The Cruel Theater of Rap

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Preface

Academia is not separate from the rest of the world. I am a white, twenty-two year old, male writing about a traditionally black culture and art form. Who am I, who grew up in a fairly rural part of Indiana, who had not even attempted to listen to rap music until I was exposed to it as a first year undergraduate student, to write about the cruelty of rap music? I do not pretend to have experienced the same hardships that are presented in this culture and music but I am writing about this topic because I genuinely love engaging with it, I think it is an especially important aspect of the contemporary popular culture and art world in addition to black American culture, and I want to give as much of myself to the growth (and hopefully not toward the misappropriation) of the culture as I can. Kendrick Lamar states in his song “Ab-Soul’s Outro,” from his 2011 debut studio album Section.80, “I’m not on the outside looking in, I’m not on the inside looking out/ I’m in the dead fucking center, looking around.”¹ This is the framework toward which this essay aspires. I cannot claim to be deeply entrenched inside the culture of hip hop—I am not black, this is not music I grew up listening to, but it is a music I have come to love and so I am implicated—I cannot claim to be exactly outside of it looking in either. The interest of this work lies particularly with the aspects of cruelty that the aesthetic experience of rap music presents and as an avid listener, I have a predisposed affinity toward acceptance of even some of the cruelest aspects of the music. I will attempt to inhabit the same space of self-awareness from which Lamar claims to

project his perspective, with a critical eye focused on the aspects of cruelty in rap music’s aesthetic experience. It is not my purpose in this work to focus on the origins of cruelty or comment on the socio-political importance of rap music, or even to explore its formal lyrical structures but rather to present reflections on the artistic contribution of cruelty within rap music. These others are interesting aspects of rap music, worthy of their own theses themselves but my interest is strictly aesthetic. Perhaps this is the greatest cruelty of this entire situation: the white, twenty-two year old male writing about the cruelty (often aimed at women) that exists in rap music regardless of the inherent gender-based and racially-based power dynamic. The greatest cruelty is the potential misuse of this power. It is my utmost priority in this paper to lay myself as bare as possible in order to not contribute to these various violences. In view of this priority, it is natural that this discussion of cruelty in rap must inevitably touch upon some of the social politics surrounding rap music and the literary forms that it displays and employs. I do not write without regard to the gender and race-based power dynamics inherent to my writing, but they are not my focus. Wrapped up in this discussion, the essay will eventually arrive at an overarching point, the relationship between art and morality in contemporary spectatorship. In this study of popular culture’s relation to artistic value, it is important to understand the institutions of past aesthetic philosophies, but it is also something of an uncharted territory that must be approached as such. In accordance, I have included personal experiences in addition to interpretations of some classic works of aesthetic philosophy as well as artistic analyses of rappers, songs, and albums that will hopefully expound upon and impart important insights
toward an academically sound, aesthetic perspective on an understanding of the cruelty that exists in hip hop.

1: Cruelty and Art

Rap music often displays extremely violent situations and cruel perspectives especially with regard to misogyny and gang-related violence. Hip hop has even been considered by some as indicative of decay in the moral values of society. Rap music in particular is the medium through which hip hop culture is most often presented today, so much so that the distinction between “hip hop” (culture) and “rap” (an artistic expression or medium of the culture) has all but disintegrated in popular culture. A central question in the discussion of rap music is whether the violence it often exhibits is bad for the world—à la the usual criticisms, “it is misogynist, it is violent, and it is entrenching these things in the minds of the youth.” This is a loaded question. The short answer is that music can be extremely influential and so rap music’s cruelty is indeed a negative for society. The space that rap music occupies in popular culture is situated on a particularly influential pedestal. This essay will focus on this question of the cruelty of rap music as it relates to the connection between art and morality. It is above all, a philosophical question that must be answered through aesthetic analysis of cruelty in art as well as through an historical orientation. Rap is hardly the first genre of artwork that has exhibited violence, or even glorified it but to understand the difference between the manifestations of cruelty in rap music from many other cruel arts, it is important to first look at the context of the themes of cruelty in art generally.
Artistic relevance is an eternal struggle. How does one continue to make work that speaks to and satisfies the essential aesthetic needs of a society? In essence, this becomes a question of authenticity, a form of which, known as “realness,” also exists prominently in rap music. How does an artist make art that is perceived as “true”? Art is in a constant state of anxious and tumultuous flux—call it innovation, call it decay, it has probably been both. In 1938, French playwright and aesthetic philosopher (madman) Antonin Artaud published *The Theater and Its Double*, a volume of manifestos concerning theater arts, and in it he describes the “theater of cruelty.” Artaud expressed the sentiment that in order to rescue theater as an apparently “petrified” artistic medium that is “connected with [the] petrified idea of culture,” it had to be injected with a fresh approach, one that essentially destroyed all of the traditional conventions of theater and crafted a completely new form of aesthetic experience from its smoking ruin.\(^2\) Central to this new form was his principle of cruelty. Artaud was hardly the first to employ cruelty as an essential aspect of art, Marquis de Sade wrote his infamous libertine works much before Artaud ventured into the realm of cruel theater. Evidently, Western academia found (and still finds) something spiritually, or perhaps societally, important about artistic cruelty. As Maggie Nelson notes in the opening sentences of her book, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, Friedrich Nietzsche too alludes to the importance of cruelty in his 1881 work, *Beyond Good and Evil*. He states, “One should open one’s eyes and take a new look at cruelty.”\(^3\) Artaud, like Nietzsche, believed that a total break from the Judeo-Christian system of morality was necessary for societal progress out of

the alienating ennui brought about by the mechanized modernism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “But ‘theater of cruelty’ means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all,”—it is not at all explicit what Artaud means by “cruelty,” although I believe this quote has a distinct flavor of tragic art that will prove to be important in understanding the aesthetic mechanisms of cruelty in rap music.⁴ Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” is further confused by his adamant denial that his proposal necessarily entailed blood and violence because in the “literal interpretation of his cruelty, when the time came to get theatrically specific, his examples of potential subjects were tales of literalized bloodshed,” often accompanied by actors’ bloodcurdling screams, guttural sounds, and flashing lights, all apparently designed in attempt to shock the viewers awake into a new state of mind and body.⁵ The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning examines a huge array of art including literature, performances, films, and paintings, as well as artists from Marquis de Sade to Chris Burden and others whose work might be considered cruel. Nelson states her purpose in writing about this subject to be exploratory. The book ponders,

whether there are certain aspects or instances of the so-called art of cruelty... that are still wild and worthwhile, now that we purportedly inhabit a political and entertainment landscape increasingly glutted with images—and actualities—of torture, sadism, and endless warfare. It asks when and whether Artaud’s distinction between a coarse sort of cruelty, based in sadism and bloodshed and his notion of a ‘pure cruelty, without bodily laceration’ can be productively made, and to what end. ‘From the point of view of the mind,’ Artaud wrote, ‘cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.’

⁴ Nelson, The Art of Cruelty, 16
⁵ Nelson, The Art of Cruelty, 16
I am attracted to this precision, this sharpness, this rigor. Why Artaud and so many others have muddled it up with cruelty, I do not know. That is another of this book’s questions.\(^6\)

Nelson proposes more questions than she answers, and one might easily be left more perplexed in regard to the nature of cruel art by the end of her book than at the beginning. Perhaps this was an unspoken desire for Nelson as well. She also decides that there are evidently still artworks that employ Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” which are “wild and worthwhile” despite “inhabit[ing] a political and cultural landscape increasingly glutted with images—and actualities—of torture, sadism, and endless warfare.”\(^7\)

The artworks that Nelson finds to be the most successfully cruel are almost always those that seem to be aware of their own cruelty. She likes a cruelty that is precise, sharp, rigorous, and calculated, in other words, weighed out and thought through—self-aware. In the context of contemporary rap music, this essay will raise the debate between the validities of a weighed out and calculated sort of cruelty versus more naïve, perhaps completely unaware cruelty and how these different kinds of cruelty might result in successful or ineffective art. It is possible that the popular success of naively cruel rap music might indeed be tied to an aesthetic property of unawareness in the music.

Cruelty manifests differently in different works of art, from genre to genre, artist to artist, and even piece to piece. Sometimes cruelty in art is successful in affecting the viewer (whatever the affect—sometimes it is positive, sometimes negative, uncomfortable, or revelatory) and sometimes it falls flat. Whereas

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\(^6\) Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*, 5

\(^7\) Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*, 5
Nietzsche tries to break down morality, Nelson accepts that she exists in a society permeated by Judeo-Christian system of morality and she records her reactions to cruel artworks as a member of this society. She is not necessarily concerned with the social implications of the artworks that she regards but she is concerned with whether she likes them or dislikes them and she tries to explore the reasons for these value judgments. She seems to prefer a cruelty that is self-aware, deliberate, analyzed, calculated (i.e. “precision, sharpness, and rigor”). Nietzsche and Artaud are completely unconcerned with the sociological implications of their suggestions. Indeed, they advocate chaos and cruelty. Through art they embrace the unleashing of cruel logic on the world in order to free humanity from the bonds of traditional morality.

The similarities between the cruelty of rap music and some aspects of the “theater of cruelty” described in The Theater and Its Double are striking but there are also distinct differences. For instance, perhaps it is doubtable that many rappers think of the violence portrayed in their music as being aimed at shocking their audience into a new state of mind. Maybe rappers like Immortal Technique, whose song “Dance with the Devil,” from Revolutionary Volume 1, recounts an extremely violent contemporary Oedipal tragedy or some members of Odd Future Wolf Gang Fuck the World—OFWGFTW or simply “Odd Future”—a young hip hop collective that is infamous for violent, homophobic, and misogynistic language might make

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8“Immortal Technique—Dance with the Devil (Full Version w/ Lyrics and Hidden Track ft. Diabolic,” uploaded December 27, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8yKTuvRmPE
music with goals similar to Artaud’s designs—to shock their audience into a new state of mind and being. Perhaps some of these same qualities of cruel theater in fact do exist today in the landscape of contemporary rap; perhaps rap music is indeed a form of Artaud’s theater of cruelty in itself.

The absence of a discussion of rap music in Maggie Nelson’s treatise on cruel art is also striking. She thoroughly explores the manifestations of the cruelty that Artaud describes but mentions rap music only in passing. The book is focused on “highbrow” or “fine art” rather than any specific facet of popular culture. To be fair, she does not consider any music in this work at all but she does consider poetry (her own artistic medium) to which rap music has a strong connection. I think this distinction between high and low art in which Nelson is entrenched is perhaps less important today than it has ever been before. Why does “lowbrow” art still seem to be relegated to the realm of simple entertainment—at the very least it is not deemed important enough a topic for Nelson to include in her exploration of cruel art—indeed, what is the difference between art and entertainment to begin with?

