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Til Death Do Us Part: Kendrick Lamar, “The Heart Part 5,” and Black Male Vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

Hip-Hop continues to be one of the most influential music genres in the modern era. Such impact necessitates scholars to engage in Hip-Hop discourses to comprehend its power in shaping and understanding various individuals’ experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs. To that end, this essay explores the rhetoric of Black male vulnerability as it is expressed in Hip-Hop by Black male artists. We contend that studying the rhetoric of Black male vulnerability articulated by Hip-Hop artists assists in better understanding the realities and sensibilities of Black men and boys, one of the most vulnerable populations. To accomplish this task, we analyze Kendrick Lamar’s “the Heart Part 5” to explore how he constructs a rhetorical definition of Black male vulnerability. Our analysis asserts that Lamar recognizes the vulnerabilities of Black males through lyrically conveying their relationship to emotional suffering and death, oxymoronic peer networks, and illuminating Black males’ varied reactions to trauma. We conclude that attending to the vulnerabilities of Black males as articulated in Hip-Hop propels scholars to move beyond understanding Black males as deviant, toxic, and the racialized counterparts of white males. Such a nuanced understanding of Black male culture may improve their life chances in a white supremacist society.

KEYTERMS

Black male studies; Black male vulnerability; Hip-Hop rhetoric; Kendrick Lamar

Since its inception, Hip-Hop has served as a voice and has been one of the most prolific platforms for expressing the lived experiences of Black¹ and Brown people from underserved communities. Hip-Hop has also been of unique interest to academic scholars, addressing pertinent topics such as language, literacy, economics, culture, politics, gender, globalization, and other related topics (Campbell, 2005; Chang, 2007; Charnas, 2011; Dyson, 2006, 2007; George, 2005; Pinn, 2003; Rose, 1994, 2008). More recently, Hip-Hop has drawn considerable attention from scholars in the field of Communication/rhetorical studies regarding various topics such as pedagogy, religion, gender politics, and crime (Gordon, 2020; McCann, 2017; Sciallo, 2014, 2018; Tinajero, 2013), including a recent special issue in the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, edited by Andre E. Johnson and Damariyé L. Smith (Johnson & Smith, 2022), that complements our impending discussion.

Such interest in the rhetoric of Hip-Hop signals a necessary expansion of rhetorical studies through the examination of nontraditional artifacts, such as Hip-Hop, as these

nontraditional artifacts possess important meanings toward a more holistic understanding of human communication. While these studies have certainly contributed to the overall comprehension of Hip-Hop rhetoric, more work is still to be done regarding complex conceptualizations of Hip-Hop rhetoric. Tinajero (2020) correctly notes that “despite the enormous influence of Hip Hop culture, Hip Hop’s voice has been and, to a very large degree, continues to lie on the margins of formal academic rhetorical study” (p. 14). One area that is limited within Communication/rhetorical studies’ literature is the concept of Black male vulnerability as it is conveyed in Hip-Hop.

Black male vulnerability, according to Curry (2017a), describes the “disadvantages that Black males endure... [and] the erasure of Black males’ actual lived experience from theory, and the violence and death Black males suffer in society” (p. 29). While it is no secret that Hip-Hop is dominated by Black males (at least aesthetically) and is often criticized for promoting misogyny, hyper-materialism, crime, and drug use (Fosbraey & Puckey, 2021; Frisby & Behm-Morawitz, 2019; Williams, 2020), many academics overlook artists and songs discussing Black men’s vulnerabilities within this genre. For Rudrow (2019), the value of studying Hip-Hop rhetoric is that it is perhaps one of the few spaces where Black males can “publicly articulate and assert their perspectives, speaking to their vulnerability in an anti-Black society... [and] portray their proximity to violence, death, and suffering” (p. 639). One artist that frequently raps about the realities of (lower-class) Black men is Compton-based rapper Kendrick Lamar. Lamar is one of the most prolific and profitable contemporary Hip-Hop artists. He has earned critical acclaim from inside and outside the Hip-Hop community, evidenced by his fourteen Grammys and Pulitzer Prize, a feat not even eminent Hip-Hop artists like Jay-Z, Nas, Lil Wayne, Drake, or J. Cole have achieved. Hence, this essay explores the rhetorical construction of Black male vulnerability as Lamar articulates it in the song “The Heart Part 5.”

