



Research Paper

The Art of Healing: Kendrick Lamar's Lyrical Dissection of Violence, Trauma, and Reconciliation in *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers*

Erny Peng
USA

Abstract:

This paper examines Kendrick Lamar's profound engagement with the theme of violence in his 2022 album Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers. Through meticulous analysis of key tracks, including "We Cry Together," "Mother I Sober," "Worldwide Steppers," and "Father Time," this study explores Lamar's complex interrogation of personal, societal, and historical violence. The paper highlights how Lamar's lyrics weave narratives of domestic abuse, generational trauma, and toxic masculinity, contextualized within the broader realities of the Black community. Additionally, it underscores his artistic vision of healing and reconciliation, challenging the pervasive cycles of violence. Lamar's work is presented not only as a reflection of contemporary struggles but also as a testament to the transformative power of art in addressing historical trauma and advocating for social change.

Keywords: Kendrick Lamar, Violence and Trauma, Generational Healing, Toxic Masculinity, Black Community Dynamics, Hip-Hop Social Commentary

Received 03 Jan., 2025; Revised 11 Jan., 2025; Accepted 13 Jan., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

Focusing on his latest album, *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*, released in 2022, this study unpacks the intricacies of Kendrick Lamar's engagement with violence. Throughout his work, Lamar's examination of the history, prevalence, and outcomes of violence draws inspiration from both personal experience and observations of the world. Through a meticulous examination of the album's lyrics, this paper unveils Lamar's nuanced perspectives on violence. Lamar ultimately asserts that social movements and artistic practices are needed to resolve and undo the legacy of historical violence that manifests in contemporary relationships.

"We Cry Together" presents a notable example of how Lamar engages with the effects of violence. This song portrays an emotionally abusive relationship within the context of domestic violence. Distinct from conventional instances of domestic abuse, wherein a discernible victim and perpetrator are evident, this particular composition lacks a clear demarcation between the roles of abuser and abused; both sides exhibit equivalent propensities toward abusive behavior. Plausibly rooted in Lamar's personal experiences, the song meditates on the traumatic effects of witnessing parental violence. The reservoir of resentment between partners culminates in a palpable release. At the outset of the song, the following insults establish that the theme of violence runs through the core of its engagement with relationships:

Lil' dick ass nigga that's tryna go big
But you wassuckin' this dick though
Well, shit, I shoulda sucked his (what you say?)
I shoulda found a bigger dick (bitch, get the fuck out my face)
Oh, what, you mad?
Shut up, bitch, you got me fucked up today, on God
Ah-ha, you mad, lil' feeling as is shot.

The two figures in this song engage in a form of cathartic release. The angry, violent rhetoric they employ against each other reveals how, in the world that Lamar creates in his songs, every relationship, even one that is loving, has the potential for violence within it. The female voice (most likely Taylor Paige) target's Lamar's masculinity, conflating the male body with male success. Lamar's lyrics reveal that relationships are

potentially volatile because the participants know how to hurt each other. The denouement of the song strongly suggests a physical intimacy between Lamar and Paige, ostensibly serving as a resolution to their altercation. However, it is conceivable that this temporary reconciliation through sexual engagement may not herald a definitive conclusion, as the underlying resentment cannot be so easily dissolved. The cyclical nature of their discord implies the likelihood of its recurrence, underscoring the transient nature of their chosen resolution. The themes of love and violence are present throughout Lamar's work and are often connected to both a diagnosis of contemporary life and an exploration of how the past imprints the legacy of traumatic violence that destabilizes relationships.