Let us assume for the moment that entertainment must always involve a relationship between a spectacle, and an audience in which the spectacle holds the attention of its audience. Art seems to be a form of entertainment but perhaps all entertainment is not art. Or perhaps not—in any case, a complicated relationship exists in art with relation to the concept of spectatorship. Some art even makes a point to not address the role of “spectator” at all. Perhaps some art is not explicitly entertainment. Indeed some art does not address the role of “spectacle” either. It
seems that the only strictly necessary criteria for art is the presence of an artist or perhaps, in an even more abstract sense, the presence of a creative impulse.

Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified.”¹⁰ In other words, life is tragically ephemeral and meaningless so it is only through the aesthetic experience, engaging with art, that the world becomes the world and that one can (and must) justify living in it. This Nietzschean definition of art seems to be very broad. It is interesting to note that existing as an “aesthetic phenomenon,” as Nietzsche describes, also implies the possibility to live as art or to aestheticize life. Indeed, one could interpret this section of *The Birth of Tragedy* as implying that one must turn oneself into art in order to justify living. Extrapolated, this interpretation also allows that one might live as “good” art or as “bad” art—perhaps an entirely different question, but one that might be appropriate with regard to rap music. Part of the art of rapping is the creation by the artist of a character and persona from which to project a distinct perspective. Part of what makes for good or bad rap music is the level of intrigue generated by a rapper’s perspective. Are rappers who create larger than life, fictional personalities through which to present their work, work which effectively becomes part of a real perspective on life, actually doing it (living life) right? Taking Nietzsche at his word, it seems that the answer must be dependent upon the characters and the perspectives that these characters present.

In an existentialist vein, there are many ways to justify living – one of the most common mantras (perhaps most related to Albert Camus’ work—i.e. *The Myth

of *Sysiphus*—and the concept of the Absurd) associated with this philosophical framework being, “life is meaningless and so one must find one’s own meaning.” This “given meaning” is imposed onto an otherwise meaningless existence. Viewing the world in this particular way does not necessarily imply an aesthetic quality, though perhaps it can be understood that way. Perhaps art is really anything that can justify living (evoke an aesthetic experience) and give the world its shape and meaning. It follows that “art” must be a very a broad category. So what then is art, or what is capable of justifying life, and what is not? Are all forms of entertainment akin to Nietzsche’s concept of the “aesthetic phenomenon”? And how does “cruelty” fit into all of this?

2: Kitsch, Artistic Cruelty’s Opposite? The Based God, Macklemore, and Kanye

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag quotes Leonardo Da Vinci as he instructs his students. He says that in order to truly depict suffering, one must paint without empathy, without pity, that they “have the courage and the imagination to show war in all its ghastliness.” Sontag explains, “The concern is that the images to be devised won’t be sufficiently upsetting: not concrete, not detailed enough. Pity can entail a moral judgment if, as Aristotle maintains, pity is considered to be the

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emotion that we owe only to those enduring undeserved misfortune.” Sontag is not necessarily advocating for the depiction of suffering characters through a completely objective lens but rather through a pitiless lens, one that does not entail an empathetic, pitying, “moral judgment.” There is art that employs the use of “pity” in such a way as to elicit a specifically empathetic or moralistic response in the viewer. Some art of this kind might be considered kitsch, “preachy,” or “self-satisfied,” or even “idiot compassion” and inherently entails an implied moral superiority on the part of the artist. In another sense, “kitsch” is artistic untruth, art that is inauthentic. This truth or untruth, authentic or kitsch is occasionally considered a qualifier for “good” or “bad” art. “Camp” is another aesthetic term, one that is closely related to kitsch and perhaps alters the relationship between kitsch and “bad” art. One interpretation of camp is that it is kitsch used ironically. When kitsch is presented as aware of its own kitsch, it is camp. Especially in our purportedly “postmodern” world, there are artists who flirt with and blur the lines between camp and kitsch, kitsch and not kitsch. Even in the context of rap music, there are those who stray into the territory of kitsch on occasion, let alone some who exist entirely in this realm and even thrive off of it like Lil B, the Based God. Lil B moved from Internet sensation based out of Berkeley, California, to a position as something of a hip hop-household name sometime in the late 2000s and the early part of the next decade. He started his current Twitter account in 2009 and his bio

13 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 75.
reads: “Mogul, First Rapper Ever To Write And Publish A Book at 19, Film Score, Composer, Producer, Director/Photo/Branding/Marketing/Historical Online Figure #BASED.” The term “based” (according to Lil B’s Wikipedia page) refers to a “lifestyle of positivity and tolerance.” It also is a common colloquialism for being high on marijuana, or as an adjective to describe something that might seem weed-inspired.

Why is he kitsch though? In the second paragraph of his article, “Critics Corner: The irony of Lil B,” Griffin Bur describes B’s music: “Put bluntly, he sucks—at least in a technical sense. Even his fans don’t deny this. Flubbed lines and poorly improvised lyrics; at times, flat-out gibberish; productions that run the gamut from keyboard presets to, um, keyboard presets.” To be fair, some of Lil B’s rapping happens to be over rather sophisticated production (provided by legendary producers and beat makers like Clams Casino) but as Bur goes on to discuss, Lil B’s appeal lies not so much in his music as in his performance, his character. His lyrics are by-and-large, meaningless but he is not without a message. B advocates a lifestyle of love, positivity, and tolerance as presented through his ridiculous tweets (tweets like “Lil B is my friend – Lil B,”—he signs all of them as if his readers were not already aware that it was him tweeting) and his personality. His fan base is rather cultish but depending on the individual, they alternatively view him as either a complete joke or as the musical messiah. Some of them think the music is horrible

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and some who are acquainted with his music genuinely love it, and these categories are not mutually exclusive. Locating the specific elements of artistic truth or untruth in the phenomenon that is “Lil B” is close to impossible. Perhaps the most interesting and equally unanswerable, question is whether Lil B (birth name: Brandon McCartney) is offering social satire ironically through his character or whether he is authentically as ridiculous as his character purports to be. Lil B and his Task Force, as his fans are sometimes known, provide context to the question for whether liking or disliking art is even related to the art’s being good or bad. If one likes a work of art, it seems to me that they must be gaining some sort of important, perhaps life-affirming, aesthetic experience even if they themselves recognize the work as bad. It seems to me that the question of the relationship between kitsch or art that presents false or hollow truths, and bad art is not as relevant today as it might have been for modernist and pre-modernist artists. This comes down to an essential question between the relationship between art and morality.

Art has always been concerned with authenticity and truth but contemporary art has reached a crossroads where to continue creating authentic art, an artist might be willing to enter the space of kitsch and of falsity without a specific preconceived moral value judgment of how kitsch figures into “good” versus “bad” art. Indeed, to label any artistic work as “good” or as “bad” is inherently a moral judgment. There are contemporary artists and critics who are able to reject this judgment in favor of a morally relativistic model. Rather than asking whether a work is good or bad, the more relevant question for them to ponder becomes whether a work resonates and how it affects an audience. This is one of the essential
differences in contemporary art making as compared to art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the worlds of Nietzsche and Artaud.

It is evident that despite the criticism of his work as kitsch (or camp), Lil B is in some way still compelling. People are still buying and it seems to me that it is not strictly a fetishistic ironic sense that is compelling people to engage with his work. There are people who genuinely like Lil B. I think kitsch must not necessarily be an indication of “bad,” art. To “like” or “dislike” a work of art is to make a moral choice. Liking or disliking ascribes a value judgment very similar to deciding whether a work of art is “good” or “bad”. Sontag is opposed to the artist inhabiting a space of moral superiority but what happens when an artist like Lil B can refer to his own rapping ability as quite poor and yet continues to create “bad” music that his fans devour? Indeed, how are we to understand the fact that some of his fans can even accept that his music is terrible and still like it? I have been to a Lil B concert and it was wild, people loved it but to be honest, I hated it. There seems to be a joke somewhere that either I am missing, or Lil B’s audience is missing, or perhaps he himself is missing.

Macklemore is another contemporary rapper who has produced works that could be considered kitsch. In his and Ryan Lewis’ song “Same Love ft. Mary Lambert” (which many people love by the way, perhaps proving its aesthetic value despite its potential status as kitsch) he raps about his relationship with his own sexuality (heterosexuality) and the importance of accepting and loving people whatever their sexual identity, that all love is equally valid. This is a perfectly noble cause to put at the center of a work of art—especially for a rap song given that the
culture surrounding rap music is so often represented as anti-gay and misogynistic—although under some slight scrutiny, his message of love might fall flat for some. Macklemore is white, a heterosexual male rapper rapping about the struggle that gay people often must endure while he also makes sure to distinguish himself from gay people in the opening lines of the song: “When I was in the third grade/ I thought I was gay/ Cause I could draw, my uncle was/ And I kept my room straight/ I told my mom, tears rushing down my face/ She’s like ‘Ben you’ve loved girls since before Pre-K!’/ Tripping, yeah, I guess she had a point...” In context of Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Macklemore seems to occupy a position of moral righteousness and from this position he presents his art with “moral judgment.” Even if this song is not kitsch, at the very least Macklemore comes off as being full of himself in an annoying way in much of his music, which ironically is usually a good thing in rap music.

