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Opening up frontiers through music: exploring narratives of identity, prophethood, father figure and trauma in Kendrick Lamar's *Mr Morale and The Big Steppers*

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Statutory declaration

I declare that I have written this thesis independently and without external help and that I have not used any auxiliary materials other than those included in the works cited list. All passages taken directly or indirectly from publications are marked as such. The submitted electronic version of the thesis corresponds exactly to the submitted written version. The thesis has not yet been submitted to any other examination authority and has not been published. I am aware that an untrue statement has legal consequences.

Abstract

Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers is Kendrick Lamar's latest album, which, to date, has not been the subject of scholarly analysis. The aim is to investigate his narrative throughout his work in relation to issues such as the questioning of material wealth and the exploitation of African-American culture within the Hip Hop genre. In addition, religion is examined, analysing how the artist approaches and is influenced by religion to represent both social and personal issues. African American masculinity and the formation of African American masculinity is also examined, along with the influence of Gangsta Rap and its limitation of masculinity in the African American community. Finally, trauma in Lamar´s narrative is explored, as well as sexual violence and the influence of slavery on the African American community in the present.

Keywords

Hip-Hop, materialism, Lamar, Kendrick, identity, religion, prophetic figure, black masculinity, African-American community, trauma, sexual violence.

1. Introduction

1.1 Origins of Hip-Hop.

As Hip Hop grew and consolidated as a genre, it consequently achieved more reach and other social groups started to consume it. According to Diallo, it originated in "poor neighborhoods in New York City, especially Harlem and the Bronx" (1). It has gone from being a genre with slum roots (its roots in marginalized areas) and Afro-American culture to being listened to by people of all classes and cultures.

Among the several epithets Diallo came across, the scholar assigns names at the time such as "America's worst slum", "the city of despair", "ghetto of the ghettos", "the stain", and ultimately, "the cancer" to the Bronx. (1) In addition, he refers to former President Ronald Reagan's words that "the landscape of the Bronx reminds him of the destruction he saw in Dresden, Germany, during World War II."(390)

In this way, the social context of the neighborhood can be seen as a mechanism that acted as a catalyst for its inhabitants to express their experiences through this new genre. This way of expressing the harshness of living conditions and realistic descriptions "provided a new cultural context for creative expressions of urban sensibilities" (Kai Johnson, 63). This correlation between social context and artistic manifestation is what keeps the genre alive today, from its birthplace to global success

By the end of the 1970s, we can see the first decade of hip hop's development and the idea of expanding it beyond the borders of the Bronx, with the idea that African-American identity would benefit from the commercial side and the expansion of the "sociocultural matrix of the hip hop movement" (Diallo, 225). As a consequence of

commercialisation, an opening to a non-African American audience is obviously achieved.

In the 1980s, DJ Tony Joseph, after gaining experience on the streets of New York, decided to venture into California's booming hip-hop scene, Diallo stating that "he moved there in 1979" (224). His arrival brought him a multitude of opportunities and sparked a wave of musical innovation. Although the genre was slow to catch on in the country, it eventually captivated a wide range of listeners. In Los Angeles, Joseph was responsible for exploiting the territory and "started to mix at house parties, New York-style, and to organize mobile parties in the Los Angeles metropolitan area" (225)

In California, the spread of hip-hop music was greatly affected by political circumstances. Californian artists emerged in the 1980s and gained popularity, becoming important figures in their communities and representing the voice of the marginalised. Thus, the genre played a crucial role in addressing social grievance through the artistic expression of Hip Hop and consequently giving a voice to social minorities.

The city of Compton is particularly important concerning the growth of California's hip-hop culture. Artists such as N.W.A. or Coolio have been artists who helped to consolidate the subgenre of hip hop, gangsta rap, which will be addressed throughout the thesis. It is also the birthplace of the thesis' subject of study, Kendrick Lamar, who has been an important figure in American hip-hop in recent years.

1.2 The place that shapes your identity: Compton.

To try to understand Duckworth's music and his music away from mainstream hip hop, one must first place oneself from his perspective, and from the place he comes from, Compton. In addition to not reinforcing the negative stereotypes that come with

traditional hip hop, his works, as well as Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers, present the context that Duckworth has experienced throughout his life in the African American community in his hometown. Issues of racism, the power of African-Americans in American society and moral issues can help to understand the position and difficulties of young people in American society.

Compton is a city that made significant progress in the mid-20th century. With a predominantly white population, until 1960, an African American community movement was emerging in the western United States. Sides states that "African Americans, who represented less than 5 percent of Compton's population in 1950, represented 40 percent of its population by 1960"(588), so a strong racial transition can be observed within the city.

This racial change was not widely welcomed in the white community, thus they decided to "limit the residential mobility of blacks" (Sides, 586). To that end, they exploited fear to ensure that no black family would be interested in buying the house. They promoted fear by "vandalism, cross burnings, bombings, and death threats" (Sides, 586).

All of this opposition began to fade as whites started to perceive the African American population as a source of economic benefits. African Americans looking for homes outside of South Central were often willing to pay more than whites for properties in Compton" (Sides, 587). Compton therefore established the groundwork for a settled African American population beginning in 1960.

Everything gradually improved until 1965, when the Watts riots brought the area to a halt, resulting in considerable industrial flight from the area and severe damage to the

city. Indeed, Compton "was tarnished by the Watts riots" (Sides, 591). According to Straus, "a wave of factories and warehouses closed or moved out of the Los Angeles area, putting some seventy-five thousands of the city's citizens out of work"(515), which completely altered the lives of the African American community and forced them to reorganize in an alternate and worse way than they were accustomed to.

Although the unemployment rate was not as affected as other districts such as Watts, Compton looked different and more and more young people were joining street gangs. Thus Sides explains that "the decline in legitimate employment opportunities was the explosive rise in black street gangs in Compton and throughout black Los Angeles during the early 1970s" (593). What were at first gangs trying to protect themselves from white gangs became a fight between gangs that pitted blacks against blacks simply because they lived in a different neighbourhood.

Although the rate of joblessness was not as high as in Watts and other districts, Compton seemed different, and an increasing amount of young people joined street gangs. As a result, Sides explains, "the decline of legitimate employment opportunities was the explosive rise of black street gangs in Compton and throughout black Los Angeles during the early 1970s" (593). What began as gangs seeking to protect themselves from white gangs quickly devolved into a gang war pitting blacks against blacks simply because they lived in different neighborhoods.

All of this was combined with the rise of new gangs like the Bloods and Crips, which were formed to defend the severe brutality used by the Crips, and the introduction of cocaine in the 1980s, which increased demand for its commercial control and distribution. Compton developed into a violently chaotic metropolis. All of this led to a

city in utter decadence and a desperate state for its society, along with exorbitant taxation, poor public infrastructure, inadequate education, and increased crime.

