

“I Am. All of Us.”

by Aaliyah Jackson

Imagine seeing your first murder at 5 years old. Imagine growing up in a city where violence and gang culture are so prevalent that from a young age, you are sought out to participate. Regardless of the nature of the violence, you've accepted it as a norm in your life because it was the culture you grew up around. Now imagine getting away from that culture, gaining success, and trying to shed light back onto that same culture to promote change amongst your people. This is the story of “The Heart Part 5” by Kendrick Lamar. Lamar uses this song to send a wake-up call to the black community about how we have allowed and accepted decades of violence in our communities without properly addressing the issue because we push it off as just another aspect of our culture. In this song, Kendrick uses a series of lyrics that present a double meaning to convey the merging views of his perspective and other perspectives of black culture. He effectively uses all four rhetorical appeals to create a sense of connection between himself and the listener as well as himself and his love/hate relationship with the black culture.

“The Heart” series is a journey through Kendrick Lamar’s career serving as bookmarks for what his mindset is at the time. These tracks are always released days before his album and give a glimpse into the topics he will delve into within his upcoming album. Each installment of the series signifies an era in Kendrick’s career with no two tracks resembling each other in style or lyrical message. They showcase his triumphs and struggles, which allows the listener to gain a better understanding of him and his intended message. “The Heart Part 5” is the latest and arguably the most significant installment of the series. It is about the merging viewpoints of black culture from different perspectives. The music video shows Kendrick morphing into six other famous black men including O.J. Simpson, Kanye West, Jussie Smollett, Will Smith, Kobe Bryant, and Nipsey Hustle. Though Lamar is rapping his thoughts and feelings, he uses the personas of other black cultural figures whose perspectives and situations correspond to what he is saying and feeling.

Kendrick Lamar is a rapper who has focused his music on bringing awareness to the societal harm and social injustices that surround the black community, whether that harm is external or self-inflicted. Lamar always makes his message clear by alluding to the fact that, though he has contributed to some negative aspects of the current state of black culture, it is not too late for him to make positive contributions as well while motivating others to do the same. Many of Kendrick’s songs are a call to action for black people to unite as one to change our culture with “The Heart Part 5” being his clearest message of this. As a music artist, music and videos are the most effective way to get out his message. Considering how hip-hop is a cornerstone for the black community, it makes sense for him to create rap music to reach more of his intended audience. At the time of this song's release (2022), several of the figures he portrays throughout the song had recently gone through very public situations that caused a direct impact on black culture. Whether it be death, mental illness, or showing that you are a fraud, these events as well as the slow demise of black culture as the result of negative cultural norms were the catalyst for the release of this song.

This music video opens with a quote written with white words on a black screen, "I am. All of us," with the quote signed by Okluma, one of Lamar's personas. This quote is the first double meaning of the song and sets the tone for it. It shows how Kendrick identifies with all the people of the black culture with the intent to be a light for it. The period after "I am" shows a level of uncertainty about himself and his connection to the culture. I will discuss in later verses where this uncertainty is brought to light. This quote can also be seen as a biblical reference to the 7 "I am" statements Jesus makes in the Bible. This idea is further supported by the cover art of his album following this song which depicts Kendrick with a diamond-encrusted crown of thorns. This is a direct reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This detail is expanded on throughout the song as Kendrick pleads with the black community or "the culture" because he is often criticized for rapping about social issues instead of money, drugs, and women like most rappers. The "All of Us" portion of the quote relates to how Jesus was crucified for the well-being of all people. Kendrick sees himself as someone who has been crucified by the culture repeatedly because he chooses to rap about things that can benefit the well-being of the black community versus rapping about things that could aid in its demise.

Kendrick's first verse and chorus are built around his childhood upbringing and other aspects of his past. He opens the video with him looking away from the camera while speaking to the audience. This verse is the only one in the song where Kendrick appears as himself and speaks from his perspective the entire time. After thanking his fans and speaking of differing perspectives, he keeps his body language closed to show a sense of timidity when it comes to him addressing his fans for fear of not being accepted. As he begins to rap, his body movements become very erratic. These movements coincide with the erratic behavior of the culture he comes from. Lamar uses several lyrics with double meanings while discussing his violent upbringing. He opens with the line, "I come from a generation of pain where murder is minor" (Lamar 0:41). His saying that "Murder is minor" points to the fact that a lot of black communities have become desensitized to murder because it happens so often and is accepted as simply being a part of the culture. This line can also point to the issue of the rising number of black youths joining gangs and falling victim to gang violence before they reach the age of 18.