Perhaps the most “full of himself” rapper today is Kanye West. West’s self-glorification is obvious in a number of his songs but the infamous, “I Am a God,” from his 2013 album, *Yeezus* perhaps speaks for itself. It is interesting to note that rap’s king of kitsch, Lil B, also has a song titled “I’m God.” Like many artists, rappers are often spiritually inclined; Kanye and Lil B (in his own debatably ironic way) are no exceptions but West’s self-identification as a god is especially multifaceted. He raps from a perspective that is larger than life resorting to the

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perspective of a God to comment on the injustices from which he and the black community in general suffer. I believe that when West calls himself a God he does not actually believe that he is a God; rather he is speaking as an artist, an enlightened individual. À la Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, artists are the portals through which the primordial unity operates and through which art enters the world.21 Kanye West invites his audience to reflect on the knowledge of the truth of life that he, as an artist, is privy to but to which the masses that listen to his music may be unaware. He is part of a relatively new population of black individuals in America who came from poverty or relative poverty and who are now extremely wealthy, and yet he is still oppressed. The end of his suffering and the suffering of Black America is not in sight and from this suffering emerges *Yeezus*, a veritable deluge of creativity and angst. West’s anger is palpable in more than just the lyrics that are often vague and vulgar, or pointed, satirical and extremely politically charged. West’s production on this album (with the exception of the final song “Bound 2”) is a heavy-handed electronic storm of futuristic and demonic synth samples. This style has since been labeled “Industrial Rap” and is cruel in its own right. Interesting, Kanye West’s cruel masterpiece album does not stay with the “Industrial Rap” aesthetic all the way through the length of the album. The final song on *Yeezus* seems to be a kind of “return” to kitsch that contrasts the heaviness of the previous songs. “Bound 2,” features smooth, warm, soulful production that is reminiscent of West’s older music (i.e. albums like *The College Dropout* and *Late Registration*). Over this backdrop West spits an account of love that is confusing in

its contradictorily vulgar and debatably sincere presentation. There is a certain calculated awareness of feigned innocence in the contrast between “Bound 2” and the songs that precede it. “Bound 2” becomes something of a final satirical remark rather than a representation of innocence or sincere love. The depiction of Kanye West as the tragic hero, the painter of the sublime, turns to a kitsch picture of a lust for beauty in a move that oozes sarcasm and disdain for his listeners. In this interpretation, West’s final statement is thrown in the face of his audience that they will never understand their status as slaves. We are slaves to our own blind lust for beauty. We are blind to the true nature of life. This song, “Bound 2,” is the most popular on the album and has since peaked in popularity at number 12 on the Billboard Hot 100. It seems to me that “Bound 2” is a camp exclamation point at the end of a blunt and heavy club of an album. If we have not awoken to the evils and sufferings of the world by this point, then we never will; “Bound 2” allows us to continue sleeping. West’s ironic kitsch is cruel. He makes a mockery of the audience who rejects the rest of Yeezus by giving them a stupid song that they will like and then still profiting off of their relative stupidity.

The rest of Yeezus finds Kanye West, the character, battling with his inner demons, his own relationship to higher power, and especially his battle with oppressive society. West explains some reactions to “I Am a God” in an interview with BBC Radio 1’s Zane Lowe. He says, “I Am a God? Who does he think he is? I just told you who I thought I was! A god! That’s who I think I am.” West is obviously full of himself but he exhibits his self love in this case, with just about the biggest

boast possible, a motion that simultaneously employs and satirizes a classic element of rap music and African-American literary form known as signifying. West continues on this train of thought referencing social inequality and the expectations of a black rapper.

Would [it] have been better if I had a song that said, “I am a nigga”? or if I had song that said “I am a gangsta”? or if I had song that said “I am a pimp”? All those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me, right? But to say you are a god? Especially, when you got shipped over to the country that you’re in, and your last name is a slave owner’s. How could you say that? How could you have that mentality?

Macklemore’s self love in “Same Love” might also be considered a form of signifying but what he really signifies in this song is his belief in his own moral righteousness. Signifying is thoroughly examined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his 1988 work, The Signifying Monkey. Adam Bradley brings the concept into his analysis of rap music as literature in his Book of Rhyme; The Poetics of Hip Hop. Though it is difficult to define, signifying often seems to employ aspects of artistic cruelty. According to Bradley, signifying in rap is “what MCs rhyme about when they aren’t telling lengthy stories—in other words, what MCs rhyme about most of the time.” He summarizes all of these topics into just three, “celebrating themselves, dissing their opponents, and shit-talking in every other possible way,” as the mainstay manifestations of signifying in rap music. All of these manifestations have pretty clear relations to cruelty in that they are designed by a “self” in (at best

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26 Adam Bradley, Book of Rhyme, 180.
competitive, at worst malicious) opposition to an “other” whether the “other” is specifically designated or not. This emphasis on the “self” is present throughout rap music. Bradley suggests, “when rappers talk about themselves, there is more at stake than the individual. Through self-exploration, they expose an expanse of meaning.”27 The almost narcissistic tendency toward the “self” in rap music is reminiscent of Artaud’s “cruelty first and foremost unto myself,” from the *Theater and Its Double.*28 There is a certain tragic component of self-important art that designs cruelty against another.

As Sontag’s interpretation of Da Vinci’s suggestion to “show war in all its ghastliness” advocates to not project art from a perspective of the pitying subject, she then leaves room for the artist as wielder of cruel subjectivity to be an effective depicter of suffering and tragedy. The cruel subjectivity is in effect, the opposite of the pitying subjectivity. It even seems to suggest that cruelty is an important quality for an artist to possess, especially an artist that is concerned with crafting tragic art. Of course, this is not to say that only tragic art can be “good” art but especially in the context of rap music, cruelty is importantly connected to art of tragedy. For that matter, not all compassionate art is necessarily ineffective art or kitsch or a form of “idiot compassion” either, nor is kitsch art necessarily ineffective. But the essential debate surrounding cruel art remains: whether dwelling on cruelty, witnessing or exhibiting it, in art will ultimately manifest to cruelty in societal life. Nevertheless, cruelty is an important aspect of the contemporary artistic landscape.

3: Photography, Lies, Entertainment, and the Tragedy of Cruelty

As noted, Sontag and Da Vinci do not necessarily advocate for an “objective” perspective from which to depict suffering rather, they suggest doing so from a perspective that does not employ “pity,” or “moral judgment.” Without a doubt, it is false to say that “the more objective art is, the better it is,” but the questions posed by objectivity in art versus the scale between various compassionate and cruel subjectivities from which art is created, present interesting relationships.

Rap music has an intricate relationship to aesthetic objectivity or “truth.” “Realness” in rap music might be associated with artistic concern of authenticity. The concern centers around whether the views espoused in the music are heartfelt, or whether the stories recounted ever actually happened. “Realness” is highly valued by many sections of the rap audience. “Real hip hop heads [fans]” (quotation marks are essential in this description because rappers will sometimes refer to their music as “real hip hop” though it might not be in the general sense of the rap genre being described here) are one brand of conservative or even, fundamentalist rap fans that are prone to valuing “fact” over any other qualities in music even if the truth is on the gritty side—much gangsta rap for example, falls under the category of real hip hop—perhaps one might consider the realest of the real are those who grew up around and rap about thugs and gang violence. Apart from the inherent moral dilemmas in this case—of race and class in the mass consumer gaze that exoticizes the ghetto where rap music originates and in which the audience decides what
really constitutes “real,” there is also a more general aesthetic problem with over-glorification of objective truth in art.

There are also other descriptive genre terms associated with rap music though many of the labels are rather lazy designations. “Ignorant” rap, often associated with party scenes and clubs, is seemingly unconcerned with social issues or artistic authenticity. It is usually a derogatory description but not always. The opposite of ignorant rap is not necessarily “real” but rather, “conscious” rap, which is also often and perhaps ironically (though perhaps not so ironically when considered in the context of cruel art), considered a derogatory description. Conscious rappers are at their core, essentially concerned with the impact of their music on the world. They are socially conscious. Both ignorant and conscious rap are inundated with expectations of realness and both also have the capacity to exhibit great cruelty.

An example of the relevance of authenticity in art as related to rap music can be provided through basic analysis of photography, Sontag’s favorite field of aesthetic philosophizing. Obviously, a photograph is an image of an exact scene taken from reality. On a “scale” of objectivity, a photograph is much closer to exact objectivity than for example, a painting. Photography is, for better or worse, closely entwined with objective “truthfulness.” Pablo Picasso’s perspective on the truthfulness of art throws a bit of a curveball into this logic. He famously states in his transcribed “Statement to Marius De Zayas,” conversation (1923), “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince
others of the truthfulness of his lies.” For photography to be an art, in this framework, it must be inherently a lie. How can a photograph, an image produced from reality, be a lie? Photographs are not inherently truths simply because they look like the real thing and this goes for film as well. Though we recognize videos and photographs as evidence of the literal past, they are only records in the sense that they are a set of light patterns imprinted upon film or data on a disk; they are not the physical iteration of those past moments. Time (understood in the conventional sense, as a timeline) is ephemeral, these moments, though they have been filmically documented, will never happen again. Magritte’s painting “The Treachery of Images,” features an image of a pipe subtitled by the phrase in French, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” in English: “this is not a pipe.” And it is not literally a pipe, it cannot be packed, lit, and smoked like a pipe, it is an image, it is literally only paint and canvas. Likewise, a photograph is not reality; it is a representation, or rather, a framing of reality. The artistic truth of a photograph or a film cannot be literally objective. Artistic truth, Picasso’s truthful lie, might be one aspect that separates good art from bad art or any art from entertainment.

Nietzsche writes about such an artistic truth at great length in The Birth of Tragedy. He asserts in this work that human beings do not actually “create” art rather we (as artists) channel it. The aesthetic experience, through which life is justified, is apparently an engagement with what Nietzsche calls, the “primordial unity,” or the truth of life that is only revealed through aesthetic experience. He

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invokes the legend from Greek mythology of the wisdom of Silenus the satyr to provide a metaphor for the primordial unity. According to the Silenus, it would be better for any human to be dead; that being alive, it would be good to die soon; and it would have been yet better had one never been born.\textsuperscript{30} This is the true nature of existence as relayed by an immortal being to mortal humankind. The primordial unity, as the source of art, provides access to this truth in a way that allows an audience to experience this tragic knowledge without it destroying them, and even reaffirming their existence by knowing it.\textsuperscript{31} This is the effect of an aesthetic experience. It is a momentary sense of creation, which is experienced by both artist and audience. The Nietzschean-reminiscent sense of an aesthetic experience is perhaps the defining feature between art and entertainment.

\textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in addition to its contemplation of the nature of art (the lens through which to view the suffering of the world), its origins (the primordial unity), even its necessity (to “justify one’s life as an aesthetic phenomenon,”\textsuperscript{32}), Nietzsche incorporates all of these contemplations into a specific outline of the importance of tragic art as well as classical dramatic tragedy and its origin. Western aesthetic tradition has always had an interest in classical Greece with “neo-classical” styles popping up in different times and places periodically. Nietzsche’s focus on classical tragedy was not unfounded. Even in its authentic context, Aristotle maintained that dramatic tragedy was an important aspect of the artistic landscape. It apparently imparted something he called “catharsis,” or a sort of relief and release

\textsuperscript{30} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, 23.
\textsuperscript{31} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, 46.
\textsuperscript{32} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, 33.
from strong, pent up emotion. The exact definition of catharsis in Aristotle's sense is somewhat confusing, exactly what is it that is felt and how does it manifest from viewing a dramatic tragedy? Nietzsche argues that the importance of tragedies lies in the revelation and affirmation of the true, tragic nature of human life (i.e. Silenus' wisdom). The audience, by staring into this abyss of human suffering, by staring at the horrors and ecstasies on the stage and otherwise engaging with the performance, joyously and passionately affirms their own existence. Of course, these classical tragedies do not exist in the same artistic space today as they did in their original context. They do not speak in the same way. Apparently we must turn to new artistic forms in order to affirm our existence.

