
Music Review: Analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s 2016 Grammy Performance

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Scan to watch Kendrick Lamar's 2016 Grammy Performance

Kendrick Lamar’s 2016 Grammy performance medley of his songs “The Blacker the Berry” and “Alright” – akin to a protest march and laden with powerful and moving imagery – is coming from a place of exhaustion. It speaks volumes regarding the plight of Black Americans and is a stark representation of the entrenched violence perpetrated against them by the United States government, allowing regular White folks to rape, murder, and pillage Black bodies without repercussions (Anderson 2016).

Using three key images from Lamar’s performance in the order in which they are presented – incarceration, bonfire, and Compton/Africa – this analysis will provide historical context and background regarding the racialized policies to which each image refers. These are stories that are not often told, certainly not in a historically accurate way. Lamar’s telling of these stories may be the first time certain audiences have seen these histories represented in a way that rings true for their own lived experience. The facts informing these images are often not represented accurately. I aim to reveal their deeper meaning: how the situation got that way and how the system continues to be misrepresented.



Image 1 Key Imagery from Kendrick Lamar's 2016 Grammy Performance

INCARCERATION

The powerful imagery of Kendrick Lamar on a chain gang, and his band in jail cells, will be explored first. Lamar uses the racial project of the prison system to expose the impact of incarceration

as it has led to inequalities, discrimination, and segregation. The imagery of Lamar surrounded by jail cells and a chain gang is powerful because it points to systemic racism that perpetuates the disproportionate number of Black people stuck in the industrial prison system (Smith 2012). Lamar is bringing to light that this is still happening 400 years later and that racial inequalities are what perpetuates this historical system. This imagery showcases how Black men, of all statuses, experience the brutality of the prison system, so when Lamar is breaking the chains, which is a significant and integral part of this performance.

Lamar's performance may be a call to action for Black Americans to stay 'woke' and stay vigilant (Zavattaro and Bearfield 2022). The rigid, intractable, and seemingly immovable social structure that rejects change must also be recognized for how it perpetuates white supremacy and resists movements like Black Lives Matter (Smedley and Smedley 2012). To create change there must be a call to action to write anti-racist policies and laws that protect the most vulnerable, and resist the misappropriation of Black culture, such as weaponizing the word woke (Zavattaro et al. 2022). Every individual has the opportunity to do something, such as lead, activate, march, protest and unite. This could look like organizing in your community to end gang violence and police violence (Zavattaro et al. 2022). It could look like starting a neighborhood clean-up program for teens. These strategies can change the trajectory of Black lives, neighborhoods, and outcomes shaping Black futures (Sojoyner 2013; Williams and Lewis 2024). Lamar understands the industrial prison system as the new slavery for Black people that perpetuates poverty while maintaining the status quo for the wealthy and white through "cheap labor" of "Black bodies" (Hammad 2019).

BONFIRE

Second, the bonfire image relates to 400 years of racial terror, slavery, and oppression of Black people alongside Indigenous tribes and other people of color - A.K.A. BIPOC (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Lamar is being didactic through his message that systemic and institutionalized racism perpetuates the plight of Black Americans. The fire, on the one hand, represents KKK terrorism against Black people: the cross burning, the lynchings, and the

ethnic cleansing of entire towns of BIPOC (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Lamar's performance tells us that racism is not dead simply because the majority of White people say they are not racist (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Additionally, the imagery of the fire is saying there will be more Civil unrest because poverty leads to violence. The fire represents the systems in place throughout American history, which have manifested through events like the Tulsa, Oklahoma massacre of 1921 and the Philadelphia bombing of 1985. White supremacy evolved to perpetuate these draconian systems into a new form of Jim Crow, which is color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Furthermore, the racism that plagues Black Americans spills over in the form of racial remittances (Zamora 2022), causing immigrants to have racial baggage full of stereotypes about Black people. Prejudice happens long before they have encountered a Black American. This system speaks volumes to the impact that colonialism has on people outside the U.S. (Zamora 2022). It is a strong possibility that racial baggage is the fuel that helped more than 60% of Hispanics make the decision to choose a racist, divisive, xenophobic, felon over a more than capable, highly educated, strong, effective Black woman for President. With that in mind, Black Americans must join Lamar's vigilant fight against the racial divisiveness that plagues this nation (Williams and Lewis 2024).

AFRICA/COMPTON

The final of the three analyzed images, Compton stamped in the middle of Africa, sheds light on the categorizing of Black people. Segregation, discrimination, and inequality happen in Compton and wherever Black people call home. Such categorizing leads to systemic racism and racial inequality for Black Americans. Compton stamped onto Africa signifies the unity necessary to dismantle systems like structural racism and police brutality. The image of Africa/Compton denounces the myth of scientifically proven biological differences that Black people are inferior to white (Smedley and Smedley 2012) by reminding the audience that we all come from the DNA of the same African woman. Finally, the West African dancers joined by the prisoners represent unity, ambition, and advancement of Black people that fueled the Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement (Anderson

2016). Through this image of Compton in Africa, Lamar is imploring Black people to never forget that Africa is where they came from (hooks 2015).

LYRICAL CONTENT

At another point during the performance, Lamar identifies the United States government's discrimination, couched within the guise of biological determinism, to which Black people were subjected (Smedley et al. 2012). Specifically, the lyrics refer to the size of his nose and dark complexion. Lamar confronts Black Americans' racialization, as it testifies to color-blind racism's maintenance of the status quo. Indeed, white rage has led to 400 years of physical labor and mental anguish of the Black race (Anderson 2016). Lamar's performance reminds us of the countless lives and generations destroyed by Anglo-settler colonialism (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014).

CONCLUSION

Stereotypes created by White America have misrepresented Black people and such racialization has led to institutionalized and systemic racism, as held up by the racist laws and policies of the U.S. government. Lamar pushed the envelope with his 2016 Grammy performance, sending a didactic message by revealing the ethnocentrism that White America has used to beat down the Black race (Smedley and Smedley 2005). In doing so, Lamar exposes Black Americans' of-repressed sentiment: that the social structures supporting American terrorism have perpetuated a system of segregation and inequality. Racism has not ended because Jim Crow laws are no longer in force. Damage, previously caused by overt racism and racial terror, is perpetuated by covert racism and color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The imagery was powerful and moving, and it confronted the categorization of Black people by White Americans, as it has led to discrimination, inequalities, and segregation of Black Americans (Williams and Lewis 2024).

Lamar never ceases to amaze his audience by faithfully delivering the no holds barred punches. His message warns the world that Black people are "*gon' be alright*," (Lamar 2015) which is completely in line with Lamar's character and morals.

Since 2016, Lamar has soared to new heights winning the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music (Pulitzer 2018). Once again reigning victorious with his 2024 hit “Not Like Us” inspired by a controversial battle with Drake (Trust 2024), Lamar’s “Not Like Us” music video captures his style of speaking truth to power and remembering where you come from (hooks 2015).

Lamar’s performance reveals the color-blind racism that has taken the place of Jim Crow laws, thereby perpetuating the misrepresentation and stereotyping of Black people in the United States. Lamar’s performance illustrates the hatred for Black people and demonstrates the historical racist policies that have led to the marginalization of Black people (Anderson 2016; Williams and Lewis 2024). Recall that Black people did not come to the Americas by choice but by force!

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