All of this continued until the Crips and the Bloods formed a peace agreement in the early 1990s. Nobody could feel fully comfortable in Compton or Los Angeles because of the prevalence of guns and the ongoing violence, which affected everyone who resided there. Additionally, the novelty of listening to Gangsta Rap music was brought on by the growth in crime.

In order to get Kendrick's father, Kenny, out of a gang on Chicago's south side, the Duckworth family relocated from Chicago to Compton during this period. From the minute Kendrick comes until the moment he departs, Compton will be remembered as the city that most significantly moulded who he is.

Hip Hop music rappers including Coolio, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Eazy E and Roddy Rich hail from Compton, considered the birthplace of gangsta rap, one of hip-hop's most famous subgenres.

By the end of the 1980s, Hip Hop on the West Coast of the United States had already achieved a certain power. Los Angeles would give birth to a new style: Gangsta Rap. Its name is consolidated through the most emblematic group of this style, NWA, Niggaz Wit Attitude. This new phenomenon was given this name because its lyrics dealt with themes such as the life of gang members, marked by the use of weapons, the drug trade, riots with the police, sexism and hyper-masculinity. Like the East Coast, this style emerged from a place plagued by marginalisation and poverty.

This well-established group achieved enormous success in a very short time. Felicia explains that “even buyers for black-owned, independent music outlets in cities

like New York, Memphis, and Cincinnati rushed to stock the record, ordering, in some cases, hundreds at a time." (97) This new genre made a large part of Los Angeles society feel identified. Felicia states that inner-city youth from Los Angeles recognised that it was a bold representation of their city, "where we're from... what we're about." (98)

1.3 Effects of culture on Hip Hop development.

One of the first publications on the movement, in analysing the possibilities and potentials of rap, in a clearly defensive as well as culturally critical tone, is "*Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*" by Tricia Rose, Professor of African American Studies at Brown University. Published in 1994, the book is a critical analysis of rap music and culture in the United States, with a special emphasis on how rap has contributed to the construction of black identity and cultural politics.

According to Rose, rap music contains a wealth of complex social, cultural and political issues. In today's American society, the apparent contradictions in rap music are not indicative of confusion, but a common feature of popular cultural dialogues that always offer various perspectives. As a basis for analysis, this is an important and necessary perspective for understanding popular culture and especially rap music which is "negotiated (in) contradictory position of social vulnerability and cultural clout" (184)

In terms of identity, rap serves as a mechanism for the construction of identity, it is a genre that has as a feature the expression of individual and place identity, which is directly associated with a sense of community and, as a result, collective identity. Thus, it establishes that "Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family" (32)

Rose states that critics often present limited opinions and general assumptions, such as that rap is sexist, racist and violent, always associated with the genre. Rose,

however, offers a wide range of ideas and voices and challenges the violence, racism, sexism and general discourse of power that accompany society as a whole, claiming that rap itself is "embedded in powerful and dominant technological, industrial and ideological institutions" (2).

Another perspective on hip hop is that proposed by Tricia Rose in her second book *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008). In the first section of the book, Rose exposes individuals who consistently condemn hip hop, and in the second, she exposes those who consistently praise it. Additionally, she proposes that rather than ignoring the violent and excesses settings that hip hop first aimed to resist, we should acknowledge them as a necessary component of the environment in which this culture has evolved.

Rose specifies the figure of the gangster, of the gangsta rap that was commercially imposed in the United States in the 1990s, and which has left a discursive legacy within the genre which persists to this day. The scholar is characterized by its focus on themes such as violence, gang culture, black masculinity, criminal gangs, sex, drugs, prostitution, money, and the hard life in African American communities. According to Tricia Rose, the hyper commercialization of this subgenre has had a negative impact on hip hop culture, the African American community, and racial issues. In addition, this hyper-commercialization brings huge economic benefits.

Hip-hop cultural critic Tricia Rose emphasizes that there is a growing problem with sexism and homophobia in the business, which is the power apparatus responsible for distributing and shaping the gender narrative. She contends that these difficulties have their roots in larger socioeconomic problems like racism, misogyny, and violence, which have evolved into "rap's calling cards" (2) of black masculinity. As a result, black masculinity is often portrayed in rap music as negative and destructive. To effectively

address these issues, Ross said, it's exceptive to address the larger social issues that drive sales in these situations.

Therefore, Rose argues that criticisms of hip hop frequently overlook "the culpability of the larger social and political context" (5) that fuels the issues facing the sector. The over-blaming of hip hop, according to Rose, is alarming because it ignores the responsibility of the larger social and political backdrop, including "structural forms of deep racism, corporate influences, and the long-term effects of economic, social, and political disempowerment" (5).

As a result, Tricia Rose argues that a sizable portion of music critics are incapable of appreciating the connection between rappers' narratives of their ghetto upbringings and their experiences. According to Rose, these narratives are used as an accusation of the African-American community's behavior as the cause of the conditions in their ghettos rather than being taken into consideration as a reflection of individuals who live in these situations

Thus, the author maintains that any proportion of society that supports gender, racial and class justice should not have to blame the negative aspects of the music genre. The industry, in this case, is responsible for the promotion of narratives and forms of discourse that create desire towards the community. This is the reason why Rose highlights that the context and past of the problems represented by the industry must be taken into consideration, and that, on the contrary, it is necessary to take control in order to break down negative stereotypes.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that these rap narratives are neither the only ones nor the most complex. Rather, they are the most popular and, as a result, the ones that have the broadest appeal and are thus accepted by the music industry. Different artists and currents deal with more varied issues, convey more messages, and have a more

uplifting effect on society. Instead of categorizing hip hop as a singular image or stereotype, every story should be recognized.

1.4 Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers.

Kendrick Lamar's album *Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers* is a complex and emotionally charged exploration of the artist's personal struggles with trauma, toxic masculinity, societal expectations, and the discourse surrounding him throughout his life. It delves into the generational trauma inherited from his father and the unhealthy coping mechanisms developed as a result. It also addresses the difficulties in his relationship with his partner due to his own toxicity, tendency to avoid facing trauma and its consequences on his relationships with others in society. Throughout the album, Lamar reflects on his role as a leader and hero in his community and realizes that he is not equipped for it. Instead, he seeks to better himself and learn to empathize with those he previously did not understand. Central themes of the album include performative virtue and judgment, and the final message is that imperfection is beautiful.

The album is divided into two discs. The first one explores the roots of his issues, specifically the generational trauma that has been passed down from generation to generation. Lamar starts off in his usual preacher mode, commenting on general societal flaws as he has done in the past, as we would expect the Kendrick from *To Pimp a Butterfly* to act in therapy for the first time. In each of these songs, he describes the struggles of the "Big Steppers", the masses of people who struggle with their flaws and sins but align themselves with some sort of leader figure, some Mr. Morale, so that they may validate some moral superiority and see their steps as bigger than the steps of others.

On the second album, Lamar confronts his imperfect nature and tries to come to terms with it. In songs such as *Mirror* and *Auntie Diaries*, he reflects on his relationship with his family and himself, the behaviour he used in his youth and the truth of the

moment. Themes such as the virtue of acting and insight, and the importance of Lamar growing as an individual and as a society, accepting imperfection and learning to empathise with those we didn't understand before.