The song "Mother I Sober" provides a separate example of how Lamar addresses the connection between generational trauma and sexual violence. In this song, the victims of violence are mainly his family, but at various moments, the song broadens to include the black community as a whole. Lamar begins by stating his desire to "heal everybody." Following this inauguration, Lamar says, "Heal myself, secrets that I hide, buried in these words." In these lyrics, Lamar expresses his desire to foreclose all trauma. Following these statements, Lamar tells a story of how his cousin was sent to jail for allegedly sexually assaulting him even though Lamar asserted the cousin's innocence:

Family ties, they accused my cousin,
"Did he touch you Kendrick?"
Never lied, but no one believed me when I said "he didn't."

In the following lines, Lamar reveals two things. The first is that this traumatic event continues to haunt him. The second is that he turned to "rhyiming" as a "coping mechanism to lift up myself." This idea participates in another running theme in the album, and that is the ability of art to heal. Later in the song, Lamar reveals that his mother refused to accept the cousin's innocence because she herself had been sexually assaulted in Chicago. The historical trauma of her assault renders her incapable of seeing the reality in front of her. Instead, she accepts the narrative of abuse because it seems plausible and because it actualizes her longstanding fear that her son would be subject to the same violation as her. Addressing trans-generational abuse, Lamar states, "I hope our children don't inherit me and feelings I attract." These lyrics symbolize Lamar's longing to foreclose the inheritance of trauma. He hopes the history of suffering will end with him as he brings attention to the trauma the black community faces. This underscores the motive that Lamar articulates at the beginning of the song. To "heal everybody" would effectively prevent trauma from resurfacing in future generations.

Later in the track, Lamar connects his personal experience of sexual trauma to a longer history of sexual violence in the black community:

A conversation not being addressed in black families,
The devastation haunting generations and humanity,
They raped our mothers, they raped our sisters,
Then they made us watch, then made us rape each other,
Psychotic torture between our lives, we aint recovered."

Lamar uses these lyrics to address the black American community's inability to escape collective historical trauma. Lamar connects what has been inflicted on the black community with the violence that the black community, in his eyes, inflicts on itself. In effect, Lamar is arguing that the black community has internalized violence and now expresses it against itself. He concludes the song by calling the sexual assault his family endured a "generational curse" and imagining that his own life has brought the curse to its end. Throughout the song, the line "I wish I was somebody, anybody but myself" repeats. This lyric most likely symbolizes Lamar's feelings about his current experience, which most likely means he wants to escape the trauma he has endured. In this particular track, another topic that Lamar covers is familial violence. In the following line, he raises this variation of violence directly:

Mother's brother said he got revenge for my mother's face
Black and blue, the image of my queen that I can't erase
Till this day, can't look her in the eyes, pain is taking over
Blame myself, your never felt guilt, till you felt it sober

This "revenge" was probably due to Lamar's cousin being sent to prison earlier as a result of her not believing Lamar. As the lyrics reveal, Lamar blames himself "till this day" for what happened. The fact that he "can't erase" the image reveals the traumatic trace of violence. Lamar expresses that violence originates in many places, including family. In this context, Lamar uses "Mother I sober" to process his guilt and trauma. The song expresses his wish to heal/protect others from experiencing the same.

In "Worldwide Steppers," Lamar explores other forms of violence. This track establishes his vision of an essentially violent society. Throughout the song, the following lyric repeats:

I'm a killer, he's a killer, she's a killer, bitch
We some killers, walkin zombies, tryna scratch that itch.

Universalizing the terms “killers” and “walking zombies,” Lamar points to the inherently violent nature in everyone. In this case, he uses violence as a way to engage with what has come to be known as “cancel culture.” According to the logic of the song, we are all willing to be a “killer” in the presence of anything that isn't already dead. Lamar underscores this position in the following lines:

Eight billion people on Earth, silent murderers
Non-profits, preachers and church, crooks and burglars (woo)
Hollywood corporate in school, teachin' philosophies
You either gon' be dead or in jail, killer psychology