Reception of “the Heart Part 5” from the Hip-Hop community

Released as a promotional single on May 8, 2022, on Lamar’s fifth studio album as a digital bonus track, “The Heart Part 5,” is Lamar’s latest installment of a series of songs titled under the same name that has appeared on previous albums. The song received high praise from many Hip-Hop critics due to Lamar’s lyrical complexity and genius. Dylan Green (2022) of *Pitchfork* noted, “[t]he themes and lyrics are dense and complex... and the song’s accompanying video adds even more layers... but they amplify Lamar’s words and serve to visualize a complicated lineage through Blackness and the pressures of celebrity.” Son Raw (2022) of *The Fader*, a New York City-based magazine, called the song “an indictment of the toxicity fueling contemporary culture,” underscoring the lyrical intent of Lamar. Further, the song even gained international attention, with Ben Beaumont-Thomas (2022) of *The Guardian* commenting that “[Lamar] seems to be addressing his own community as well as a broader America... [by] acknowledge[ing] that violence is often the reaction of the victimized.” Beaumont-Thomas (2022) further adds, “[Lamar] is honest and tender about the self-perpetuating nature of all forms of violence... [due to] the social and psychological histories.” In short, Lamar’s “The Heart Part 5” has received critical acclaim from the Hip-Hop community for its lyrical complexity, community uplift, and critique of American and Black cultures, meriting scholarly attention.

In this essay, we argue that Lamar invites his audience to consider the vulnerabilities of Black males in the song “The Heart Part 5” through the articulation of three rhetorical strategies: (1) Black maleness’ relationship to emotional suffering and death; (2) the oxymoronic nature of social validation for Black males; and (3) illuminating Black males’ responses to trauma. We contend that Lamar’s invitation provides a more comprehensive understanding of Hip-Hop rhetoric related to Black male vulnerability, moving beyond stereotypical discourses embedded in Hip-Hop that overemphasize hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, hyperconsumerism, and gangsterism. We are particularly interested in interrogating how Lamar understands his (and potentially others’) vulnerabilities. To clarify, while the term “rhetoric” can generate many valuable definitions, for this essay, rhetoric refers to *the persuasive force of speech that seeks human liberation by gaining adherence from an audience, most ethically, toward balance, justice, reciprocity, peace, and harmony*. This definition draws on Afrocentricity’s liberatory nature and the Greco-Roman tradition’s persuasive underpinnings (Asante, 2011; Borchers & Hundley, 2018; Smith, 2020). This definition also provides a robust analytic to morally assess Lamar’s rhetoric in terms of understanding how his discourse has the potential to liberate listeners, particularly Black males, persuasively. Overall, we contend that Hip-Hop artists, such as Lamar, through their music, provide vital insights for their listeners to better understand Black males as vulnerable figures.

Black male vulnerability and Hip-Hop

Curry (2017a) is primarily concerned with the academic denial of vulnerability and victimhood for Black men and boys, maintaining that such intellectual deprivation leads to material consequences for the Black male body. Curry (2018) asserts that “Black men enter our theoretical purview through the negative stereotypes...” (p. 1). He adds that “contemporary theories of Black masculinity suggest toxicity is the cause of Black male deviance and maladjustments rather than the cultural and structural realities that confront Black men and boys” (p. 2). To that end, Curry, along with other Black Male Studies scholars, maintains that interrogating the vulnerabilities of Black men and boys is not only worthy of academic inquiry but, more importantly, critical to the destruction of structures of oppression, racism, and white supremacy (Johnson, 2018; Rudrow, 2019, 2020; Smith, 2023). Despite the assumption that Black males are the racialized counterparts of white men and enjoy similar privileges and power, one must consider the empirical disparities of Black males in society. For instance, Black men and boys (6.5%) experience unwanted sexual violence at a similar rate as Black women (5.8%) and often higher than white women (3.6%) (Curry, 2019; Smith et al., 2017). Further, Black males have the lowest life expectancy, educational attainment, highest incarceration, and unemployment rates (Curry, 2017a, 2018, 2019; Johnson, 2018, 2022). As Johnson (2018) puts it, “The problem with identity-based accusations of privilege is that they rely on assumptions about access to resources and institutions of power, while often defining privilege incorrectly” (p. 35). Stated differently, how much privilege and power do Black males truly enjoy in society if they are dying at abnormal rates, uneducated, in prison, and jobless? Thus, to honestly grapple with the notion of power and privilege in a white

patriarchal society, one must include analyses of Black male vulnerability in various areas, including Hip-Hop.