Confronting himself with his own problems causes him to relinquish his role as the voice of a generation, and so he focuses on his surroundings and making a difference. The effort to be an unattainable and perfect prophet, as he has tried to portray in his previous works, now becomes a version of being an ever-changing identity in question and inspiring others to do the same. This shift in perspective is a crucial step in personal growth and understanding, as well as in the betterment of society as a whole.

1.5 Contextualising the study of *Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers.*

Starting from the premise that the central aim of this master thesis will be the analysis of Lamar's narrative, I will establish on which concepts this narrative will be analysed in order for the aims of the thesis to be supported.

Firstly, materialism and identity development will be considered, as well as the influence of the American music industry and social discourse as a limitation of narratives. Lamar's critique of the construction of narratives and the exploitation of African-American culture are examined in order to overcome the removal of masks through Foucault's or Nancy's theory.

Once the first point has been made, I then introduce the connection of religion to Hip Hop, as well as the discursive influence through critical approaches by authors such as Miller. I will make an account of the transgressive potential of Christianity within Lamar's work and how he employs it in his narrative in a different role of prophet than Hip Hop listeners are used to.

Thirdly, the analysis of the narrative will focus mainly on the song *Father Time*, where the influence of African-American masculinity, its formation and its influence and impact on American society is analysed. This includes the historical context, the stereotypical construction by the industry and how Lamar challenges discursive norms through his work.

Finally, *Mother I Sober* will be further discussed as a song that presents the traumas and hardships that the African-American community has suffered, especially those of sexual violence. This will consider elements inherited from slavery, different studies that corroborate the situation of the African-American community and the gender limitations still present. Lamar's narrative will be analysed for its role as an attempt at transformation and healing through the visualisation of traumas, limitations, dangers, reflections on slavery and oppression.

2. Exploring Identity and Spirituality in the Work of Kendrick Lamar: An Analysis of Materialism, Religion and Gender.

2.1 EGO and the Value of Self-Exploration for Coping with Grief.

The way in which an individual deals with his or her traumas has been adhered to throughout Mr Morale and The Big Steppers, so much so that the artist reflects on the nature of change from United in Grief. This section looks at how Lamar values his development on the basis of materialism, how he preaches his singularity and how this singularity is not compatible with that of others.

Lamar gives rise to the process of unfolding by putting his place with more ego and darker under study through the questioning of the legitimised narrative in the genre. Before reaching the study of all his behaviour one can see an image of Mr Morale, which not only explains some of the hardships he has suffered but also justifies to an extent his reactions to them with material relevance. Lamar hides his suffering through his social status while his wealth is "wipin' the tears away"(Lamar, 3:23).

This first process is questioned from the outset and is shown as a critique of artistic production through its narrative, derived from the beliefs of his community where "the appreciation for material wealth as another way to establish self-image and gain respect." (Kubrin,362) Lamar then explicitly describes the sufferings of his shared community, leaving the material aside.

This critique of the narrative derived from an imposition by the American industry is explained by Neal. For the author, hip-hop culture has evolved from a subculture created by African American youth in response to post-industrialisation, “into a billion-dollar industry in which such responses were exploited by corporate capitalist and the

petit bourgeois desires of the black middle class" (381). Consequently, we find an industry which feeds white desires, since "white consumption is significantly higher than black consumption", where "whites were 60.1 percent and blacks 25 percent" (Rose, 88), (in terms of consumer ratios).

This evolution has been largely driven by corporate capitalism, which has taken control of black popular expression and used it to stimulate consumption among the masses who had no access to the American dream for much of the 20th century. Despite the economic success of hip-hop artists and black entrepreneurs associated with contemporary popular music, this transformation has not alleviated the negative realities of African American society.

Consequently, the high visibility of haute couture fashion and other signs of conspicuous wealth in hip-hop served to stimulate desire and consumption that transcended the structural realities of society. Despite the materialistic weight in the form of possessions, high fashion and status raising, the social realities of the African-American community persist. The delimiting narrative promoted through "industry in which such responses were exploited by corporate capitalist and the petit bourgeois desires of the black middle class"(Neal, 381). This means that the industry feeds on its own delimiting discourse encouraged through economically rewarded, but unconsciously and socially restricted artists.

Moreover, the industry factor is obviously not the only one, but goes hand in hand with the legitimising discourse of American society. Watts explores how the possession of high-value items is used as a way of increasing self-esteem and demonstrating self-worth in hip-hop culture. Participation in this type of social behaviour is promoted and legitimised by street discourse and extended by the industry, leading to participants being

respected within the culture. Thus, “those attempting to circumvent the code are judged as weak” (596).

It is for this reason that within this dynamic of social participation (such displays of material wealth are promoted and rewarded. It is typical of a perverse dynamic of production in which, through cultural expression, subjects not belonging to the (dominant)community— are promoted. In short, seeking the representation of submerged anti-social facts "that is considered marginal even by its participants, drag it kicking and screaming to the surface, and celebrate it as 'art'"(Watts, 600).

In response to the social behaviour (promoted) and extended by the industry, Lamar presents the song *N95*, which deals with identity and the existential emptiness of the individual in today's society. Lamar proposes that in order to discover a person's true identity, it is necessary for them to eliminate the material elements of their life and the behaviours that derive from their discourse. In this way, the individual will be able to see his "new face" and free himself from the "mask" that hides him. *N95* begins like this:

> Take off the foo-foo, take off the clout chase, take off the Wi-Fi
>
> Take off the money phone, take off the car loan, take off the flex and the white lies
>
> Take off the weird-ass jewelry, I'ma take ten steps, then I'm taking off top five
>
> (...)
>
> Take all that designer bullshit off, and what do you have? (0:14-55)

This reference is directly related to the breakdown of the limiting discourse described above, suggesting how African-American culture has been exploited as a response to post-industrialisation, which concludes in a social limiting discourse. Lamar thus questions these limits to focus on the authentication of identities.

Self-defining is a response to society and the environment, based on one's perception of that environment. Lamar does not refer to such practices as being unique to African American communities, but highlights the perceived norms.

The metaphor of N95 relates to the existential void that Lamar depicts of the individual's feeling of being a slave to the system anchored to material references to construct his identity and find his place in the increasingly homogenous world. However, when these references disappear, what is left is an empty individual, lacking desire and without meaning in life, stating that "a mask won't hide who you are inside" (1:11-2), inviting us to explore what in his truth is the authentic identity beyond masks and material references.

It is important to note that this reflection is relevant in a context where the pandemic has led to the widespread use of N95 masks to protect against the spread of the virus. However, the metaphor of the mask refers to all the ways in which we hide behind material representations or constructions of ourselves, instead of exploring our true identity and purpose in life.