For Nietzsche's framework, the purpose of art (perhaps life generally as well) is to justify life aesthetically because otherwise living is impossible. It is apparently tragic art that is best equipped to do this. At the end of this essay's first chapter I posed a number of questions including what constitutes an “aesthetic phenomenon,” the difference between art and entertainment, and how cruelty fits into the big picture. I think that there is an important connection between cruelty in art and the importance of tragedy for contemporary audiences. In this line of inquiry, since artistic aspects of popular culture are so often considered “entertainment” and excluded from artistic study, I wonder whether there are forms of entertainment that are not usually considered strictly art or artistic that are capable of providing an insight into artistic truth as an aesthetic experience in the way that tragedy did for classical Greek audiences.
Sports (both watching and playing) are often considered to be entertainments. They are also essentially competitions. Schopenhauer would end the conversation right there. In his philosophical framework as presented in The World as Will and Representation, life can only be sustained by virtue of what he calls the Will. In essence, it is the Will to Life that keeps us alive and it is necessarily competitive. Art is a competition-free phenomenon that falls outside of the Will (if it is good art). According to Schopenhauer, the aesthetic experience (including the making of art and the participation with it) allows one to see or understand life for an instant without the lens of the Will obscuring the possibility of non-competitive life. Though it might seem to fit with Nietzsche’s framework, the most glaring problem here is that art is not completely devoid of competition. Art is not a separate entity from life no matter how Schopenhauer noumenalizes it. To exist in a contemporary context, art must be able to adapt into the capitalist, intrinsically competitive institution that permeates all of Western culture. Artists have to compete for commissions and grants and awards all the time. Rap music is naturally tied to competition. A number of rappers have even characterized their profession as a sport (Jay Z even specifically references rapping as being like boxing). Competition cannot be a single driving difference between art and entertainment; in fact, entertainment and art are linked by competition through a mutually shared aspect of cruelty. There is a cruelty in every competition and looking to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, there is an inherent cruelty in life itself. A competition

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34 Adam Bradley, Book of Rhymes; The Poetics of Hip Hop (New York: BasicCivitas, 2009), 177.
pits two entities against each other, and participating in a competition (watching or playing—as in a sport) pits the “self” against the “other.” Schopenhauer’s assertion that life is inherently competitive seems to hold at least as much weight as Nietzsche’s assertion that life is suffering. Competition and suffering are inextricably tied to life, to tragedy, and in turn, to cruelty.

There does seem to be some aspect of otherworldliness or spirituality to art that separates it from the workings of traditional life, capitalist-competition driven or otherwise. But can say, sports or reality television—in other words: entertainment that is not considered art—provide this same sort of spiritual experience? What is it that people get when they watch or play sports? Personally, I have asked this question many times while watching sports and the usual response is something along the lines of, “will you just let me watch this?” Devoted fans often feel a deep sense of duty to watch games until their end, even if their team is losing or will inevitably lose. The “fair-weather fan” only watches when their team is winning. Both fair-weather fans and devoted fans glean enjoyment from watching their team do well but the devoted fan watches all games with a sense of religiosity or perhaps nationalism, and it is tragic for them when their team loses. What is religion but a form of spirituality? And what is the competition between nations but a form of warfare? In every game there is the possibility for it to become either a tragedy or a comedy (in the classical sense, with a happy ending) for the fan watching; in fact, every sports game is inherently both a comedy and a tragedy because there must be a winning team and a losing team and with them, a winning nation and a losing nation. Whether or not we consider sports to be a form of art or
only entertainment, it seems to me that the important spiritual component that an aesthetic experience addresses can sometimes also be satisfied through ritualistic cultural competitions like sports.

Rap music is also a competition. Adam Bradley noted the three aspects of signifying as “boasting, dissing, and shit-talking.” These three situations are all in reference to an “other” against whom rappers design their verses. Rap music is also in essence tragic. One might argue against this point that rappers are not talking about losing very often (though this exhibition of vulnerability does happen and it seems to me with increasing regularity especially with the ever-growing success and popularity of artists such as Drake), they are usually boasting, talking about winning, and if rap is truly a competition they must be enacting a comedy not a tragedy. This is true, and it depends on the piece of work in question, but even so I think that rap music is generally more tragic than comedic. Tragedy is narcissistic. It is essentially tied to the “I,” and the “self.” Artaud says, “‘theater of cruelty’ means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all.” When Oedipus realizes that he has slaughtered his own father and bedded his mother he reacts by questioning himself, “what have I done?” and he blinds himself. Rapping, whether storytelling or signifying, boasting, shit talking, or dissing, is also essentially narcissistic and tied to the “I.” It seems to me, the self-centered nature of rap music lends itself easily to aesthetic cruelty. This is perhaps the most important link in the logic of this essay: the link between rap music and the cruelty of narcissistic tragedy.

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might be difficult and cruel for himself first of all and some contemporary rap music
might be as well, but the cruelty of rap music can take many other forms as well.

4: Rick Ross, “Boss” of Naïve Cruelty in Rap Music
and the Relationship Between Art and Morality

In a year of particularly bombastic hip hop releases, the rap song
“U.O.E.N.O”37 by the rapper Rocko was one of 2013’s most talked-about tracks. It
was released early in March38 and set the tone for a year that crackled with music
that created particularly interesting situations in popular culture with regard to
some of the moral problems surrounding cruel art. The song features verses from
Rocko himself, Future (who also lends his signature auto-tuned crooning to the
mournful, yet boasting hook), and Rick Ross over sparse, ethereal production by one
of Atlanta’s many promising young producers of recent years, Childish Major.

“U.O.E.N.O." stands for “you don’t even know." This song gained a lot of attention for
three big reasons, those being Future’s hook, Childish Major’s eccentric production,
and especially Rick Ross’ verse in which he makes an allusion to date rape. This song
was one of Childish Major’s first break out hits and deservingly so. The production
paired with Future’s hook made the song popular, Rick Ross’ verse made it
infamous. His full verse goes:

April 20th, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEkYsqu6MU
That nigga sold you that re-rock, you ain’t even know it
I’d die over these Reeboks, you ain’t even know it
Put Molly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it
I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it
Got a hundred acres I live on, you ain’t even know it
Got a hundred rounds in this AR, you ain’t even know it
Got a bag of bitches I play with, on cloud 9 in my spaceship
Zoned out but he stay fresh from Zone 1 through Zone 6
Bricks all in my blood, birds all in my dreams
Boats all in my yard, lemon pepper my wings
I’m bout to get you fuck niggas wacked, you ain’t even know it
Your main nigga bout to turn his back, you ain’t even know it

As is often the case in rap lyrics, this verse is loaded with signifying metaphors, double-entendres, and word play. The lines which caused the uproar in pop-culture were: “Put Molly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it/ I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it.” “Molly,” a term for ecstasy, is currently enduring a stint as something of a fixture in rap music. Rick Ross references a situation that is undeniably an instance of date rape and many people were greatly offended by this particular line. This seems to be a moment of artistic cruelty but one that was particularly important in the context of contemporary society’s moral expectations.

How can one help but wonder what Sontag or Da Vinci would say? For that matter, what would Nietzsche, Artaud, or Nelson think? In any case, there usually is no social outrage when a rapper sings about “catching bodies” because street violence, even killings, when it happens among young black men is not taboo the way that rape as a topic in art is taboo in contemporary society especially when it is presented from a cruel perspective. Perhaps the success of artistic cruelty truly

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depends on the perspective from which it is presented, after all according to Picasso, it is the artist’s job to present “lies” as metaphorical “truths.” Perhaps society’s “taboos” only apply in art when the art is unaware of its own transgression of the “taboo.” Through the breadth of Kendrick Lamar’s still young career he as specifically examined the sort of situations that society deems taboo and why other situations are not. He still exhibits cruelty in his work but it is a much more self-aware cruelty than that which Rick Ross employs in “U.O.E.N.O.” That said, there is more going on in Ross’ verse and in the song as a whole, than just the disgusting boast of having drugged and raped a woman though the whole situation is often reduced to this one rhyme.

The title of the track represents what the feeling of the whole song is about: “U.O.E.N.O.”—“You Don’t Even Know.” The song is about not knowing, specifically the audience’s ignorance to the world of the artists, Future, Rocko, Ross, and Childish Major. The song is also about living in the shadows of society, inhabiting a dark place, unseen and unknown. Childish Major’s production is at the same time weirdly menacing, off-kilter, cold, and confusing. It speaks with a sort of “curiosity killed the cat” voice and it lends itself to the depiction of the unknown and the shadowy. The production solidifies this feeling as much as any of the lyrics but Rick Ross is a rap veteran who knows how to compliment the beat with his lyrics. “I’d die over these Reeboks, you ain’t even know it,” he raps. When this song was released, Ross had an endorsement deal with the sneaker giant, Reebok. Young black men are
mugged and occasionally do die over dope sneakers.\textsuperscript{40} This line simultaneously tributes how cool his sneakers are, nods to his endorsement deal partner, and also references dangers that black men occasionally face when just trying to demonstrate style in the streets. In the line before, “that nigga sold you that re-rock, you ain’t even know it,” Rick Ross also evokes imagery of the dark shadows of society. “Re-rock” is impure or “mixed” cocaine that has been cut with something extra to extend the value. “Got a hundred acres I live on, you ain’t even know it,” Ross is rich but remains hidden; “Got a hundred rounds in this AR, you ain’t even know it,” Ross has to stay strapped to protect himself from constant danger. There are elements of truth to Rick Ross’ verse, at least a truth that Ross himself devises—an artistic truth that is perhaps nothing but a lie presented as a truth.

As Rick Ross and his fans are constantly reminded, he is sort of a phony. His real name is William Leonard Roberts II. He adopted the name Rick Ross (the name of a famous drug kingpin from LA in the 1980s) as his rap-persona. In reality he worked as a correctional officer before he became a famous rapper.\textsuperscript{41} Rick Ross is a character devised as a piece of William Roberts’ art, as are many rap-personas. Rappers are characters that provide lenses through which pictures and perspectives of the world are painted. This is interestingly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s “justifying life as an \textit{aesthetic phenomenon,}” although what about his life is being justified in

\textsuperscript{40} Brendan Dunne, “Craigslist Sneaker Sale Ends in Gunfire,” \textit{Sole Collector}, posted April 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2015, \url{http://solecollector.com/news/air-jordan-craigslist-shooting/?utm_campaign=solecollector+04+2015&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social}

\textsuperscript{41} Eriq Gardner, “‘Freeway’ Rick Ross Taking Battle Over Rapper Rick Ross to Appeals Court,” \textit{The Hollywood Reporter}, posted March 21\textsuperscript{st}, 2013, \url{http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/freeway-ricky-ross-taking-battle-430210}
this situation is unclear. If he is justifying raping a woman by making art out of the situation he deserves our disgust but this does not seem to be his aim.