Rudrow (2019, 2020) also contributes to the Hip-Hop rhetoric literature as it relates to Black masculinity through his analysis of the lyrics of Tupac Shakur and J. Cole, underscoring how both artists express what can be considered a rhetoric of Black male vulnerability in their music. Rudrow (2019, 2020) is particularly interested in how Black men understand their maleness through their relationships with their mothers, death, suicide, and sexual debut. Smith (2023) adds to this discussion by analyzing the lyrics of Drake to explore alternative ways Black males can express their masculinity and manhood through their communication practices in romantic contexts. Smith (2023) argues that Drake's discourse offers a more nuanced and complex notion of Black masculinity to his listeners through the acknowledgment of the complications of trusting their intimate partner, forgiveness, and recognition of restricted interpersonal power in personal relationships. Other scholars have also examined the vulnerabilities expressed by Hip-Hop artists, although not explicitly employing Curry's understanding of Black male vulnerability.

Chaney and Mincey (2014) examine Hip-Hop and R&B songs from 1956 to 2013 to determine how Black male artists express their sensitivity. These scholars note that Black males convey their sensitivity (or vulnerability) in four ways: (a) Private Sensitivity; (b) Partnered Sensitivity; (c) Perceptive Sensitivity; and (d) Public Sensitivity. Further, Wilkins (2021) contends that "Black men operate within a state of severe precarity" (p. 79), underscoring how many Black men are uncertain about their life chances in an anti-Black and racially misandrist world. Such uncertainty for Black males underscores Oware's (2011) suggestion that despite market forces that demand Black male Hip-Hop artists subscribe to white patriarchal norms within their musical performances, they often will "[express] their versatile range of emotions through performance... [such as] mourning, sorrow, regret, and outreach, not necessarily because it can sell records... but... [to] articulate their humanity" (p. 33). As such, Black male vulnerability is a helpful framework for analyzing the discourse of Black male Hip-Hop artists because it points the critic toward the rhetorical devices musicians may use to convey messages about their vulnerability and victimhood to illustrate their humanity.

We maintain that attending to the rhetorical constructions of Black male vulnerability as expressed through Hip-Hop enables scholars to gain critical insights into the language experiences, realities, sensibilities, and socio-political beliefs surrounding the vulnerability of Black males. Such attention draws on the perspective of Black men themselves rather than theories about Black men that often are racially misandrist and take a problem-orientation research approach that seeks to "fix" Black males rather than understand Black males as they are. Finally, understanding the rhetorical construction of Black male vulnerability assists in comprehending Black males as victims of a white patriarchal society that seeks to destroy racialized men through discursive means—our essay proceeds in the following manner. First, we offer a brief description of the song followed by a rhetorical analysis of the lyrical content, explicitly focusing on how Lamar constructs a rhetoric of Black male vulnerability. We conclude by exploring the implications of this case study to advance the theorization of Black male vulnerability as it is articulated through Hip-Hop.

Lamar's rhetorical construction of Black male vulnerability

"The Heart Part 5" centers around three major themes relating to Black male vulnerability: Their relationship to emotional suffering and death, their oxymoronic social relationships, and their sporadic self-destructive responses to trauma. Throughout the song, Lamar discusses how Black (Hip-Hop) culture often normalizes crime, murder, and death, positioning many Black males to feel like they need a weapon for protection from their own culture and other cultures. Lamar explains that due to the ontological nature of Black males (particularly from underserved communities), many are not only desensitized to crime and pain but often hide from it. For Lamar, this trauma forces reflective thinking about one's life as dangerous, but such consciousness can also motivate one toward self-determination. Finally, Lamar critiques the lack of loyalty to one another within the construction of Black culture, underscoring such problems as "Black-on-Black" violence and failure to invest in life insurance policies that will minimize the financial burden of death placed on many unprepared Black families.