Thus, exposing material recurrences as a validated narrative in justifying the development of individuals. Lamar begins his first two albums with a predominant critique of the predominant narrative material of the genre. Thus, the artist questions the following ironically: "What is a rapper with jewelry? A way that I show my maturity" (0:58-9), showing how desire oriented discourse is tainted by positive power conditions and justifies the way he and his community act.

Foucault expresses power as a way of influencing a person's identity, understanding first of all the "multiplicity offorce relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation" (43). By power I mean the discourse, the statements that are accepted within the accepted narrative that Lamar

represents. The discourse of power, therefore, is strongly criticised and questioned by Lamar, thus seeking to consciously (or unconsciously) mark the subjects, so that relations with power are directed towards consciously changing the identities of the targeted community.

Lamar clearly makes a critique by creating his own alter ego figure, and ultimately Mr. Morale by artists like himself. He seeks to establish an artistic identity that allows him to express himself in a way that is authentic and consistent with his personal values and perspectives.

In this process, the challenge he questions plays an important role in empowering the possibility of creating and producing identities and worlds for his community. His work is a tool that allows the encounter with oneself, and in turn, challenges him by showing what his problems are and how he hides from them, which is indispensable for the construction of his new self and the constant change of his identity.

According to Jean Luc Nancy's theory, Kendrick Lamar consciously respects the process of creating worlds, inducing him into the discourse of power and conditioning the creation of his own identity, i.e. "the value itself (or of meaning) in the singularity of his creation". (46) The title of the song, *United in Grief*, suggests that he abandons this duality, conceiving pain as something that all beings perceive and something that each identity assimilates and interprets differently.

As Nancy proposes, Lamar embodies the singularity of identities in the process of creation. Lamar shows that not only do the members of the reflecting community share trauma and suffering, but that each experiences it differently. "I grieve different" (Lamar, 3:25), says the regretful voice present throughout the song, while in the background we hear a Kendrick, humble and already conscious, realising that “everybody grieves

different" (3:26), each identity's way of changing is unique and its way of doing it does not make it special.

Kendrick Lamar, therefore, manifests his critique of material possessions as a primary characteristic that determines his marginal, social identity and homogenises the formation of identities belonging to his community. He uses his narrative as a means to express his critique of socio-economic mediations as a means of trauma resolution by advocating the metaphorical removal of masks.

Lamar's (representations), then, represent both his identity as an African-American man and his upper-class identity, situated within the discourses of a minority perspective in which he suggests to show your inner self. Where he also advocates worldly plurality, he thus asks "what community feel they the only ones relevant?"(2:26)

2.2 Jesus Crown and Personal Flaws: The Intersection of Faith and Human Weakness in Modern Society.

Hip Hop since its birth has had a connection to religion. Its connection to music has always had the ability to connect individuals in society to the religious way of thinking. Monica Miller, a scholar specialising in Hip Hop and religious studies, discusses how the religious influence on the hip hop narrative affects it discursively as it is "positioned socially and intellectually as the "sanitizer" of "deviant" cultural productions" (Miller, 18) which results in a domination of the genre.

Miller, in Religion and Hip Hop, focuses on making readers aware of the question of why hip hop is religious, by asking "what are the effects of various uses of the religious?" (18). That is, what is considered "religious" for certain actors and social groups in the context of hip hop to act on the basis of it. How the use of religious and

spiritual elements in hip hop culture contributes to creating meaning and significance in the lives of the individuals who participate in it.

The author proposes a research methodology that considers three critical approaches to analyse the relationship between hip hop culture and religion. The first approach focuses on "The Black Church and Spirit of Market Maintenance", the second on "The Critical in the Lyrical: Rapper as (Christian) Prophet" and the third on Hip Hop as a "Quest for Meaning" (Miller, 36).

The first model, which I consider to be the most common of the three, analyses, according to Miller, how the institutional appropriation of genre reproduced in religious practices, and norms derived from the same religion, contribute to the discrediting of Hip Hop. This model seeks the cancellation of those who do not follow the behaviours that both religion and culture consider normative, thus Miller says that "Hip-Hop culture becomes a strategy of outreach for the market maintenance of faith-based institutions" (111).

Miller's second approach uses the transgressive and transformative potential of society in a social and cultural way. The author emphasises that within the genre, the Christian religion is generally employed within African-American culture to motivate this way of conducting itself. Thus, marginalised voices have some potential to renew "social and political structures that otherwise have a tendency to become static and stagnant" (120).

However, as I will discuss below, the author refers to the use of the model of the prophet as ending in the interpretation of the way in which the author reproduces his way of seeing and living religion in a subjective way. This can therefore lead to romanticising the figure of the artist, what Lamar conceptualises as Mr. Morale.

The latter, also studied by authors such as Pinn, analyses religion as a means that is internalised as an inner feeling to address and explain the existential search through hip hop. This construction based on religion is complex, subjective, and also "makes use of the raw data of life and culture to inform its theoretical and ontological movements" (Miller,126).

The songs that are performed, then, carry subjective ends in which hip hop artists engage the reality they experience on the basis of the religious in order to show, transform and interpret the religious and social aspects. Thus, Perry states the following: "None of hip hop exists in a vacuum; each artist provides but one orientation within a diverse community, to be understood within the context of that community" (6).

Therefore, I suggest that artists of the genre develop their religious beliefs within their communities with a critical and active purpose and that within this search for meaning the religious context is approached with an existential and internalising goal. Thus, religion, mostly centered on Christianity, despite dominating Hip Hop, manifests itself in individuals in a way that each one interprets it differently in their narrative. That is, "they rely on a phenomenology to account for the creation of meaning understood as, or through, the religious" (Miller, 160).

Lamar maintains the presence of the religious but at the same time questions behaviours derived from cultural and social realities, although in each of his works he represents it through a differential narrative. It can be seen an engagement of the artist with reality along the lines advocated by both Perry and Miller, in which Lamar implements a discursive process through the use of religious rhetoric.

Kendrick has always shown a narrative about his faith towards Christianity, but with a special narrative on each album. Throughout his career he has referred to religion, starting with his iconic album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, where Lamar depicts a society full

of violence, addictions and self-destruction, accompanied by an experience that goes beyond the church and the problem of sin.

Within this work, the narrative is based around God, and this spiritual force functions as the central theme that gives it structure and order. Lamar bases his concept of the good on all that is normatively right and honourable for God and ultimately for religion, always in a prophetic manner that seems to be attempting to change the moral foundations of American society.

In *DAMN* he shows us his inner struggles with his faith and thoughts, a Lamar "tired of running" (7:30) as he finds himself in a reality full of flawed individuals doing "too many sins" (9:19) in a society that is supposed to be "a sound of drum and bass" (4:03). Lamar here shows his submission to God and warns against the path of modesty and inaction, which can lead to the self-destruction of his society.

In this work Lamar continues with his task as a prophet, alluding, in the first place, to the social behaviours of American society based on individualism, pride and wickedness, advocating humbler behaviour. Kendrick thinks that "God uses him as a vessel to share stories" (Miller, 469), changing over time and with a series of ideas that transmute his persona.