Much of what Rick Ross boasts about (or simply addresses) in his music is in fact, untrue. “Real hip hop” fans would generally call Rick Ross’ brand of rap music “ignorant.” Rick Ross does not always rap about situations that actually happened to him—he being, the man, William Roberts. However, his verses are not devoid of any truth. He lies about his life in his art, but we know from Picasso that all art (or perhaps, much art) lies to the audience. After all, Ross does live in a big house (perhaps he does not live on a hundred acres) in Miami, and he really does have to stay strapped (perhaps not with a hundred round clip in his Colt AR-15) because shots have really been fired at him.42 “Bricks all in my blood” is a reference to the culture of drug trafficking being apparently so intimately a part of him, but he probably never even sold any cocaine.43

Ross toys with the lines between truth and fiction and it is this lack of distinction, this signifying misdirection that is the source of the greatest cruelty in his verse. Rick Ross is stating that he drugged and raped a woman. Are we to believe him? Are we to fault him for lying or are we to fault him for his “realness”? Has he had, as Da Vinci advocates, “the courage and the imagination to show war in all its ghastliness”? Are we to fault him for this representation of himself as a rapist?

Perhaps we are to fault him for glorifying and promoting rape culture, in other words: to fault him for being a bad man. The verse, in fact, the whole song signifies the artists’ existences as bad men (and “you don’t even know it”). The question remains, despite its cruel subjectivity: is it good art or bad art? The heavy criticism that Rick Ross’ rape lyric has sustained might indicate its status as bad art. In any case, most people talking about the work seem to think Ross’ clumsily wielded cruelty was heavy-handed to the point of sincere evilness and he was condemned accordingly.

The criticism exhibited by pop culture news sources and countless blogs the Internet over, (Huffington Post featured an extremely interesting live debate segment hosted by Professor Marc Lamont Hill between Ebony magazine’s News & Life Editor Jamilah Lemieux, Washington Post columnist Rahiel Tesfamariam, activist Rosa Clemente, and rapper and hip hop culture guru, Talib Kweli44) partially culminated from Rick Ross’ verse being dropped from the official album cut of the “U.O.E.N.O.” track and in losing his Reebok endorsement deal. Reasonably, the company did not want to be associated with this verse, especially as Ross plugs Reebok shoes directly before stating that he drugged and raped a woman.

Antonin Artaud describes his vision of cruel theater by stating that it is difficult and cruel toward himself first of all.45 This song arguably has elements of this self-immolative quality of cruel art but as Nelson finds in her thorough

45 Maggie Nelson, The Theater of Cruelty, 16.
exploration of cruel art, not every piece of cruel art is necessarily good art. She seems to settle on a definition of effectively used cruelty as being especially thoughtful and calculated. She draws upon Francis Bacon’s description of his process of “injuring” his subjects in his painted portraits. He describes how he “performs injuries” by painstakingly dissecting and applying alterations to his source material images (photographs of his subjects) in order to attain access into their deeper truths in a 1966 interview with David Sylvester. It is a violent act but it is weighed out, calculated violence.

In some of Rick Ross’ initial responses to the criticism he received (in which he relates his apparent sentiment that he was not actually describing a rape), it becomes rather evident that this particular instance of cruelty in his music was almost definitely not a product of much intellectual engagement. It was not weighed out or thought through to the same extent by which Bacon “performed injuries” to his subjects’ images. Judging from the perspective presented in The Art of Cruelty, Nelson, like most of the critics and academics who offered their take on the song, probably would not like Rick Ross’ lyrics. Rick Ross was not vilified for the music that he created but rather for the perspective from which he projected it, William Roberts’ perspective of naïve cruelty. However, I wonder whether these lyrics might stand up to a level of aesthetic analysis despite the apparent lack of thought that went into them, bringing up a question of intention. Should we take “U.O.E.N.O.” as it

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47 Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings, (Berkeley: 1996). 223
is, representing an extremely cruel perspective on the world, separately from Rick Ross’ intention, whatever it was, but which was obviously lacking in intellectual involvement? That is, if we can find a certain value or artistic truth in his music regardless of Rick Ross’ initial intentions, does that not mean that it exists? There were (and are still) those few who will defend the lyrics (usually anonymously on the Internet) using arguments like: “he didn’t actually rape anyone,” for example, this comment from the “U.O.E.N.O.” Genius page (formerly Rap Genius—users can read and offer interpretations and annotations for song lyrics as well as comment generally on the song) by user, AJ3500:

I don’t see why Ross got in so much trouble for that line. People unfortunately have a hard time understanding that this is art, not reality. Rick Ross is a character. William Roberts is the real man. It was the character that said the line in this piece of art that lays far from reality. Besides, Eminem has blatantly stated that he has 17 rapes, 400 assaults and 4 murders in “Crack a Bottle” and I’m sure other similar metaphors have been used. We all know damn well rappers threaten to kill people all the time in their songs. But rape is a more taboo subject I suppose.49

This comment is loaded. Perhaps it is not eloquently stated, but AJ3500 is expressing a number of interesting points. Among them, he raises questions about Eminem, the infamously crude and violent white rapper. Does he receive less flack than Rick Ross because of his skin color? To some degree, this is probably true, however, the song referenced in the post is slightly older (200950). In a more recent

(2014\textsuperscript{51}) song, Eminem received sharp criticism for suggesting violence against the pop singer Lana del Ray in a lyric, so perhaps it has more to do with the current state of popular culture and sociological changes\textsuperscript{52}. It seems that the times have changed (perhaps societally for the better though in the strictest sense, this change becomes artistically restrictive) from when Eminem could rap about raping women even if it never happened with zero repercussion. Similarly Rick Ross’ drugging and raping a woman, and especially the naïve perspective from which he sings this verse is intolerable to a large section of society. For this section, his cruel subjectivity was not put to effective use. That said, A|3500 does suggest another interesting belief in his post that is perhaps a latent thought for many people regarding the space art occupies in contemporary society: that art is in some way, outside of traditional morality. Obviously, rape is bad but apparently it is not bad to reference having raped a woman in a rap song if it never actually happened. As Picasso noted, reality and depictions of reality are not the same and all art lies to a certain extent.\textsuperscript{53} This suggestion is still intriguing. Are there any aspects of life—perhaps the cruelest aspects—that art is forbidden to touch or reference? Who forbids it? How far from reality does Rick Ross’ rape verse actually reside? These questions are essential to

\textsuperscript{51} “Shady XV Lyrics,” \textit{Genius}, last accessed April 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2015, \url{http://genius.com/Eminem-shady-xv-lyrics}


stepping-stones toward a contemporary understanding of the relationship between art and morality.

Adam Bradley’s *Book of Rhyme: The Poetics of Hip Hop* is divided into chapters that explain six important components of the poetical lyricism in rap music: rhythm, rhyme, wordplay, style, storytelling, and signifying. He does not really touch on the various, intricate components of beat production, which is an essential part of rap music and employs certain aspects of cruelty in its own right, but his discussion about signifying is particularly astute and applicable to the study of rap’s cruelty.

Bradley begins this chapter in his book with a discussion of rap battles (sometimes called MC-ing) in order to emphasize the competitive spirit of rap music. Concerning signifying and this competitive spirit, he writes,

> Rap was born in the first person. It is a music obsessed with the ‘I,’ even to the point of narcissism. MCs become larger than life through rhyme, often projecting images of impervious strength. The flipside, of course, is vulnerability, something one sees only rarely, but which is powerful when it appears. When rappers talk about themselves, there is more at stake than the individual. Through self-exploration, they expose an expanse of meaning.54

He goes on to reference two kinds of this signifying, dissembling (aimed at someone else) and braggadocio (aimed at the self). So what is happening when Rick Ross raps about drugging and raping a woman in “U.O.E.N.O.” and how does the cruelty he exhibits fit into the context of signifying? This verse falls under the category of braggadocio and though it is no Drake song, Ross boasts and displays a certain kind of vulnerability. “U.O.E.N.O.” is not a happy song; one might even go as far as to call it

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melancholic. “Rick Ross” the character, is an extravagant drug dealer and gangster so for him to rap in this melancholic fashion about the things in his life that are in the shadows, that “you ain’t even know,” is actually to draw attention to them and to use this irony as a tragic element that displays his vulnerability through signifying boasts.

An unintended aspect of the “expanse of meaning” that Rick Ross exposes through his self-exploration in this verse is that he is steeped in rape culture. What is unclear, especially given Ross’ rather daft attempt at apology, is whether it is Rick Ross the character or William Roberts the man, or both who lack the understanding that he has depicted, even glorified rape culture. It seems to me that this is the core of the reason for the criticism Ross received. It is a moral, sociological anger, anger at the man behind the words and anger at his potential effect on society because of his words. As far as Ross’ effective or ineffective use of cruel subjectivity goes, there are basically four hypotheticals for an audience’s reception of the song. These are: the listener does not understand the role that rape culture plays in the song and they like the song; the listener does not understand the role that rape culture plays in the song and they do not like the song; the listener does understand the role that rape culture plays in the song and they do not like the song; or the listener does understand the role that rape culture plays in the song and they still like the song. The outrage against Ross comes from listeners who understand the role that rape culture plays in the song and are concerned about the listeners who like the song but do not understand the role of rape culture in the song. Their concern is that the rape culture displayed in the song might become a subliminal message of rape
culture glorification and reification. This is a realistic concern especially given the influential space that rap music inhabits in youth popular culture. What are we to make of the listeners who assert that they understand the role of rape culture in “U.O.E.N.O.” and yet, still like the song? I believe that these relationships, between artist and spectator and art and morality, can be better understood through spatial modeling.

In Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) he describes a model that represents the artistic contribution to society's historical progress. Kandinsky's model features humanity as an equilateral triangle constantly moving forward, pointing in the direction of societal progress. The triangle is horizontally divided into sections that become wider from top to bottom so the sections at the base encompass larger portions of humanity then those closer to the top. In every segment of the triangle, artists exist and create work that speaks especially powerfully to the parts of the population of humanity that exist in the same segment. The top point of the triangle is where the most cutting edge art is created and also where the fewest people exist to understand it. In this model, art is what fuels the societal progress of humanity and progress is directed by the geniuses creating cutting edge art.\(^{55}\) This is quite an elitist model but it has the beginnings of some good ideas. Perhaps, rather than a triangle moving in one direction, humanity is better described by an ever-fluctuating, three-dimensional blob that represents the perimeters of humanity's social norms. A successful artistic project grabs ahold of a group or population and attempts to move it, pushing and pulling it somewhere

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in space until the aesthetic experience ends and then those affected by the experience are released. Some drift away from the new space, perhaps back to where they started and others exist in an entirely new space representing an “affected” state brought about by engaging with the artistic project. The successful art has opened the minds of its audience to a different way of thinking. The truth or untruth, goodness or badness of art, the morality it expresses, impresses, or tears down, is dependent upon the space that the individual enduring the aesthetic experience (artists and audience) initially inhabited within the blob and the social norms to which he or she ascribes. Perhaps the “better” the art, the more deeply affected the viewer. The role of the artist is not to propel society forward necessarily, but to express views of the world in a way that expands or retracts the boundaries of social norms, to express truth as it is revealed to the artist and this can sometimes be quite a challenging experience.