Lamar continues this critique of Black male culture by addressing the oxymoronic nature of positive peer networks. He notes that despite Black males' desire to be loved and respected by their peers, they must also prepare to be potentially harmed by those same individuals regardless of their altruistic efforts to "save the Hood" or reveal logics that possibly have more favorable outcomes. Lamar notes how many successful Blacks (e.g., in the financial, social, and political realm) are always on the offense while concurrently seeking to keep a certain kinship between themselves and others from their community who may be unable to imagine life beyond the confines of their neighborhood. Because of this limited imagination for life beyond "the Hood," Lamar notes that many Black males often resort to drug use as a coping mechanism to deal with the pain and trauma of living in impoverished environments. For Lamar, this seems to be the tension for many Black males who, despite improving their social condition through self-determination and the (re)imagining of their potential, find it challenging to bring others along on the road toward success. Lamar furthers this argument by concluding that many in the Black community implicitly accept the status quo of being subjugated, often leading to negative consequences. He then takes a paternalistic perspective explaining that he advised the Black community about the challenges ahead, yet many were not carefully listening to his message. Lamar contends that Black suffering ultimately leads Black people to inflict pain on other Blacks. Lamar then dismisses the notion that Black people are united as a culture, presumably because Black culture is *not* learning from the past and teaching the new generation a better way to advance the culture.

Lamar's recognition of the complications of being Black but still exhibiting the resilience and perseverance to succeed is theoretically articulated to encourage others to face their fears of advancing socially. At the same time, Lamar acknowledges his limitations in being a change agent for his community as an artist while simultaneously wrestling with the idea that he still faces material threats of premature death. This lyrical realization positions Lamar to question his mortality and reflect on the meaning of his life. From this moment, Lamar lyrically speaks as the symbolic proxy for the late Nipsey Hussle (born Ermias Asghedom), another Los Angeles-based rapper gunned down in 2019 in broad daylight in his neighborhood. First, Lamar (metaphorically

speaking as Nipsey) assures his family, friends, and fans that he is safely in heaven after his untimely death. Then, as Nipsey, Lamar talks directly to Nipsey's assassin about forgiveness, explicitly noting that he forgives the killer. He reiterates his love for his people and gives guidance on how to go about celebrating Nipsey's life. Lamar closes the song by noting that self-healing is the key to helping others and that sacrifices are necessary; for instance, the public bear witnessing the death of Nipsey for cultural change to occur. Finally, Lamar finishes the song by restating that he still wants the Hood to love him despite the danger it presents him. Now that we have provided a descriptive analysis of the song's lyrical content, we explore Lamar's rhetorical construction of Black male vulnerability.

Black maleness' relationship to emotional suffering and death

Lamar's lyrics illuminate how the Black male body has a unique and perpetual relationship with emotional suffering and death. Because of historical, social, and economic factors, the Black male body is disproportionately subject to violence and trauma, positioning many Black males as one of the most vulnerable figures to date. This occurrence is articulated by Lamar (2022) at the beginning of verse one. Lamar opens the song by rapping, "I come from a generation of pain, where murder is minor, rebellious and Margielas'll chip you for designer belt buckles and clout, overzealous if prone to violence" (Lamar, 2022). Here, Lamar's lyrics highlight the context for many Black males where generational trauma leads to adverse views that regard vicious acts such as homicide as nugatory. Lamar's rhetoric also illustrates how access to affluent material possessions, such as Margielas (a fashion brand) and designer accessories (i.e., belt buckles), can lead to violent encounters for Black males. Critical here is that material possessions often serve as a proxy for others to evaluate social status and privilege. Such evaluations may lead to violent encounters because many Black males "are often targeted... by others and among themselves based on their... material possessions" (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2017, p. 2). This phenomenon is due to the Black community's limited access to wealth and systemic economic deprivation. Such occurrences distinctively subject Black males to various forms of violence and distress, ultimately leading to emotional suffering and trauma (Watkins et al., 2006). This notion is perhaps why Curry (2017b) believes that "Black male death and dying is the result of [a] engineered societal program" (p. 327). In other words, because Black maleness is often oriented by poverty, many are exposed to an enhanced likelihood of emotional suffering and premature death (Curry, 2017a; Johnson, 2018; Miles, 2023; Rudrow, 2019). In this way, Lamar's lyrics paint a vivid picture of the association between Black males, emotional suffering, and death that is often a result of a history of a scarcity of economic resources.