To begin with, the album cover is representative of his faith and we see how it does not conform to the traditional Christian label. Lamar represents his continued criticism of the Mr. Morale he portrays throughout the album. He admits that he is "the man of god"(0:26), in which he would kill for his daughter.

Thus, in *Worldwide Stepper* Lamar states the following: "Life as a protective father, I'd kill for her" (0:31), which is directly related to the album cover where he is wearing the crown of Jesus' thorns, is carrying a gun and holding his daughter in his arms while his partner Whitney Alford, is holding their other child on a nearby bed. What at

first would be a family-centered moment fades away because of the dangers in which their community finds itself.

Something similar to what Kanye West did in his album *The Life of Pablo*, a work in which Lamar contributes and in which the name of Pablo is used to show different behaviours. St. Paul to show his religious side and Pablo Escobar for the greed developed in his place, questioning which side he should choose and if he should corrupt himself like the rest of the individuals.

Although in the previous works we can see a version of Kendrick in the form of a prophet, in *Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers* I argue that this is not the case. Perry, in his book *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, discusses the figure of hip hop artists, stating that hip hop artists "are often self-proclaimed contemporary prophets"(2). These artists generally attempt to represent through their prophetism a truth, their truth, which, depending on who and how they represent it, can be "spiritual, cultural, personal" and "beautiful" (2).

It can be observed how both Miller's and Perry's prophetic approaches bear certain similarities. While Miller advocates the subjectivity of the artists in their way of living and interpreting religion, Perry adds that this truth performed by the artists promotes a kind of national and moral consciousness, which can be closely related to the culture and discourse that marks the lyrics of hip hop artists.

Following then the prophet model of both Miller and Perry, Lamar offers a message where he does not project onto individuals what is the best way to act as the old Lamar I have been discussing would do. In *Mirror* he states: "Heavy is the head that chose to wear the crown" (2:48-51), alluding to the famous passage from Shakespeare, where the difficulties of being a leader, or rather a prophet, are explained.

This is how we can see a version of a prophet that breaks with Miller's definition, since he is not romanticised. Lamar acts as a vulnerable prophet whose persona follows the way of Jesus, where he states that "if God be the source then I am the plug talkin',"(0:52-4). The Christian Jesus then is one of the main concepts which affects the way he sees the subjectivation of his society. It is also one of the main concepts through which he tries to promote his Mr. Morale figure in a society of Big Steppers who corrupt his morality shaped by his Christian values, among others.

Monica Miller speaks of "divinity" as a concept attributed to Hip Hop artists, adding that it is something "specific to the cultural identity of Hip Hop" (83). That is, it is making use of religious (specifically Christian) power "to make a case for the grandiosity and significance of Hip-Hop culture" (83).

Lamar, according to Miller, consciously expresses himself about the use of this grandiosity in relation to hip-hop artists. Thus, in *Saviour* he opens with the following lyrics:

> Kendrick made you think about it, but he is not your savior
>
> Cole made you feel empowered, but he is not your savior
>
> Future said, "Get a money counter, " but he is not your savior
>
> 'Bron made you give his flowers, but he is not your savior
>
> He is not your savior. (0:01-18)

One can see how Lamar is aware of what Perry is advocating on the basis of prophetic activity on the part of Hip Hop artists. Religious discourse is increasingly a source of communal modification of the spirituality surrounding the black self in the community to which it belongs. The rapper as prophet equals "the quest for authentic selfhood undergirded by God-talk" (79, Erskine).

Therefore, Lamar's message is prophetic in intent, but as a reluctant prophet. "The cat is out of the bag, I am not your saviour" (2:43), he states from his Mr Morale figure in which he no longer wants to manifest "a morality play enacted on the stage of modern America" (Miller, 122). Thus, Lamar argues in *Mirror* that "I didn't save the world, my friend/I was too busy buildin' mine again", abandoning that form of moral authority legitimised by his followers.

Underpinning Lamar's line, Dyson states that Christian prophetisms do not perform "direct access to transcendence" as it is "man-made" and, consequently, they "don't have privileged access to the mind of God" (283). This is why when a hip hop prophet advocates and champions himself and believes he knows what the Christian God wants, he is both unconsciously and consciously excluding the rest of the religious bearers and considering them false. Thus, Dyson continues, "if they range outside the hermeneutic circle and discursive frame of a given religious community" (283).

A clear example of this model is the late rapper Tupac Shakur, who shows his search for and dissemination of truth and religious discourse. Dyson states that his music and "his lyrics drip with a sense of the divine" (151), where Shakur carried out a traditional Christian vision within street life, which made him a reference point for the African-American community in America, and more specifically, on the West Coast.

Lamar in *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers* is aware of this, not only does he adapt Tupac Shakur, which I will talk about later, but he is also aware of the Californian artist's prophetic role. In *Saviour* he says the following: "Yeah, Tupac dead, gotta think for yourself" (3:03), affirming that his community cannot be saved by his referent nor by any of the prophetic referents charged with their own subjective truth.

Thus, Lamar, *in Mortal Man*, an outro from *To Pimp a Butterfly*, seems to have a conversation with Tupac in which Lamar asks him for advice and inserts answers from

the different interviews. In a comparison with the course of the works, the way of interpreting religious prophetism is not enough, but Lamar advocates the use of the quest of meaning of the self.

Lamar then employs his religious figure within hip hop to promote a form of authenticity and a quest for the self, in which Christian religious discourse plays an important role. His role focuses on questioning absolute truths, he does not see himself as a prophet and is remorseful for attempting to assume such a role.

The recognition and example of hip hop figures, especially Tupac Shakur, is present, but they are “not your saviour"(Lamar, 0:19). For Lamar society is not dependent on prophets as a reference for his specific community, but the reference is the self and the development of thought from the guiding hand of the Christian God.

2.3 Father Time: Unpacking the Impact of Childhood Trauma on Masculine Identity and Self-Reflection in Kendrick Lamar's Music.

The formation of black masculinity in the United States has developed in the "time when white capitalist consumerism of gangsta' ideologies in rap videos suffocated hip-hop's more social and politically conscious discourses in mainstream media" (Prier, 21). The sub-genre that most addressed this formation is Gangsta Rap, which, as mentioned in the introduction, is both more visible and in demand by white audiences in the country.

This representation of the masculinist narratives of Gangsta Rap opened the door to the commodification of the African-American community's street life. This phenomenon was born out of the 1980s and 1990s, on the back of the "post-industrialization and criminalizing, neoliberal policies of the Reagan era” and “subsequently followed by Bush, Clinton eras of the 1990s" (Prier, 24).

Then, due to the enormous success of Gangsta Rap, it tends to become the representation of the gender as a whole and thus becomes "an essentialised and limited

construction of black masculinity" (Oware, 22). These representations, according to Oware, translate into the notion of the African American male who "means exhibiting extreme toughness, invulnerability, violence and domination" (22).

