable curiosity” of people like the aforementioned Bronx boy Kool Herc, who spent their time “theorizing the turntable and the mixer . . . trying to figure out how to turn beat-making and crowd-rocking into a science” (Chang 112). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. B-boying evolved from “forms of Angolan and Brazilian capoeira, Cuban Rumba, or Chinese gung fu,” and turned into an art that allowed its perpetuators like Crazy Legs and Ken Swift to “[write] their own generational narrative” (Chang 116, 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Graffiti was about more than just a dominating masculinity, and it gave artists like LADY PINK a way to learn how to “stand strong against that kind of adversity and that kind of prejudice,” and how to “be strong, carry your own point, have a lot of endurance” (Chang 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. MCing (Rap) was a collective effort of poetic genius between word smiths like Melvin “Melle Mel” and Nathaniel “Kidd Creole”, who “devised ever more intricate lines, finishing each other’s rhymes, throwing in unexpected melodies and harmonies” (Chang 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chang spends the first half of his book on New York’s borough “The Bronx” as the birthplace of Hip-Hop culture. For the purpose of my discussion of Kendrick Lamar and his West Coast background, I will be focusing on the latter half of his history of Rap as it applies to Compton. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It should be noted that the extensive footnotes provided here mimic the nature of the Rap lyrics I intend to analyze, which often have pages of explanation and interpretation attached to singular words or phrases. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The prominence of gangs in LA and their influence on Hip-Hop mirrors the gangs of the Bronx and their contribution to the culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Crips distinguished themselves by wearing blue, while the Bloods distinguished themselves by wearing red. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The article entitled “Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners” was published in The University of Chicago Press’s *Crime and Justice* on pages 121-162 of the 1999 Volume 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In a 2013 interview with *GQ* Magazine, Lamar cites Dr. Dre, leading founder, member, and producer for N.W.A. as one of the four most important MC’s that “made” him. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)