In another verse, Lamar (2022) raps, "I done seen niggas do seventeen, hit the halfway house. Get out and get his brains blown out, lookin' to buy some weed." Lamar illuminates many Black males' vulnerability throughout and after imprisonment in this excerpt. Lamar acknowledges a material reality for various Black males regarding incarceration. He notes how life after prison is still threatening, in this case, when attempting to purchase marijuana potentially for recreational use. As Miles (2023) notes, "the threat of death always impacts the way Black people live" (p. 210). Lamar's

observation of Black male death ultimately leads to paranoia for many Black males, positioning them as emotionally vulnerable. Rudrow (2019) remarks, “Black men are perpetually susceptible to death as a key feature of social life, which acts as a kind of haunting” (p. 642). Countless Black males are constantly afraid as their lives are organized around affective deterioration and predetermined mortality. Yet again, Lamar’s lyrics reveal how Black males’ relationship with emotional suffering and death are/can exist in a perpetual cycle.

Despite their material realities, some will argue that while Black males can be understood as vulnerable figures or victims in *some* cases, their status as males still positions them to exercise privilege and power over other minorities (Mutua, 2012; White, 2008). Such an understanding of Black maleness and manhood is appalling, denies Black males’ victimhood, and dismisses their emotional suffering and premature deaths that continuously occur. Butler (2013) writes that “Black men are still men ... [while] [t]hey don’t have access to all the ‘benefits’ of the patriarchy ... they have some of them ... there is the danger that [intellectual intrusions grounded on Black male empowerment] ... reinforces [a] gender-based hierarchy.” (p. 503). While it is plausible that such scholarly interventions have the potential to reinforce gender-based hierarchies, ignoring the material realities of Black males will only proliferate the dehumanization and eventual extinction of their being. The critical question is, who are these Black men and boys? Are they, not husbands, fathers, sons, and nephews? Do their lives not have any value to others?

Such inquiries are why Smith (2023) notes that “It is imperative to study the communicative realities and sensibilities of Black men to enhance their life chances” (p. 51). By analyzing lyrics, such as the ones from Lamar, scholars can more readily discern the discursive ways in which white patriarchal power functions to denigrate racialized and marginalized bodies. Further, recognizing Black males’ unique relationship to emotional suffering and death will not only facilitate scholars in benevolently elucidating their ontological disposition but, more notably, position scholars to combat pathological assertions of Black males. Not to mention comprehending the complexities of race, gender, and class as it relates to power and privilege under a White supremacist regime is vital to advance society toward more humanistic goals. Likewise, due to having an inimitable link to emotional suffering and premature death, some Black males may seek friendships with whom they can express their vulnerability to enhance their quality of life while it last.

The struggle to find “good” friends

Black males, like others, look for social validation and a sense of belonging from their peers. However, this desire becomes complicated in many underserved communities due to social factors, such as racism, economics, and job opportunities, that disproportionately impact Black males’ interpretations of positive peer networks. Such probable (mis)interpretation positions many Black males in an oxymoronic situation regarding peer relationships. Some peer groups may lead to unintended consequences for Black males. For many Black males, especially in underserved communities, joining negative peer groups (gangs, for example) may be optimal for protection purposes, brotherhood, and financial opportunities (McDougal, 2020; Spielberg, 2014). The challenge for many

Black males is that many of these negative peer groups may lead them to engage in self-destructive behaviors and material threats, even from the people within their peer group (i.e., vulnerability).

Lamar further expresses a rhetoric of Black male vulnerability by illuminating the difficulty of establishing positive peer networks for many Black males. This phenomenon is readily observable in Lamar's lyrics. Lamar (2022) states in the song, "I said I'd do this for my culture. To let y'all know what a nigga look like in a bulletproof Rover." In this excerpt, Lamar describes riding around in a Range Rover vehicle, a symbol of success. However, he notes that he must ride with bulletproof on his car for fear of being endangered by others, including members of his peer group. While the symbolism of riding around in an expensive vehicle illuminates perhaps his monetary achievement, the need to protect his possessions and his life through bulletproofing reveals his vulnerability as he climbs the social and s. In other words, financial success still does not protect Lamar from the material threats of being victimized by his peers. Lamar (2022) continues, "the streets got me fucked up, y'all can miss me. I wanna represent for us." Again, Lamar's lyrics clarify that he desires to be the embodiment of a constructive Black male ethos; however, he wrestles with the fact that many of his peers do not recognize or view him as a brother but instead see him as a potential threat or an opportunity to advance their lives in some capacity. Given this positionality, despite seeking and needing external validation and a sense of belonging, Black males such as Lamar are trapped in an oxymoronic predicament primarily due to their subject-position as racialized males who suffer from pathological readings of their existence (Allen, 2013; Curry, 2017a; Jackson, 2006; Smith, 2023). This notion underscores the vulnerability that Black males, like Lamar, face socially. Rather than enjoy the comfort of social bonds with others, Black males constantly fear their life being stripped from them materially and symbolically from not only police and white vigilantes but also other Black males (Lacy, 2023).