People live their lives according to certain moral codes that are imprinted upon us by social norms. Art is not inherently dictated by the same morality, it is the inverse. The truth expressed in art is simply the truth as the artist recognizes it and how he or she chooses to reveal it. These truths (sometimes in fact, they are lies expressed as truths) can still grab and move the blob around. Truth can only be perceived through a lens specific to the one who looks.

There are a few important implications for this morally relativistic model with regard to cruel art and with regard to rap music. For one, a mediocre artist can make good art even unintentionally. Lil B makes rap music that speaks to some people on some level despite the fact that his technical abilities as a rapper are
rather objectively weak. In addition, there are unlimited valid reactions to an artistic project but not all reactions are valid. In the case of Rick Ross’ verse on “U.O.E.N.O.,” it is valid to dislike the song because of the role that rape culture plays in it and to worry about those who like the song and do not understand how rape culture has affected Rick Ross’ mindset. It is also valid to like the song despite understanding the role that rape culture plays in it, however it is invalid to assert that rape culture does not play a role in the verse. This also means that an artist’s intention does not necessarily matter for an individual who is engaging with a work of art and who creates (for it is a creative process) a meaningful aesthetic experience from it. If an audience member gleans this meaningful aesthetic experience, regardless of how it manifests, there is an aesthetic truth present in the work in some capacity.

5: The Calculated Theater of Cruelty in

Contemporary Rap Music: Kendrick, Drake, Kanye

Looking to the contemporary rap music scene, the last few years have been extremely interesting for a number of reasons. Quite few high-profile rappers put out songs and projects in 2013 that generated a lot of dialogue about morality in art. Big names like Kanye West, J. Cole, and Drake, among others releasing successful full-length albums, not to mention Kendrick Lamar breaking onto the mainstream hip hop radar in late 2012 with the excellent Good Kid M.A.A.D. City, now widely considered a classic rap album. One might consider 2014 as sort of a disappointingly quiet year for rap music given the fact that many of is biggest players did not release
new music, in reality, it was a year dominated by up-and coming, lesser known, and downright oddball rappers. Approaching half way through 2015, a slew of strong projects have already dropped, including Kendrick Lamar’s long awaited sophomore album, the politically charged, To Pimp a Butterfly and Drake’s mixtape, a dense exploration of self and space, If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late. Excitement will only continue to build as rap fans anticipate a new album from Kanye West and yet another project from Drake scheduled to drop in the later part of the year.

Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and Kanye West are the three biggest players on contemporary rap music’s stage especially with consideration of the immediate moment. Not only are they three of the most successful popular musicians of the moment but due to their all releasing projects in the same year, there is an ubiquitous feeling among rap fans that the year 2015 will be remembered as something of a golden age for rap music. Another aspect of the importance of these artists, even perhaps a factor in their great success, is their ever-willing engagements with theaters of cruelty, though they manifest their cruelties in very different ways.

Kendrick Lamar’s To Pimp a Butterfly is personal, and yet universal, an exploration of social value and hierarchy. It is something of a natural evolution from the hip hop heroism of Good Kid M.A.A.D. City, subtitled: A Short Film by Kendrick Lamar. There is cruelty present in various forms in all of these projects and it does not always manifest the same way. Still, the particularly effective “theaters of cruelty” in rap music tend to focus a critical lens on the artist’s “self.”
Kendrick Lamar’s *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City: a Short Film by Kendrick Lamar* (2012) truly plays like a short film, each song or even parts of songs representing scenes in the life of young Kendrick Lamar. These scenes are puzzle pieces; with every song the picture Lamar paints becomes clearer. The album opens with the sounds of a tape being started. The tape plays a recording of a group of young men pledging themselves to their Lord Jesus Christ over eerie, ethereal hip hop production that moves into Lamar’s lyrical account of sexual and deviant adventures from the perspective of his seventeen-year-old self. The album follows Lamar’s experience as being the “good kid” growing up in a gang-war torn Compton. The songs and the skits interjected between songs on the album draw attention to the real hardships to which young people who grow up in such an environment are subjected and what their survival entails. This is not a new concept for a rap album but *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City stays far away* from the dangers of kitsch in this work. As the story unfolds, the listener is thrust into the visceral rawness of Kendrick Lamar’s theater. He is a skilled rapper, not just as a storyteller. He is clever with his wordplay—employing double and even triple entendres, his technical ability is unparalleled in contemporary hip hop, and he delivers his lines with distinct musical and rhythmic understanding in a voice and style entirely his own. Through all of these means he presents his situation and mental state leading up to the death of his friend, killed in front of his eyes in a shootout with a group of rival gang-affiliates. The album is complete in its concept and form. The delivery of the story through such a musical form is as much an enveloping theatrical experience as an auditory one. Artaud’s theater of cruelty is cruel unto himself first of all and
Kendrick Lamar’s is as well. He turns an unflinching, critical glare of cruelty toward his own life as he recounts the exploits of his youth.

Until this point, the album follows the exploits of young Kendrick Lamar and his friends driving around the city. They drive around freestyle rapping in the car, they drink, smoke, break and enter, steal, run from police, hustle for money. Lamar reflects on his experience with peer pressure and concepts that he calls “realer than the TV screen,” but he continues. He and his friends live the only way they know. The song that follows the death of their friend is a revelatory moment for Lamar and his group of friends involved in the shootout. It also features a number of themes that are important in understanding the transition and growth from *GKMC* to Lamar’s new album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. “Sing About Me/ I’m Dying of Thirst” is the emotional climax of the album and it is presented in two parts. “Sing About Me” features three distinct verses the first two of which find Lamar speaking to himself from the perspectives of two fellow victims of Compton: the brother of his friend killed in the shootout and a prostitute. In the third verse, Lamar responds to these two compatriots.

In the first verse, the gang-affiliated older brother of Lamar’s deceased friend speaks, “I’m fortunate that you believe in a dream… Everybody’s a victim in my eyes… I wonder if I’ll ever discover a passion like you and recover the life that I knew as a young’un.” These passages and Lamar’s response to them in the song’s third verse are extremely important in the context of the album and the reality that it represents as well as relating the desire to attain a sort of return to innocence. It also enforces Lamar’s “good kid” identity. If everyone is a victim, there must have
been many “good kids” before they had to sell their souls, becoming victims. These lines also raise the question of whether Kendrick Lamar actually “believe[s] in a dream.” He becomes a believer in God and he believes in death, as evidenced in his third verse and in “I’m Dying of Thirst,” the second part of the song as well as the skit that follows this song.

The second verse of “Sing About Me” finds a prostitute reprimanding Lamar for telling her story to the public, effectively asking: “Who are you (really who am I, since it is indeed Lamar’s voice questioning himself) to speak about other peoples’ struggles?” Directly quoted, he says, “You lying to these motherfuckers, talking about you can help ‘em With my story, you can help me if you sell this pussy for me, nigga Don’t ignore me, nigga, fuck your glory, nigga...” The anger that he writes with is more than just palpable, it is truly affecting in both its language and its emotive tone of voice.

Lamar responds to these situations in his third verse:

Sometimes I look in a mirror and ask myself:
Am I really scared of passing away? If it’s today, I hope I hear a
Cry out from heaven so loud it can water down a demon with the holy
ghost ’til it drown in the blood of Jesus
I wrote some raps that make sure that my lifeline
Reeking the scent of a reaper, ensuring that my allegiance
With the other side may come soon, and if I’m doomed
May the wound help my mother be blessed for many moons
I suffer a lot, and every day the glass mirror
Get tougher to watch; I tie my stomach in knots
And I’m not sure why I’m infatuated with death,
My imagination is surely an aggravation of threats
That can come about, ‘cause the tongue is mighty powerful
And I can name a list of your favorites that probably vouch
Maybe cause I’m a dreamer and sleep is the cousin of death
Really stuck in the schema of wonderin’ when I’mma rest
And you’re right, your brother was a brother to me
And your sister’s situation was the one that pulled me
In a direction to speak of something that’s realer than the TV screen
By any means, wasn’t trying to offend or come between
Her personal life, I was like “It need to be told”
Cursing the life of twenty generations after her soul
Exactly what’d happen if I ain’t continue rappin’
Or steady being distracted by money drugs and four-Fives, I count lives all on these songs
Look at the weak and cry, pray one day, you'll be strong
Fighting for your rights even when you’re wrong
And hope that at least one of you sing about me when I'm gone
Am I worth it?
Did I put enough work in?56

In the first part of this verse, Lamar voices his fear and his feelings about death and redemption. He says that he is obsessed with death; that his music reeks of it. He sings about death and he fears that his music might be complicit in the deaths that surround his life. He also employs strong religious imagery. In an earlier song he refers to himself as “Kendrick Lamar, A.K.A. Compton’s human sacrifice.” He knows his words are powerful and that they might bring about his own demise whether by means of gangs or bureaucracy that want to silence him or by other means. He hopes that his sacrifice will help his community in some way. The second part of the verse refers directly to the man and woman who addressed him in the first and second verses and he describes why he continues to make music that tells their stories. If silence continues, so will their situations, “girl[s] [that are] damaged by the system,” and kids killed in mindless shootings even twenty generations later.

“Dying of Thirst” refers to religion, using the imagery of holy water. In a chant-like flow, almost incantational, Lamar voices his tired sufferings. “Tired of running, tired of hunting My own kind but retiring nothing... We’re dying of thirst...”

Every verse on this part of the song is extremely image based and tragic. Lamar paints vivid pictures of the experiences he’s recounted throughout the album from a perspective of one who is “dying of thirst,” one in need of a truth with which to quell his guilt and his ethical abandonment. The final verse on the song ends with a plea from his mother (voiced by Lamar). “See a pastor, give me a promise What if today was the rapture, and you completely tarnished/ The truth will set you free, so to me be completely honest/ You dying of thirst, you dying of thirst,/ So hop in that water, and pray that it works.” The twelve-minute long, two part song ends with a repetition of the skit with which the album is introduced as well as some additional context that together contributes to the listener’s new perspective of the impact that this moment had in the life of Kendrick Lamar. Lamar turns to religious salvation, and in turn, artistic redemption from the deal with the devil that the social inequality of life in Compton required of him to make in order to survive. The album continues for two more songs that lyrically recount his newfound philosophical outlook on life. In “Real” Lamar asserts the importance of the truth that he attained in his redemption and the subsequent return to innocence represented by religion. The final song on the album is titled, “Compton” and it relates Lamar’s excitement at his own future as well as an ominous warning of the danger of his city.