This verse also talks about betrayal being accepted and pushed off as just another aspect of the culture. Kendrick is very critical of himself and his contribution to the negativity of the culture, so he uses the first chorus as his plea to be accepted by the culture to feel solidified as an artist. He feels a need to contribute to the negativity of the culture to be accepted by it. For the entire first verse and partially the chorus, Kendrick avoids eye contact with the camera. It isn't until he says, "Look what I have done for you," that he finally makes eye contact with the camera to show he is finally speaking directly to the culture (Lamar 1:40). These areas of the song appeal to ethos and pathos. Referencing his actual upbringing in the violent streets of Compton, CA, gives credibility to his experiences while also playing on the emotions of the listener. A lot of black people who have had similar exposure to these negative cultural aspects relate to Kendrick and follow his message the most.

Kendrick's second verse and chorus reference his present mindset while also ushering in the perspectives of others. During this verse, we see Kendrick morphing into different famous black men to show the merging of black consciousness through different perspectives. He opens the

verse with, "I said I do this for my culture to let y'all know what a nigga look like in a bulletproof rover" (Lamar 1:46). This line establishes Kendrick's long connecting musical ties to the culture by quoting a line from Jay-Z's 2001 song "Izzo." Kendrick morphing into O.J. while saying the above-mentioned line is no coincidence and is yet again another lyric with a double meaning. The Jay-Z line being said while simultaneously morphing into O.J. is a reference to Jay-Z's song "The Story of O.J." which speaks of the troubles of still being seen as just another black person regardless of status. Kendrick relates this line to himself by mentioning his bulletproof Rover. Though O.J. is a black man, his status allowed him to receive a different response from police than most black people who start a miles-long car chase. Kendrick's status allows him to drive around his crime-ridden city without fear of being shot because he has the money and means to protect himself. His status provides him with an advantage over average citizens. He next morphs into Kanye West while rapping the line, "friends bipolar, grab you by your pockets. No option if you froze up. Always play the offense" (Lamar 1:55). Kendrick uses Kanye for this portion of the song as he is someone who publicly struggles with bipolar depression leading him to have a lack of trust in others. Kanye, like most black people entwined in this culture, often keeps their friendship circles small for fear of being financially taken advantage of.

He next morphs into Jussie Smollett who in recent years has been considered a fraud for faking being a victim of a supposed racial attack: "That's the culture, point the finger promote ya. The streets go me f*cked up. Y'all can miss me. I wanna represent for us" (Lamar 2:05). He portrays Jussie in the midst of saying these lines to point out how oftentimes people have profited from playing the victim in black culture. Although Jussie claims he wants to be a positive symbol for the black community, he contradicts himself by attempting to profit by lying to the same culture he claims to be a champion for. Kendrick stays as Jussie while talking about his grief over losing fellow rapper and friend Nipsey Hustle while on vacation. He feels like a fraud for grieving the death of his friend at the hands of the same violent culture he has been a contributor to. He feels as though he has a hand in the decline of the black community. In his grief, he also feels guilt for himself and the culture because, despite the grief, we often drink or smoke the pain away and continue in the same negative actions because the culture has conditioned us to do so. Kendrick does this to make the audience feel a sense of guilt for the way the culture continues to let violence go unchecked because we have been conditioned to accept it as culture. It makes the audience feel a sense of accountability for the current state of the black community.

The last person Lamar portrays in the second verse is Will Smith while rapping the lines, "In the land where hurt people hurt more people f*ck callin' it culture" (Lamar 2:46). He chose Smith for this portion, as well as the chorus, to showcase a real-life example of hurt people hurting other people. In recent years Will Smith's marital controversies have led to his public humiliation by not only his spouse but also the criticism of the culture. This humiliation eventually led to the slapping of Chris Rock at the Oscars for making a joke about Jada Pinkett-Smith. Keeping Will's persona throughout the chorus creates a parallel between Will pleading with his wife to want him back, as well as for the culture who has often considered him corny to accept him. By stating, "Look what I've done for you" as Will Smith shows him telling Jada to look at the violence he has caused on her behalf. He uses these same lines to plead with the black community to accept him for all the "contributions he has made to the culture in movies and music. By him saying, "f*ck callin' it

culture,” Lamar is calling for black people to stop accepting these negative norms as a part of the culture.

Kendrick’s final verse speaks to himself in the future and can easily be considered the most enlightening and controversial. As he morphs back into himself, he shifts his tone for the song’s final verse by taking a pause. By this point, his erratic body movements have calmed down as he requests for the drums to be removed from the song. The removal of the drums from the song can be a reference to the next two people he portrays, Kobe Bryant and Nipsey Hustle. Drums are known as the heartbeat of the music and Kobe and Nipsey had both passed by the time of this song’s release. Before beginning to rap again, Kendrick takes two deep breaths and on the last breath does not exhale which also plays into the idea of taking your last breath before morphing into perspectives of people who have passed on. Kendrick begins to rap in a way to reflect on his change within his time as an artist and if it will ever be enough to help the culture. As he raps the line, “consciousness is synchronized and crystal clear,” his mouth appears out of sync with his words (Lamar 3:58). This was intentional to show that Kendrick’s consciousness may not be as clear as he portrays, which leads back to his uncertainty with his connection to the culture mentioned earlier. He uses Kobe Bryant and Nipsey Hustle in this verse to show how he is figuring out how to give back to his culture, which is something Kobe and Nipsey are well-known for.