Some may argue that numerous Black males experience nondestructive social relationships such as fraternities, religious groups, and other social clubs. This notion is indeed factual on the surface, as many Black males do have positive peer groups. Important to note here is that many of those Black males are generally middle to upper class and, thus, in many ways, are socially privileged. However, only examining middle to upper-class Black men as a proxy to understand the totality of the Black male experience with establishing and maintaining positive social networks ignores perhaps the most vulnerable sub-group of Black men, those from an underserved socioeconomic status. According to Spurgeon and Myers (2010), "Black males compose only 6% of the total population yet account for 45% of all homicide victims, and they are [ten] times more likely to be murdered than are young [w]hite males" (p. 528). This suggests that even if some Black males can establish friendships with other Black males, the likelihood of losing that peer to homicide is absurdly high, especially in underserved communities. Positive Black male friendships are further complicated considering the low educational attainment rates for Black males at institutions of higher education and below (Johnson, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2011), not to mention the invisibility of countless Black males incarcerated (Curry, 2017a, Pettit, 2012). Thus, many Black males are limited in their choices for healthy peer groups, leaving many isolated while simultaneously confronting the struggles of their daily lived experiences.

Ultimately, many Black males struggle to find social validation and are thus vulnerable because of the challenges of finding what Bonner (2014) calls “safe zones” where they can express themselves and be themselves without fear of reprimanding. Even when underserved Black males do find perceived “safe zones,” it is ultimately an illusion as many of those supposedly “safe zones” are not genuinely safe and expose them to potential dangers, as Lamar explains in the excerpt above. Through his lyrics, Lamar illuminates the oxymoronic nature of Black male relationships. As Lamar describes, establishing and maintaining positive networks that will validate the existence of Black males, particularly those in underserved communities, is exceptionally complicated, thus underscoring the social vulnerability of Black males. With the limited opportunity to form positive relationships, Black males often must deal with their trauma independently.

(In)visible suffering and responses to trauma by Black males

Because Black males are often deemed dangerous and inspire fear in the public’s imagination, many tend to observe their behaviors as pathological. Such imposed subject position for many Black males can trigger them to engage in self-destructive behaviors as a compulsory retort to trauma. Lamar’s lyrics continue to convey this rhetoric of Black male vulnerability by engaging his listeners in a dialogue of the varied responses many Black males may employ to cope with their trauma. This phenomenon is readily apparent in Lamar’s (2022) lyrics when he raps, “crack a bottle. Hard to deal with the pain when you’re sober. By tomorrow, we forget the remains, we start over. That’s the problem.” In these lines, Lamar exposes that alcoholism and memory (or lack thereof) are vital components to cope with the daily traumas of being a Black male. In other words, alcohol and drugs are utilized as an escape mechanism to delay one’s need to confront their trauma. This phenomenon has been expressed in other Hip-Hop discourses. For instance, in J. Cole’s (2018) song “KOD,” he raps, “...I smoke the drug and it run through my vein/I think it’s workin’ it’s numbin’ the pain/Don’t give a fuck and I’m somewhat insane... Yeah, at this shit daily...” Cole illuminates the frequent drug use and addiction that many in Hip-Hop culture embrace as a mechanism and daily serum to cope with reality. In an interview, Gucci Mane, another notable rapper, explains his addiction to alcohol and “lean” (a mixture of soda and codeine/promethazine-based cough syrup). Gucci describes how he developed PTSD following a 2005 robbery attempt, where one of the would-be robbers was killed by Gucci in self-defense. To combat his paranoia of being killed, Gucci turned to “lean” and alcohol (Lane, 2022). In this way, many Black males may engage in copious drug use to manage their trauma.