Following Oware, Tricia Rose, in *Hip Hop Wars*, describes how this sub-genre and the hyper-masculinised figure within the African American community has been commercialised to levels that are problematic for the perception of the African American community. Thus, she states the following:

> If we focus solely on a rapper, song or video for its sexist or gangsta-inspired imagery, the trees are not letting us see the forest. Rather, it is a broader and more significant trend that has come to define commercial hip hop as a whole: The trinity of commercial hip hop - the black gangsta, the pimp, and the whore - has been promoted and accepted to the point where it now dominates the narrative worldview of the genre. (4)

Neal explains this domination of the narrative by analysing the artist Jay Z. He explains how the impact of such narratives "is related to efforts to limit the breadth and diversity of black identity" to a limited performative mobility. This representation of African American masculinity reduces its stereotypes to people who fit into "the essential tropes", such as "playa, pimp, hustler, thug, and nigga-that define contemporary mainstream hip-hop masculinities" (24).

This is why, as Oware argues, commercial success played a transformative role in capitalising on the stereotypes promoted by a discourse that imposes a racial authenticity on the African-American community. The projected image of the violent and dangerous black man is reinforced through the genre, thus perpetuating behaviours considered typical and perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and stereotyping.

Male Hegemony, or "the global dominance of men over the women", is a concept internalised by Connell himself, which deepens a discourse that validates the dominant roles of men over women and identities in society (183). For Connell, "this structural fact provides the important basis for relationships among men that define a hegemonic form of masculinity as a whole" (133). That is why masculinity, he explains, is elaborated in terms of various masculinities, also taking into account its relationship with the opposite gender, women. These interactions underpin "an important part of how a patriarchal social order works"(183).

Foucault, in *History of Sexuality* already tells us how "The pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator" (83). Note that the French philosopher does not speak of male hegemony, but of a discourse introduced into society which acts, with respect to sex, in a "juridicodiscursive character" (83). The man as a self-sufficient person and hero, on whom the woman depends. *Father Times* does nothing more than show how this tool of domination is represented through Lamar's experience.

Connell supports this view, stating that change "comes from outside, from society at large, as in discussions of how technological and economic changes demand a shift to a modern male role" (53) The transcendence of roles gives us an understanding of domination throughout history.

Thus, Foucault establishes that the "prohibitions surrounding it (discourse) soon reveal its links with desire and power", and not only relates them, but that discourse for him "it is also the object of desire" (216). I speak, therefore, of Male Hegemony as a form/manifestation of power, of the production of subjects that will have direct consequences on men themselves and on the domination of women and groups that do not belong to the hegemonic male in society.

This manifestation of power and social relation is "promoted and legitimised by the street code", so that if you participate in it you are within the object of desire and it produces "a certain amount of regard" (Watts, 596). It is not only this structuring of relations that Watts makes clear is the object of desire, but that it is also the promotion of this way of acting within social relations that expands the street code.

According to Foucault and Connell, the formation of black masculinity within hip hop takes place directly through men subordinated to a submissive discourse based on desires imposed by the dominant culture. This is why Randolph states that this masculinity not only satisfies “their own desires, but to meet their White audience's stereotypes about Black men" (221).

I argue then that African American artists have two types of audiences. The first one is that which validates and buys their narrative promoted by commercial success, the one which is considered white. The second audience is the African American community that the black hip hop artist is responsible for representing.

Within this context, artists are able to delimit those behaviours that are considered normative and those that are not, thus reproducing molded identities that oppress not only the African American race itself, but any identity that differs from normative sexuality based on imposed power.

Foucault expresses this phenomenon as a tool of social construction of a cultural nature, explaining that power "is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (86). This idea of behaviour attributed to African-Americans as a whole is the result of cultural learning and a specific social construction of masculinity for which institutions of power, including musical institutions, are responsible.

Thus, for Connell, African-American masculinity is closely linked to relations of "power", "production" and "cathexis" (74). The study of African-American masculinity is the result of social practice that takes into account not only gender, but also social class, sexual orientation and race, factors that explain the oppression of the dominant masculinity I am discussing.

Within this context, African American masculinities are used for the construction of gender by white masculinities in order to sustain the social and institutional hegemony that has been in place. Thus, the idea that black masculinity is violent or dangerous, while normative, or white, masculinity is ideal, is sustained.

In the song *Father Time*, Lamar depicts his experiences of developing this masculinity from a young age as reflected in the image of his father. This experience is common within the African-American community and, in many cases, results directly from fatherlessness.

However, Lamar seems to be aware of the importance of the father figure, which is partly responsible for the representation of the model of masculinity I have been describing. Furthermore, he makes reference to how the lack of a father figure can lead one to seek another within other places, such as gangs or hip hop culture.

According to Abreu et al., African American youth "may adopt a masculinity shaped by greater reliance on peer culture, which may create a gravitational pull towards athletics, fighting, and risk-taking behaviors" (76), i.e. gendered behaviors that are consequential to structural and socio-political environments. Lamar explains that young people have to "learn shit 'bout bein' a man and disguise it as bein' gangsta"(2:53-7).

Thus, Abreu et al. conclude through a Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure that being in a situation where African American youth are without a father figure "would be likely to increase the influence of peer groups regardless of race" (76). Paschal, Ringwalt

and Flewelling add that fatherlessness is an indicator that highlights the impacts of mothers in maintaining a stable home and that it is important "to parents of both supervision and control of their son's behaviour" (31).

Lamar therefore represents these actions as a cycle that repeats itself over generations and is aware of the consequences. He states: "And to my partners that figured it out without a father/I salute you, may your blessings be neutral to your toddlers"(3:03-9), hoping that these fatherless males do not continue a cycle that is detrimental to their community. It is "crucial" that their community realises this and can "see the mistakes"(3:11).

Following Lamar's experience of the development of his identity based on his father's reflection, "daddy issues"(0:33) are explored by the artist to show the self-consciousness of masculinity and the effects of it. First, Lamar opens the song by simulating a conversation in which therapy is advised for the artist, whereupon he sarcastically and self-consciously responds, "Real nigga need no therapy, fuck you talkin' about?"(0:06)

"Daddy issues ball across my head" (Lamar,0:44-6) says the rapper, aware of the cultural effects on which he is self-representing and challenging African-American masculinity through the image of his father. The behaviour that Lamar's father expects from his son is questioned throughout the song.

The father's worldview shows how Lamar has experienced the formation of his identity based on the conceptions imposed on him and his way of developing in his community. It shows how his father maintained that "the bills got no silver spoon"(2:12) and Lamar's thoughts in response to his father's cultural imposition of his way of acting.