Lamar morphs into Kobe Bryant after mentioning how he is reflecting on his life and what he has done: “paid dues, made rules, changed out of love. The same views made schools change curriculum” (Lamar 4:05). Kobe Bryant is known for his “Mamba Mentality” and that is the energy Kendrick is channeling. He is willing to push himself past the limits for something he’s passionate about, but this mentality shows a fracture in the lines that follow: “but didn’t change me starin’ down the barrel of that gun. Should I feel resentful I didn’t see my full potential? Should I feel regret about the good that I was into? Everything is everything this ain’t coincidental” (Lamar 4:10). Despite his positive contributions to the culture, he always feels the pressure that he is not doing enough which leads him to suicidal ideations. The pressure he feels as a leader does not go away simply because people tell him he’s a light in the community.

As he questions himself, he begins to morph into Nipsey Hustle while saying, “as I bleed through the speakers, feel my presence. To my brother, to my kids I’m in heaven. To my mother to my sis I’m in heaven. To my father, to my wife I am serious this is heaven” (Lamar 4:23). He raps these lines as if he is Nipsey speaking back to his family about being in Heaven. He also speaks as Nipsey to say for his family to forgive the man who killed him. The rap continues to speak of the good and positivity that Nipsey brought to the violent California culture by giving back to it. Nipsey is well known for his philanthropy and for becoming what some would consider a “hood hero” to inner-city California communities. This is a behavior that Kendrick plans to emulate in his future for the culture. With Nipsey being a friend and a role model to Kendrick, he pays homage to him by recreating his body movements and flow while speaking on his behalf from beyond the grave.

The most controversial line of this verse says, “and I can’t blame the hood the day that I was killed. Y’all had to see it that’s the only way to feel and thought my physical won’t reap the benefits the energy that carry on emits still. I want you” (Lamar 5:21). Kendrick stays as Nipsey while saying this to show how though he has passed, let his murder be a wake-up call for the culture to change.

It also shows how he doesn't blame the culture and its flaws for leading to his demise. He understands the essence of the culture and despite all the positives he brought to the community; he still fell victim to the violence of the culture. Him ending and saying, "I want you," shows that despite what happened to him, Nipsey still wants the hood to thrive.

Kendrick uses the previously mentioned combination of ethos and pathos throughout this song by using his and the well-known experiences of other famous black people to bring credibility to each perspective while allowing the listener to connect emotionally to each person he portrays. He also uses pathos to play on the emotions and connections within the black community to those who have been exposed to the aspects of the culture he is rapping about. His appeal to logos comes throughout the song in specific lines such as, "you can't help the world until you help yourself" (Lamar 5:18). He also uses Kairos in this song. The period in which he released this song blew up the internet because the lyrics were so relatable to a lot of the black community's current situations. It is nothing new that several predominantly black communities are riddled with seemingly endless crime and violence. The rise of gang-related violence and lack of unity within the black community has been at an all-time high as of late. Areas like Los Angeles and Chicago have experienced this the most. This continuance of violence has led to a very significant number of black youths being trained to follow in the same footsteps of violence because they feel like they have no other options. It is a "get down or lay down" mentality in several violent black communities. The black culture as a whole has decided to accept these things as our cultural and social norms, so the problem continues to grow simply because we as a community continue to accept it.

All in all, "The Heart Part 5" is Kendrick trying to reason with the black community in a way that does not come off as preachy or overbearing, but still pushes a sense of urgency. Through his lyrics, use of deep fake technology, and body language he successfully manages to stir the pot to get people talking about the downfall of the black community and how we can change it. Kendrick Lamar was very effective in his approach to opening the conversation about change in our culture. The release of the song led many people to post videos and stir up conversations in comments about what Kendrick was saying and what he meant by it. Son Raw from thefader.com stated that "The Heart Part 5 was meant to create a buzz, and it accomplishes that flawlessly, inviting commentary and analysis from rap nerds, pop culture prognosticators, and credentialed eggheads in equal measure" (Son Raw). Kendrick's use of all four rhetorical appeals paired with double entendres and a hypnotizing flow allowed him to showcase his message in an effective way that did exactly what he intended for it to do, start the conversation about positive change within the black culture.

Works Cited

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