Lamar (2022) further explains his (and possibly other Black males’) responses to trauma when he says, “Our foundation was trained to accept whatever follows. Dehumanized, insensitive. Scrutinize the way we live for you and I... In the land where no equal is your equal.” Lamar illuminates the early lessons for himself and perhaps other Black males about how they should view themselves, how society treats them, and how they ought to respond to traumatic incidents that occur in their lives. In this case, Black males have no equal as their humanity is often deemed futile. As

Curry (2017b) explains, “The fear of a Black man determines all of his physiological reaction to be aggressi[ve] toward whites [and others]” (p. 325). In this fashion, many Black men like Lamar are positioned to respond in particular ways (at times assertively) in the world due to the exigencies of the rhetorical situation in which their audiences’ fear of them locates them as incongruous with society. Further, the pathological perception of their being produces the oxymoronic nature of their social relationships, which makes it difficult to cope with trauma.

Are Black males’ responses to trauma appropriate, as Lamar describes in the song? Most will agree that Black males, particularly from underserved communities, face distinctive barriers regarding trauma but may disagree about the appropriateness of their reactions (e.g., alcoholism, drug use, crime, aggression) to trauma. The concern about appropriateness without consideration for the disproportionate effects of racism, health, education, employment, and racist misandry regarding Black males ultimately contributes to the pathological scripts that continue to stifle any liberation attempts by Black males. To truly comprehend the rationale for the perhaps hostile reactions by Black males toward society as they deal with their trauma, as Lamar expresses in “The Heart Part 5,” scholars must attend to “the pain expressed by Black men ... within a context of an historical narrative of marginality and the psychosocial consequences of an oppressive past” (Lipscomb et al., 2019, p. 12).

Critically listening to Lamar’s expressions of Black male vulnerability provides valuable insights into how many Black males may cope with their trauma. By closely listening to Lamar’s message, Black males are fed a more nuanced understanding of their realities and may be in a more robust position to cope with their feelings in a nondestructive manner. This idea is not to suggest that inappropriate responses by Black males do not deserve critique; it certainly does. However, reducing some Black males’ violent and aggressive behaviors to simple deviance without a sincere and nuanced intellectual engagement surrounding their maleness is reductionist. In short, Lamar’s lyrics underscore the vulnerabilities of Black males as it relates to responses to trauma. While other subjects are granted victimhood during times of crisis, Black male suffering, according to Lamar, is rendered invisible.

Conclusion

This essay explored the rhetoric of Black male vulnerability expressed by Hip-Hop artists, in this case, Kendrick Lamar, in his song “The Heart Part 5.” In this essay, we have argued that Lamar invited his listeners into a dialogue regarding the vulnerabilities of Black males, particularly from underserved communities, by rapping about (1) Black maleness’ relationship to emotional suffering and death; (2) the oxymoronic nature of social validation for Black males; and (3) Black males’ responses to trauma. By inviting his audience into a lyrical dialogue, Lamar helps illuminate the vulnerability of marginalized Black males in urban communities in various ways. In other words, for Lamar, Black males involuntarily occupy vulnerable subject(ed) positions because their bodies are socially deemed as utilities for others’ material and symbolic consumption and disposable once their utility becomes superfluous. Lamar demonstrates that when Black males attempt to gain and sustain social relationships, these relational arrangements may be compromised due to the nature of Black maleness and its relation to

poverty, financial capital, and social mobility in a white patriarchal society. To this end, according to Lamar, Black males face unique traumas that may cause them to engage in self-destructive behaviors as a response to trauma. Given our analysis, we offer three thought-provoking insights worthy of further consideration for the theoretical advancement of Black male vulnerability rhetoric as expressed in Hip-Hop by Black male artists.

First, Lamar's take on Black maleness' relationship to emotional suffering and death underscores the complexity of the ontological disposition of Black males. According to Lamar, Black males must emotionally contend with what Lacy (2023) calls "The Talk," or conversations about preventative tactics to possibly evade being slain by law enforcement and navigate the emotional tensions of being victimized by other Black males. While Rudrow (2019) illuminates how the Black male body is threatened by police, gun violence, and suicide, this essay contributes to the literature by illuminating the violence Black males undergo that is enacted by historical, economic, and social factors. Because of the historical trauma of racism combined with the economic deprivation and disproportionate poverty level in the Black community, Black males are exceedingly victimized socially, whether over material possessions or due to the threat of incarceration or homicide. Black males, particularly in underserved communities, are excessively affected by poverty, informing their ontological disposition. For Curry (2014), this occurrence is a result of "the genocidal logics of American racism" (para. 4), where Black male death is normalized or observed as justifiable due to pathological perceptions of their being. Put another way, Black males' unique encounters with violence and trauma are part of the proper functioning of a socially engineered program, causing a hefty toll on Black males' psyche and may lead to emotional suffering and premature death.