The aforementioned traits of the embodied conception of the Afro American male as a harsh and insensitive person are challenged by Lamar: "A child that grew

accustomed, jumping up when I scraped my knee", Lamar reiterates the words of his father "Cause if I cried about it, he'd surely tell me not to be weak/ Daddy issues, hid my emotions, never expressed myself/ Men should never show feelings, being sensitive never helped. (1:54-2:06)

Lamar's way of developing his identity and his concept of masculinity is challenged through a process of constant change throughout the narrative, supporting Connell's line that masculinity is not fixed or inherent, but is constructed and negotiated in interaction with other members of the community.

This approach is examined from Lamar's father's point of view, in which he says that "I love my father for telling me to take off the gloves"(2:57-3:00), reinforcing Connell and Foucault's idea that, despite being in a marginalised position, dominated individuals subscribe to certain social norms imposed by the hand of dominant masculinity.

The artist further suggests that "fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickledown effect" (Connell, 81), i.e. it does not lead to social change for black men as a whole. The term hegemonic and marginalised masculinity does not apply specific characters to the whole but rather "configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships" (Connell, 81).

Lamar thus shows through the narrative an attempt to break away from imposed norms of social performance and to stop perpetuating existing structures of domination. His response to his father's way of acting was put into question, as he says "cause everything he didn't want was everything I was"(3:00-2).

The importance of the father figure is presented throughout Lamar's work and how the absence of such can lead to the emulation of models of masculinity in lower socioeconomic groups settings. The importance of the structural and socio-political environment is also shown to influence the gendered behaviour presented.

Cultural stereotypes imposed on African American masculinity are challenged by Lamar, firstly, by attempting to break detrimental cycles. Through his narrative it can be seen how the gender issue is treated, and that far from being inherent, it is continually negotiated with the community and the influence of dominant social norms to which subordinate individuals are exposed.

2.4 "Breaking the Chains: Healing and Empowerment in Kendrick Lamar's Narrative"

Gender stereotypes have been present in American culture and over the years have affected the representation of women, especially those of African-American origin. Different studies have shown how representations of women in music are detrimental to their position in society, depriving them of "sexual power", a "reality of truncated economic opportunity, and the pain of racism and sexism" (Rose, 146).

Rose underlines the role of African American society as a source of resistance to dominant discourses, not only feminist, but also resistance to power. That is, despite the situation of domination faced by the African American male demographic, addressing issues of police harassment or the means by which they are policed, African American women are on a lower rung, more specifically "in the arena of sexual politics" (Rose, 147). Nonetheless, over time there have been some shifts of consciousness in this regard in lyrical and visual representations within the Hip Hop world. The clearest example is Jay Z, who I have mentioned above. He acknowledges his hyper masculinist behaviour in his latest work and apologises for the damage he caused to women by promoting a sexualising and inferior discourse. Thus, Jay Z states the following in *4:44* "I apologize to all the women whom I toyed with your emotions' cause I was emotionless" (1:40-4).

The record of women's representation in commercial hip hop has shown progress, but the truth is that narratives that objectify and sexualise women still persist. If Hip Hop is to serve as a tool for change, it is essential to showcase it to society and raise awareness of the situation in which those women find themselves and to promote responsible narratives.

Within African American culture, Rose presents the difficulties presented about black women in addressing an important role in a hegemonic culture that is largely male-dominated. Perry argues that such narratives are profitable for the industry because the genre is beholden to hegemonic black masculinity, and also maintains the domination of African American women over "what they are allowed to say and do"(144).

Commercial hip hop songs, according to Perry or Rose, are cultural representations that reinforce the identity that is intended to be attributed to African American women in society. They are using "power and irreverence for decorum as defined through societal expectations of the behaviour of 'respectable' women and male expectations of female subordination and stroking the male ego"(Perry, 525). Rose thus argues that African American women's identity and sexuality must be considered in a multiple way, in the face of the need to avoid the simplistic stereotypes of commercial narratives. In the same way Perry also argues that empowering African American women on the basis of an imposed commercial appeal limits the creation and development of identities.

Both perspectives reflect the importance of understanding the stereotypes and limitations imposed on the representations and discourse that entrench African American women as objects. It is important to recognise the consequences of maintaining a narrative

that limits them and keeps them in constant danger of sexual violence and dehumanisation.

Regarding imposed limitations and gender stereotypes, Lamar expresses his experience with sexual trauma in *Mother I Sober*. He describes how sexual violence in his community affected his mother, who was abused by his uncle when the artist was five years old. Lamar's sexual trauma and healing are the subject of the "generational course"(6:04) that the artist seeks to end.

This experience represented by Lamar is common within the African-American community. A study by Bryant-Davis et. al. of 314 adult African American women found that approximately 65 percent of the sample had been sexually abused. Also, a study by Wyatt of 248 African American women shows that "154 reported at least one incident of sexual abuse prior to age 18" (507).

The use of institutions and systems, such as medical, mental health or correctional facilities create distrust among the Afro American community because they tend to "revictimize African Americans" (Tillman et al., 64). Moreover, according to Tillman et al. they suggest that, as a result, they are less likely to seek help from institutions belonging to the dominant sector of society, which has oppressed them over the years.

Thus, Tillman et al. also suggest that "racism and limited knowledge about different cultures" from institutionalised agents are "predisposed to biases and prejudice that affects assessment, treatment, and therapeutic engagement"(65).

It is crucial to show how Lamar, through *Mother I Sober*, visualises the theory discussed through what may be one of the best narratives in his discography. The result of the indiscriminate violence, hatred and oppression that the African-American

community has suffered is shown by an artist coming from the birthplace of Gangsta Rap, a genre that I have been discussing as a sub-current of Hip Hop that suppressed this kind of narratives that show the suffering and trauma of his community from the industry.

Lamar introduces his song as a trauma which he has not been able to overcome since an early age and which has conditioned his life because of which he wants a "transformation"(0:21). Lamar expresses the difficulty of showing the pain of trauma with the recurrence of addictions, such as money, sex or drugs. Thus, he tells us that “you ain't felt grief 'til you felt it sober” (Lamar, 1:06-8)

During his childhood, Lamar explains that his mother would question him about whether his cousin had sexually assaulted him. "Did he touch you, Kendrick?"(1:45), the rapper explains, putting himself in his mother's shoes, the answer always being the same, to which he explains that "never lied, but no one believed me when I said "He didn't""(1:49). It was these constant questions from his mother that consolidated Lamar's trauma.

This experience of sexual abuse was previously presented in *Mr Morale*, where Lamar explains that "My mother abused young/ Like all of the mothers back where we from"(1:56-59). As previously explained, cases of sexual violence in African-American communities are very frequent. Studies from The National Center on Violence Against Women in The Black Community explain that 20 percent of black women in the United States are raped in their lifetime.

Thus, the rapper exposes his mother's constant worry that his son would not have experienced what she had to go through. In this way, Kendrick addresses a narrative that is very explicit and different from what Hip Hop listeners, in the line of Tricia Rose, are

used to. Addressing sexual violence in the African-American community with responsiveness is a "conversation not bein' addressed in Black families" (Lamar, 4:21-24)

In the slavery era, the domination of the African-American community was a feature that "play symbolic roles for white gender construction" (Connell, 80). This can be seen today in the United States, where the discourse of power within American society continues to consciously and unconsciously support the oppression of the black American community.