*Good Kid M.A.A.D. City* is a tragic tale, but it has a positive ending. Lamar is excited about the future. As per Artaud’s requirement, Kendrick Lamar’s cruelty is self-directed but rather than an end in suffering, death, and destruction, Lamar recognizes his own ability to transcend tragedy and live a better life. In 2015, *To Pimp a Butterfly* finds Lamar still concerned with his “self” but his cruelty is no
longer pointed so strictly inwards. He is not so much looking back on his life but rather, reflecting on the state of the world and his role in it as he gazes around, watching social and structural injustices play out around him. The cruelty is pointed in all directions.

*To Pimp a Butterfly* is not the same kind of concept album as *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City*, with a storyline that evolves as the album progresses. The story continues, the content altered, however it offers many similar themes as those found in *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City*. The classic, funky electronic west-coast hip hop production of *GKMC* is elaborated with a sort of jazz-funk-hip hop fusion twist (heavy on the improvisational bass sometimes provided by Brain Feeder label affiliate Thundercat—Flying Lotus, a descendent of jazz royalty Alice Coltrane, is the leader of the Brain Feeder label and produced a portion of *To Pimp a Butterfly*). The sound, rather than feeling dated, is refreshing in the context of the contemporary “trap music”-dominated hip hop environment. Mirroring some of the conceptual themes of the project as a whole, the production hearkens back to a history of black music, which Kendrick Lamar seeks to reclaim in a contemporary context.

In *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar raps about his experience as well as the general experience of black America. As he has becomes more and more

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57 Constant Gardner, “Flying Lotus on Kendrick Lamar: He Gets No Credit For Being A Producer But He Had A Vision For This Album,” *Pigeons and Planes*, posted March 16th, 2015, [http://pigeonsandplanes.com/2015/03/flying-lotus-on-kendrick-lamar-he-gets-no-credit-for-being-a-producer-but-he-had-a-vision-for-this-album/](http://pigeonsandplanes.com/2015/03/flying-lotus-on-kendrick-lamar-he-gets-no-credit-for-being-a-producer-but-he-had-a-vision-for-this-album/)

successful, he battles with problems entailed by his newfound wealth. He must now deal with a whole team of new faces, all of which are trying to profit off of him through various means. They try to get him to throw around cliché hip hop phrases like “fuck you haters” because it makes money and to dissuade him from rapping about the concepts he addressed in *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City* as “realer than the TV screen.”59 This all takes place on a backdrop of a world of racial turmoil. In the song, “The Blacker the Berry,” the thirteenth track of sixteen total, Lamar alludes to the injustices that people of color have always suffered at the hands of the fairer skinned however, each verse in this song begins with a phrase that drips with self-degradation: “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015 When I finish this if you listenin’ then sure you will agree,” (Lamar 2015). The final verse continues:

This plot is bigger than me, it’s generational hatred
It’s genocism, it’s grimy, little justification
I’m African-American, I’m African
I’m black as the heart of a fuckin’ Aryan
I’m black as the name ‘Tyrone and Darius
Excuse my French but fuck you—no fuck y’all
That’s as blunt as it gets, I know you hate me, don’t you?
You hate my people, I can tell cause it’s threats when I see you
I can tell cause your ways deceitful
Know I can tell because you’re in love with that Desert Eagle
Thinkin’ maliciously, he get a chain then you gone bleed him
It’s funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war
Two tribal armies that want to build and destroy
Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that life next door
Beefin’ with Pirus, only death settle the score
So don’t matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers
Or tell Georgia State “Marcus Garvey got all the answers”
Or try to celebrate February like it’s my B-Day
Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kook-Aid on weekdays
Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements

Or watch BET cause urban support is important
So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?
When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
Hypocrite\(^60\) (Lamar 2015)

The Kendrick Lamar of *To Pimp a Butterfly* is plagued with a cruelty in the form of self-loathing, spurred by the fear that he has committed atrocities against his own race on par with the evils perpetrated upon Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman.\(^61\) In “The Blacker the Berry,” this anxious, consuming theme that is present throughout the entirety of the album comes to the forefront of Lamar’s subject matter. In addition to his own new problems, problems presented by money, fame, success and a perpetual fear of being taken advantage of, Lamar is incessantly aware that violence, suffering, and tragedy continues in black communities across the country and he fears his complicity in the tragedy.

The album reaches its focal point as he accusingly yells at himself, the hypocrite. It arrives in a similar fashion to “Sing About Me/ I’m Dying of Thirst,” in *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City* except instead of a story arc in which Lamar sells his soul to the devil and finds redemption through religion, the arc of *To Pimp a Butterfly* comes in the form of Kendrick Lamar’s psychic growth. The final three songs, “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said),” “i,” and “Mortal Man,”—which culminates in two poems and a fake interview devised between the hip hop legend, Tupac Shakur and Lamar—emphasize a positivity that looks toward the individual’s ability to


transcend violence and suffering and tragedy through self-love, hope, and love of God. Throughout his career, Lamar has focused on calling attention to social, moral norms, and questioning what it is that the audience really finds important. This is an essential power of art and the aesthetic experience that perhaps can only be accessed occasionally. Art has the power to influence and to change the way he or she who engages with it understands and acts within the world—to push and pull the boundaries of social norms and even moral codes for an audience. The role of cruelty in this situation is complicated but it seems to be very similar to Artaud’s endeavoring to shock his audience awake through the cruelty of his theater. It is only through Kendrick Lamar’s willingness to step into a perspective of cruelty that he is able to reach this power, to engage in violence with himself and with those who wish to subjugate him for their own profit and even with the other artists around him.

Indeed, Kendrick Lamar has engaged with artists around him in a sort of classic hip hop fashion although he does so with a Brechtian twist. Kendrick Lamar employs a constructive style of cruelty, not destructive à la Nietzsche and Artaud. One could regard his body of work as being a sort of dialogue with the other contemporary hip hop acts that are taking place around him, especially in regard to the music of Aubrey “Drake” Graham and Kanye West, both of whom make music from a potentially much more destructive perspective.

Jay Z refers to rapping as being more like boxing than art.62 This extreme competitive nature is one that Kendrick Lamar has at times whole-heartedly and

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vocally bought into as evidenced in his verse on Big Sean’s track from the summer of 2013, “Control.” Rather than staying completely silent during the three years between his most recent albums, Lamar lit a metaphorical fire under the laurels of rappers across the United States with his verse on “Control,” calling out a number of living-legend rappers as well as his more contemporary peers. I think his mention of Drake’s name especially drips with confrontational malice.

The history of rap music is a history of dialectics and great rivalries but it would be a disservice to the rappers of the past and the present to say that whatever relationship exists between Kendrick and Drake today is a continuation of any past dialectics. There have been various accounts and rumors of a Drake and Kendrick Lamar “beef” or feud in the past and these rumors have been squashed for the most part but speculation remains. Drake and Kendrick Lamar are very different types of rappers and they both know it but what they may not be so aware of is their dependence upon each other. Too Pimp a Butterfly broke Spotify streaming records

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that Drake’s *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late* set just a few weeks earlier. Kris Ex, in his Complex Media article, “What’s a King to a God? Why Drake and Kendrick Lamar Need Each Other to Succeed,” calls *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late* a “tentpole blockbuster, packed with action sequence after action sequence,” versus *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s “Oscar-bate,” and the success of one hinges upon the existence and success of the other. Whether or not this argument actually holds water, one of the telling points Ex draws upon in the article is Drake’s focus on “self.”

Since his 2010 major label debut *Thank Me Later*, Drake has primarily focused on Drake, *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late* is no exception. Drake presents an interesting case for study in the context of rap’s “theater of cruelty.” *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late* is almost exclusively an exercise in signifying. It is a sprawling, seventeen track project, more album than mixtape—it is a cohesive whole rather than a jumbled mix; comparatively, mixtapes often feel rather pieced together. *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late* finds Drake focusing most of his energy flipping between boasts of his impervious strength, soulfully lamenting his shortcomings and sufferings, and poking veiled (and occasionally not so veiled) disses at his label and at other artists, both specified and not specified—the general signified “others.” That’s honestly about all that happens. There are plenty of poignant lines about Drake’s feelings, Drake’s awesomeness, and how Drake is out to win, but despite the often seemingly celebratory subject matter, the album as a whole is melancholic sounding. In his review of the project, *The Guardian*’s Paul

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Lester says, “the former child TV star comes out fighting, amid machinegun fire, complaining about everyone from his peers to his family – but he convinces more as the original sad rapper.”

On the song, “6 God,” which features Drizzy spitting one long verse for three minutes over a particularly hard hitting Boi-1da and SykSense beat, he opens,

I’ll admit it, I’ll admit it
Watch you’re motherfuckin’ tone, boy, get hurt, boy
Aww, here go another mo’fucker that don’t understand
The concept of puttin’ money first, boy

Drake is exactly the type of rapper who puts money first. By contrast, Kendrick Lamar is not. While I do not think this line was specifically aimed at Lamar (others on the album might well be), the rhyme describes a fundamental difference between the two artists. Drake is the classic anti-hero—narcissistic, and tragic. He wields a crueler perspective than Kendrick Lamar, or Kanye West, and he does so with more success than Rick Ross. I have previously examined the potential value for a naïve sort of cruelty through analysis of Rick Ross’ rape lyric on “U.O.E.N.O.” Drake also makes music that features an aesthetic aspect of naïve cruelty but the difference between much of his music and Rick Ross’ rape verse is that Drake seems to be almost painfully, vulnerably aware of his cruel perspective; he simply uses it to create his narcissistic, tragic, and cruel art. Drake, like Nitzsche and Artaud, is unconcerned with his effect on society. As he says on the song “6 Man,” Drake

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“didn’t do this tape for CNN/ [he is] not tryna win awards, that shit looked forced/
It’s nothing like this,”—nothing like this mixtape.\(^70\)

His cruelty is not exactly calculated as per Artaud or Nelson’s preference (it is calculated in its own way), but it is definitely not formulated with the goal of impacting societal consciousness like the work of Kendrick Lamar or like Kanye West’s *Yeezus*, at least not yet. On “6 PM in New York,” the final track on the album, Drake spits rhyme after rhyme virtually non-stop for almost five minutes. One particularly interesting section on this song references a potential change in the type of music we might expect from him in the future:

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I’ve been tryna reach the youth to I can save ‘em this year
Fuck it, guess I gotta wait til next year
And I heard someone say something that stuck with me a lot
‘Bout how we need protection from those protectin’ the block
Nobody lookin’ out for nobody
Maybe we should try and help somebody or be somebody
Instead of bein’ some body that makes the news
So every body can tweet about it
And then they start to R.I.P. about it
And four weeks later nobody even speaks about it
Damn, I just had to say my piece about it
Oh, you gotta love it
But they scared of the truth so back to me showin’ out in public
That’s a hotter subject\(^71\)
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Perhaps we can expect some sort of “conscious” rap direction shift on the next album, then again, perhaps not. *Views from the 6* is expected to drop toward the end of this year and it is scheduled to drop as an album and not simply a mixtape. Often rappers will drop a free mixtape to hype their following release, in this case however, Drake did not release *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late* in the traditional

context, for free, possibly in order to free himself from his deal with the Young Money Cash Money record label.\textsuperscript{72} One might wonder why Drake has deemed this year somehow inappropriate to put out music that will “save the youth” and why he must wait until next year. Perhaps it had to do with his relationship to his record label, perhaps it had to do with Kendrick Lamar’s imminent album (it came out a few weeks after \textit{If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late}), but I think it likely that Drake will stay the same Drake that has made a lane for himself in contemporary rap music with own brand of naïve cruelty. In an ironic (re: tragic) state of affairs, he notes in “6 PM in New York,” right before he launches into the tease for a “conscious” turn of events in the future, “wonder how long they’ll check for me/Probably forever if I stay in my zone.”\textsuperscript{73}

Drake does not wield his cruelty willy-nilly. He knows what society is like around him, he has seen the way Kendrick Lamar for instance, goes about making music but Drake makes a conscious decision to create “naively” cruel music, to “put money first.” In some ways, the naïvety is ironic as it is in fact, a conscious move. The “money over everything” mentality is perhaps the greatest aspect of cruelty in any art; what could be crueler than the system responsible for maintaining social and economic structural inequalities? Maybe the only greater possible cruelty is the enthusiastic acceptance and glorification of the system by individuals of the


populations subjugated by this system. It is a theme that has existed throughout the
history and across the entire spectrum of rap music but Drake makes it his with
what he brings to the table as an individual in the contemporary rap game, a new
sound, a new perspective, and by imposing his own set of standards on his work. If
Drake wanted to cash out completely he could but he is also concerned with where
his money goes. As he says on “6 PM in New York,” he is “managed by the kids that
[he] grew up with,” and that he would “rather ... give that 15% to people [he] fucks
with.” It seems he is also genuinely dedicated to making quality music in his lane.

If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late might be a crowd-pleasing “blockbuster,”
compared to the difficulty and politically charged, To Pimp a Butterfly but it is the
type of blockbuster that gets overall positive reviews and stays true to a sound that
is essentially Drake’s own. In the second verse of the song “You and the 6,” Drake
raps to his mother about the things his father did for him that make him able to
forgive his father for not being there for him all the time in his youth. He raps the
lines, “He made me listen to his music, old music, soul music/ Shit that can only be
created if you go through it,” and he follows them with more of his own struggles,
past and present. He hinges his individuality in the rap game on this connection to
his roots, to jazz and soul and blues, and he raps but he also sings about it,

74 “6 PM in New York Lyrics – I’m managed by my friends that I grew up with I’d
rather give that 15 percent to people I Fuck with,” Genius, last accessed April 20th,
friends-that-i-grew-up-with-id-rather-give-that-15-to-people-i-fuck-with-if-me-and-
future-hadnt-made-it-with-this-rappin
75 “If You’re Reading This It's Too Late [Mixtape]—Drake, Reviews,” Metacritic, last
accessed April 20th, 2015, http://www.metacritic.com/music/if-youre-reading-this-
its-too-late-mixtape/drake
76 “You & The 6 Lyrics – He made me listen to his music, old music, soul music,”
incorporating these sounds with his characteristic production—a cool, atmospheric sound aesthetic.

2015 has so far exhibited two high profile hip hop projects that have continued a conversation, not expressly about cruelty, but that employ a use of it for varying purposes. More are expected. Before the year has expired, it is expected that the much anticipated follow up to Kanye West’s 2013 album, Yeezus, as well as Drake’s second project of the year, Views from the 6 will be released. Yeezus was an exercise in creative cruelty even unto the album artwork that in fact featured no image at all, simply a plastic case with a blank disc inside.\(^7\) Content-wise, Yeezus framed life’s tragedy, especially that of black America, and of the continued struggle. Swish (previously So Help Me God, West decided he would change the name of his album on May third, 2015\(^7\)) is rumored to be something of a paradigm shift. In an interview on radio station Power 105.1 West revealed that whereas Yeezus was protest music, his new project will be in “service to the people,” and he further described it as “cookout music” which he “just hopes people will like.”\(^7\) Needless to say, these signs seem to promise a very different direction than Yeezus, possibly, a direction that might entail less cruelty and less rage. One might be inclined to wonder whether the album will sound like an entire project of “kitsch” rap songs


\(^{78}\) “Kanye West,” Kanye West’s Twitter account, last accessed May 6\(^{th}\), 2015, [https://twitter.com/kanyewest?lang=en](https://twitter.com/kanyewest?lang=en)

like “Bound 2.” Strange as it is to hear the man who wrote “New Slaves” talk about making music in “service to the people,” perhaps this new direction will fit in an important new space in the dialogue surrounding cruel rap music.

In 2015, this year of return for hip hop’s biggest names, Drake has sprung first with an irreverently cruel project. He made a tragic statement about the cruelty toward self and society generally that is inherent in success. The statement was especially tragic and cruel in that he willingly engages with this cruelty to maintain success. It is a testament to not only the cruel irony of the project but indeed, in a Nietzschean sense, life’s inherent tragedy that this dense exploration of self and morality was perceived by some as blockbuster-ish and vapid. In the guise of vapidity, Drake wields an offhanded cruelty of perspective in his creative act and in pursuit of success. He creates naively cruel art but he is not unaware of the cruelty he possesses.

Kendrick Lamar continued the conversation in a different direction, with perhaps even greater critical and popular success. Lamar appropriated a space of cruelty in order to reflect on himself, society, and his own role in society to promote a message of positive change. He stepped into this space of cruelty but he did so reluctantly and the self-criticality of the project was the more poignant and tragic because of his reluctance.

If Kendrick Lamar and Drake are indeed considered the essential components of today’s dialectic of rap music forms, then how does Kanye West fit into this scenario? From his comments about his upcoming project thus far, *Swish*
strikes me as potentially inhabiting a similar vein of cruelty as Lamar and Drake but with a much sharper ironic edge. This has been a theme in West’s work (thinking especially of the final track from 2013’s Yeezus, “Bound 2”) but this album might come with a new level of extreme camp and a sort of meta-irony. I am inclined not to take West at his word that Swish will be strictly an album for cookouts and in service of the people, for a number of reasons. Two purported singles (they are not officially released singles as of yet) off of the album, “Wolves,” and “All Day,” are hardly what at least I think of as “cookout” music but they do have a certain conceptual theme in common with “Bound 2.” “Bound 2” sounds similar to some of Kanye West’s early work, namely albums like The College Dropout. “Wolves” and “All Day” are similar in that they harken back to the sounds of West through the ages, respectively, 808s and Heartbreak era West and West and Jay Z’s Watch the Throne. Neither of these first two singles, nor “Bound 2,” seem to be directly angled at changing or influencing cultural consciousness. Rather than attempting to pull an audience one way or the other in their metaphysical bubble of social norms, they simply appease the audience’s appetite for new Kanye West music that sounds like the Kanye West music with which they are already familiar. These tracks are pleasing to the ear but there does not seem to be any deeper significance to them other than perhaps a grand, signifying boast of all that West has accomplished throughout his career, a career that has effectively created and destroyed pop music trends at least three or four times in its wake. Granted, this is all speculation.

Perhaps in the context of the whole album there will be a more hard edged conceptual and cohesive element but even looking at the previous title: *So Help Me God*—it seems to be an exasperated plea. It is almost as if West has given up on the cruel perspective of *Yeezus* in favor of “Bound 2”’s ironic satire—perhaps this is West saying, ‘if “Bound 2” is the only popularly successful track off of *Yeezus*, then *So Help Me God* I will put out an entire album of meaningless, nice sounding pop music!’ The name change to *Swish* can be considered an extension of this idea. “Bound 2” sounded out of place on *Yeezus* in a way that revealed it to be a venomous satirical joke in the same way that *So Help Me God* entails a threat to accompany the album of “cookout music.” West might be pushing his subliminal satire still deeper on his forthcoming project by giving it such a title as *Swish*, seemingly meaningless, something of a catchphrase and a slang term that is associated with basketball.

Again, this is all only speculation but if these speculations are on target, what does it mean for West’s highly cultivated theater of cruelty, this near draining of intellectual content, this descent into naivety? Of course it does not mean the end of cruelty but what is evident from (the potentiality of) this move is that West has moved in the direction of the space of cruel theater that Drake inhabits, a cruelty of awareness and naivety and away from Kendrick Lamar’s difficult, self-reflective, and society-critiquing brand of cruelty. Like Drake, this possible new direction means that West is making naïve music from a calculated intellectual point of view, engaging in the cruelty of capitalism but, perhaps with a specifically pointed ironic take.
Looking to the “three-dimensional blob model of humanity,” West might be attempting to make a new, sort of disaffected, statement about himself and art and society by making an album that specifically does not try to shake his audience up or move them into a new state of mind. The question that must follow is whether this statement of feigned naivety (if that is indeed what it is) is saying anything effectively different than music presented from a perspective of unaware naivety like Rick Ross. Indeed, in a philosophical sense, this question is very similar to the question of how to deal with the audience members who claim to understand the role of rape culture in “U.O.E.N.O.” and still like the song. These are all questions revolving around the relationship between art and morality and ultimately, this relationship is relative. Different members of a work’s audience will be affected or not affected depending on their willingness to understand from a new perspective or stubbornness not to do so as well as the social norms to which they ascribe. What some might interpret as Rick Ross’ cruelty might be interpreted by others as stupidity but neither are wrong. The same is true of Kanye West’s new album if it is indeed an exasperated plea as I speculate, West is performing a particular kind of tragic, narcissistic cruelty by eschewing his artistic standards in order to cater to an audience seemingly unwilling to listen to them. In the tradition of Artaud’s theater of cruelty, this is a cruelty difficult and cruel for the self of the artist first of all.


If you’re reading this it’s too late [Mixtape]. "Drake." Take Care. Rec. 2010-2011. Aubrey “Drake” Graham, Cortez Bryant (exec.), ad all, 2011. CD.