Furthermore, this essay extends Curry's concept of Black male vulnerability and Rudrow's (2019, 2020) and Smith's (2023) work on its intersection with Hip-Hop. While Rudrow and Smith both make exciting claims about the intersection of Black male vulnerability and Hip-Hop rhetoric, analysis of Lamar's "The Heart Part 5" offers more nuance regarding the complexity of establishing and maintaining positive peer networks for many Black males. As a multitude of research has shown, to survive in underprivileged neighborhoods, many Black males must exude a certain level of aggression and hostile esthetic toward the Other (Anderson, 2000; Majors & Billson, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1993; Oware, 2011). Such antagonistic posture, or as Majors and Billson (1992) call, "cool pose," constrains Black males' options for constructing and sustaining positive peer networks (Evans et al., 2016). Like others, positive peer groups are critical for psychological well-being, intimacy, safety, and a sense of belonging. However, for many underserved Black males, this opportunity is marginal at best because of gendered racism, misandrist rhetoric, and pathologizing assumptions that distort Black male culture. Such misrepresentations of Black male culture are illuminated through media and pop culture, shaping how others (including Black males themselves) read Black men and boys. Thus, Lamar's articulation of the intricacies of establishing and maintaining positive peer networks for Black males underscores a significant component within the rhetoric of Black male vulnerability.

Lastly, Lamar's rhetoric carves space for interrogating Black male self-destructive responses to trauma. This phenomenon advances the literature on Black male vulnerability as expressed in Hip-Hop by acknowledging Black males' reactions to

trauma as a legitimate response given their social conditions. Rather than overstating that Black male deviance is a result of toxicity (which is counterproductive), this essay calls for scholars to examine the underlying causes that uniquely expose Black males to a perpetual cycle of trauma. For example, Singletary (2020) states that one of the underlying reasons for Black males' adverse responses to trauma is "the internalization of traumatic events and the cognitive avoidance of sharing traumatic experiences [which] have the potential to cause severe impairment" (p. 532). In this way, by attending to Lamar's rhetoric, scholars are more informed about the lived experiences of Black males. They can work to create safe venues for them to share their stories to alleviate their emotional trauma beyond Hip-Hop. Simply put, Lamar's lyrics arguably represent the lived experiences of a large segment of Black males in society.

Franklin (2004) notes that many Black males suffer from what he calls "invisibility syndrome," where Black males often have an inner consciousness due to racial misandry that understands their being as invisible and futile to others. Because of this perceived invisibility, some Black males will engage in excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, and even crime, as Lamar accurately describes in this song. Further, researchers have documented that the vulnerabilities of Black males often lead to negative responses such as depression, aggression, and repudiation (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005). With this understanding, scholarly intervention is necessary to assess Black males' responses to trauma and, perhaps more importantly, help reduce misunderstandings of Black male vulnerability as it relates to trauma. Thus, centering Hip-Hop as a site for interrogating the traumatic realities facing Black males, especially those living in impoverished communities, may improve their life chances.

To attend to the vulnerabilities of Black males as articulated in Hip-Hop and other creative spaces is to take an active role in dismantling a white supremacist society in which individuals outside of its logics exist. With sizeable gaps in the literature surrounding Hip-Hop culture (Tinajero, 2020), future research should further explore how other Black Hip-Hop artists complicate or resist public conceptions of Black masculinity. Rather than advance a research agenda that contributes to understanding Black males as deviant, toxic, and the racialized counterparts of white patriarchs, perhaps a more productive way of grasping how white supremacy can be undone is to attend to the vulnerabilities constitutive to Black male experiences, as much can be garnered from a critical close reading of the articulations made by many Black males in the Hip-Hop space.

Note

1. In postcolonial and anti-racist engagement, this study uses a lowercase "w" when referring to white individuals and capitalizes Black when referring to Black individuals to combat historical writing conventions that perpetuate white supremacy (see Bauder, 2020; Lanham & Liu, 2019).

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