In these lines, Lamar defines “killer.” Juxtaposing “nonprofits, preachers and church” and “crooks and burglars,” Lamar suggests that those we look to for help will often abuse us for their own benefit. Set within a historical context, the “non-profits” Lamar mentions most likely refer to the Red Cross, which was embroiled in scandal following the 2010 Haitian earthquake, during which the organization raised large sums of money and only built 6 houses. Lamar also describes how the “Hollywood corporate” play a big part in the school system, leaving only two options for most children in the black community: “you either gon' be dead or in jail” as a result of the “killer psychology.” Additionally, Lamar points to a separate aspect of global violence in the following lines:

The media's the new religion, you killed the consciousness
Your jealousy is way too pretentious, you killed accomplishments
Niggas killed freedom of speech, everyone sensitive
If your opinion fuck 'round and leak, might as well send your will
The industry has killed the creators, I'll be the first to say

Lamar's invocation of the “the media's the new religion” refers to the church during the Dark Ages, during which it exerted sole control over knowledge. According to Lamar, modern media has gained enormous control over society, and this ability to manipulate necessitates forms of coercion and violence.

In a subsequent piece, “Father Time,” Lamar explores the formidable lessons his father imparted during his formative years. The narrative elucidates the distinctive nature of Lamar's experiences within the black community, highlighting their deviation from prevailing norms and the consequent perpetuation of a cycle of violence. The song begins with a dialogue between Lamar and his spouse, during which she confronts him regarding his manifestation of toxic masculinity and advises him to “reach out to Eckhart.” In referencing Eckhart Tolle, a German spiritual teacher, Lamar's wife addresses his paternal influences. Subsequent verses develop Lamar's reflections on the ways in which his father contributed to the cultivation of his toxic masculinity. A poignant example is provided: Lamar recounts his father's injunction against crying after a minor injury, encapsulated in the phrase “Cause if I cried about it, he'd surely tell me not to be weak.” This injunction profoundly impacted Lamar, as evidenced later in the song when he asserts, “Men should never show feelings, being sensitive never helped.”

Later in the song Lamar states:

My niggas ain't got no daddy, grow up overcompensatin'
Learn shit 'bout bein' a man and disguise it as bein' gangsta
I love my father for tellin' me to take off the gloves
'Cause everything he didn't want was everything I was
And to my partners that figured it out without a father
I salute you, may your blessings be neutral to your toddlers
It's crucial, they can't stop us if we see the mistakes
'Til then, let's give the women a break, grown men with daddy issues

In these lines, Lamar articulates the repercussions of individuals grappling with “daddy issues,” asserting that such individuals, endeavoring to assimilate life lessons independently, become ensnared in the effects of toxic masculinity. Because of this history of violence, Lamar argues, men ultimately gravitate towards gang life. Lamar issues a call to action directed at his fellow “grown men with daddy issues,” imploring them to proactively engage in their progeny's lives to interrupt the perpetuation of the cycle of gang violence.

In “The Effects of Father Absence on Child Development,” E. Mavis Hetherington examines the absence of fathers on childhood development. Hetherington posits that compensation for the absence of a paternal figure may manifest as the result of a boy's earnest endeavors to attain masculine identification in the absence of a suitable role model. This dynamic, she contends, can lead to the acquisition of a set of loosely integrated

responses that approximate a caricature of stereotypical masculine roles. This scholarly assertion aligns with Lamar's conceptualization of a detrimental upbringing, particularly resonating with the lyric, "My niggas ain't got no daddy, grow up overcompensatin'." In lines such as these, Lamar explores the nexus between gang violence and "daddy issues," positing that a straightforward resolution lies in the active involvement of paternal figures to address and ameliorate the underlying societal challenges.

In conclusion, Kendrick Lamar, Through his lyrical prowess, unwavering authenticity, and unflinching social commentary, has not only elevated the genre of hip-hop but has also challenged societal norms and sparked important conversations on issues ranging from racial inequality to mental health. His ability to craft intricate narratives and deliver powerful messages through his music has resonated with millions of listeners worldwide, making him a voice of our generation