Therefore, Lamar raps the following in relation to the harmful effects of slavery: "They raped our mothers, then they raped our sisters/Then they made us watch, then made us rape each other (4:26-32). Slavery was total domination, physical and psychological. When slavery was abolished, the dominant need of the slaveholders and their families was unsatisfied because this kind of oppression could not be exercised legally. This is an example that fits Eric-Udorie and Hirsch's thoughts when he states that "white culture seeks to "eat the other" as a manifestation of patriarchal white supremacy" (153), even though the law forbids it, the aftermath and morality persists.

Therefore, through the discourse and the prohibitions surrounding it, they maintain the instability and the aftermath experienced by the subjects who suffered domination. Lamar explains that his community suffers "psychotic torture between our lives we ain't recovered"(4:32-5). A manifestation that is made explicit throughout *Mother I Sober*, which also translates into what Akward calls "the dangers of a hegemonic, heterosexual Euro-American male's in-ness"(105), where one witnesses the violation of the African-American woman and the undermining of her identity through the white man's speculation, the execution of their power over their inferiors and the deterioration of the community over which domination was exercised.

In addition to portraying the traumas that Lamar has suffered throughout his life, he also mentions "every other rapper sexually abused"(4:44), who try to avoid trauma by avoiding being sober metaphorically speaking, "buryin' they pain in chains and tattoos"(4:45-7)

Spillers conceptualises the construction of subjectivities in the slavery era within the socio-political order of the United States. The author proposes an essential distinction between body and flesh. The body is the subject, the identity as a whole, while the flesh is the "zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography"(67), the violence that has been committed against the African American body. Thus, in times of slavery, the body was reduced to flesh, and African American identity was commodified on the basis of the desire of white power.

This distinction refers to the illegality of black identities produced through the political violence of the ruling class, reducing African-Americans to flesh. This is why it can be related to Lamar's narrative that "this is post-traumatic Black families and a sodomy, today is still active" (4:47-5:01, Lamar), that is, today they are still experiencing the consequences of the slavery era.

While Spiller talks about legal mechanisms that define which individuals deserve an identity or not, Lamar says the following: "So I set free myself from all the guilt that I thought I made" (5:04-08). In other words, freeing the community from the post-traumatic burden is an issue addressed.

Spillers, like Rose throughout his work, also questions the subjection and torture that the community has suffered after slavery. He explains that African-American

subculture "becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor"(66). Lamar, then, is attempting to recover the social value of his community that is "still livin' as victims in the public eyes who pledge allegiance"(4:36-39), i.e., that has been systematically obscured by social mechanisms born in slavery.

Therefore, Lamar, through his work, and especially *Mother I Sober*, addresses the sexual trauma experienced in his community and the process of healing from it. In doing so, he consciously speaks of the limitations imposed on him through his own experience. Representing his reality through his narrative visibilises the consequences of the oppression experienced over the years, such as the high rates of sexual violence or the lack of institutional support.

Finally, the rapper's narrative seeks to end the violence suffered by his community through a transformative and healing process. Exposing the problems of African Americans through experiences differs from the normative narratives defined by authors such as Tricia Rose or Oware, advocating for narratives that question those that normalise the situation of African Americans, inducing them further into an unfavourable and detrimental situation.

Lamar challenges the conventions of the hip-hop genre by addressing sensitive issues and giving voice to experiences of sexual violence in his community. Through his music, he seeks to generate a necessary conversation that is rarely addressed in African American families and challenges the dominant narrative of power and oppression. His work highlights the importance of healing and personal transformation in overcoming trauma and breaking cycles of violence.

3. Conclusion

This master's thesis has focused on analysing the narratives employed by the artist Kendrick Lamar through his recent project M*r Morale and The Big Steppers*. In order to achieve a correct analysis of it, I first introduced two fundamental aspects.

Firstly, the musical genre Hip Hop is introduced and explored in relation to its origins and development. The importance of the genre and its origins have been examined on the basis of theories presented by scholars such as Tricia Rose, who has provided comprehensive research through works such as *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* and *The Hip Hop Wars*.

Secondly, the artist's place of origin, Compton, has been discussed, which I consider key to the artist's personal development, and consequently, to his work. The social development context of Compton, a place characterised by violence, gangs and racial segregation, has been presented.

In the main body of the final master's thesis, once the previous aspects have been introduced, the following three topics are discussed, all presented by Lamar in his narrative in his work Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers: personal development marked by materialism, religion, and gender-related issues within the African-American community.

The narrative of personal development marked by materialism is challenged by Lamar. While the dominant narrative promotes extreme materialism, Lamar challenges it by arguing that material wealth does not solve the realities of the African American

community. He also proposes a shift in the search for authenticity and the true self beyond material references, challenging the normative and exploring away from social constructs.

In relation to the narrative regarding religion, I argue that Lamar has always carried Christianity with him in his work and it has conditioned his narrative. To do this I mention scholars such as Miller or Perry to argue how Lamar's narrative develops by expressing his internal struggles and commitment to religion, presenting his persona in the work as a vulnerable prophet. Throughout the work it is argued that the rapper uses a religious consciousness in order to promote a moral conscience and reject society's saviour role. The construction of the self is prioritised and the search for the authenticity of the self is the message that Lamar argues for.

The gender narrative is addressed in Mr Morale and The Big Steppers, firstly, through the consequences of imposed conceptions of African American masculinity. In doing so, I focus primarily on the song, Father Time, where I argue that African American masculinity in Hip Hop is presented in relation to dominant discourses that impose gender constructions on the community. Through Lamar's work, the direct consequences on African American men as well as women are shown. Thus, the narrative attempts to break with imposed narratives and advocate for an end to the perpetuation of the structures of domination presented. Ultimately Lamar advocates for the empowerment of his community and the creation of healthy and positive alternatives for the development of African American masculinity.

Finally, within the gendered narrative he addresses sexual trauma and healing in his community through Mother I Sober. I argue that his narrative seeks to end sexual violence through a process of healing, challenging Hip Hop narratives and generating a conversation with his community for change and transformation. The dominant narrative

of power and oppression is challenged to end the cycles of violence and overcome the traumas thus generated.

Listening to Kendrick Lamar, Mr Morale and The Big Steppers aims to open up new barriers, such as those involving power and artistic expression by communities that have not received the attention they should, especially if it comes from the field of music, and more so from Hip Hop. Topics such as sexual violence, trauma, the search for the self, and the situation of African Americans are issues related to the role of music in contemporary society by Lamar. By focusing on Kendrick Lamar's voices and their relationship to social realities, it aims to raise awareness of the issues and challenges facing marginalised communities and society at large. To create a brighter, more just and equitable future for an increasingly global society, we must acknowledge the importance of music and artistic expression in the struggle for social change.

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