Artistic Expression and Popular Music Criticism: The Elvis Craze, The Los Angeles Uprising, and Black Lives Matter

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In 1991, Black Los Angeles rapper Ice Cube released his second studio album, *Death Certificate*. In his review of *Death Certificate*, white music critic Robert Christgau (who refers to himself as the "Dean of American Rock Critics") concluded his review by writing, "Call him Ice KKKube—a straight-up bigot simple and plain."[1] What made an esteemed music critic like Christgau write such a bold claim about a musician of color? As explained in this essay, despite common understandings of musical reviews, critical opinions such as the one Christgau wrote of Ice Cube are not simply based on musical aesthetics. Instead, popular music critics often reach beyond verses, tempos, and beats to inform their opinion. Critics' reviews are also shaped by contemporary sociopolitical tensions in a way that often runs against the themes and messages artists share in their projects.

This essay explores how the work of popular music critics perpetuates normative ideals of American society. By doing this, critics regulate and police alternative expressions of politics and identity in America along lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Based on the three sections of this essay, which present different case studies of how critics challenge artists' expression, critics have reinforced social and cultural boundaries, reviewed artists unequally, and disparaged works that have not thematically tapped into mainstream—and often white—audience's expectations. These processes of critics devaluing artistic expression are especially

concerning when considering that critics are understood to be voices of authority in the realm of popular music, people who take the time to translate musical aesthetics and social meanings from albums and determine whether they are worth the masses' time. Despite their position of authority and expectations of neutrality, this study shows that we should view the work of critics with skepticism in the same way we challenge Hollywood films and network sitcoms.

I. Methods

This essay follows the cultural studies methodology laid out by Douglas Kellner in "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture." In this article, Kellner argues that hegemonic ideologies are "encoded" in cultural texts that demonstrate "how culture reproduces certain forms of […] biases against members of subordinate classes, social groups, or alternative lifestyles."[2] Here, Kellner lays out how popular media and cultural texts can contain contemporary dominant social norms. Kellner argues that works in cultural studies should not only consider the ideology of cultural texts but pay attention to the way these texts are produced and "what sorts of audience effects the text may generate."[3] I argue that music reviews are an ideal place to consider Kellner's thesis, in part because of the ways they exist as cultural texts and in part because the work of critics is such an integral part of producing and reading music.

I consider the role of music critics in all three of Kellner's key factors as they play an important role in shaping audience reception and, therefore, future production and texts. This essay traces the emergence of critics from culture reporting in newspapers, such as *The Los Angeles Times, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* and more, through to their professionalization in blogs and websites specifically dedicated to popular music criticism like *Pitchfork* and *AllMusic*. The transition from newspapers to websites as the hub for critical reviews of popular music and its effects is considered in detail in section three, where the immediacy of access to reviews complicates audience reception. In addition to tracing this shift in media and the development of music writing, this essay will also demonstrate key instances in which, despite establishing themselves as figures of authority in analyzing music, critics have avoided discussing features of music and instead focused on political and social discourses in their reviews.

Popular music criticism went through multiple changes across the eras explored in this essay. At the time of Elvis's emergence as a popular artist in 1956, the role of music criticism was primarily to deliver information on artists' commercial success and the fascinations of their social lives. The only criticism that occurred was the critic's opinion on the social meaning of an artist and whether or not that ran against the critic's personal beliefs. In the case of Elvis, anxiety about his identity, and specifically his race, sexuality, and performances of masculinity tells us how critics encouraged readers to identify Elvis as a cultural threat to American values. Although scholars dismiss this era of music criticism due to the absence of aesthetic evaluation, section one of this essay aims to understand how this era of criticism sets a precedent for critics looking beyond music to ascribe value to artists' work.

In section two, I focus on a time in which, even though there is an emphasis on evaluating music in their reviews, critics often conflate the political and social meanings of music with its value. In the 1990s, critics reviewed albums based on how artists handled the themes of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising. Their critiques reflected the unequal treatment of artists along lines of race and masculinity. Their dedication to demonizing the rhetoric of Ice Cube, who embraced Black nationalist ideals in his 1991 album *Death Certificate*, is evident in their apathy toward the alternative/punk rock band Porno for Pyros, whose work delegitimizes the pain and violence behind the Uprising.

In section three, we see that most critics have stopped basing their evaluation of music on political meanings, but as examined through the treatment of two Kendrick Lamar albums, still impose dominant ideologies through their work by policing political expression. Considering artists and critics in the 2010's, this section considers the expectations music critics lay out for Black male rappers in the time of highly visible police violence toward Black men and the Black Lives Matter movement. The chapter also explores the process of critical production as online publications become the central host for popular music criticism. Immediate access to reviews upon the release of albums brings in concern that readers may be interpreting artists' work through the writings of critics who assert hegemonic norms.

In conclusion, this essay examines how critics perpetuate dominant social norms by labeling artists as part of larger cultural tensions/anxieties, removing albums from their political context to challenge an artist's message, and lastly by conflating their opinion of artists' politics with the value of their music.

II. Elvis, Proto-Popular Music Critics, and Cultural Anxieties

In March of 1956, Elvis Presley released his first studio album, *Elvis Presley*. The cover features Elvis with his sideburns and ducktail haircut, passionately performing with an acoustic guitar in hand. One month later, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* an editor simply wrote, "This is Elvis Presley, 21-year-old former Memphis truck driver who works himself into a frenzy with his blues songs."[4] If one's introduction to Presley had been through this *Inquirer* article, one would think Elvis was an up-and-coming artist; someone who hoped to break through into mainstream success. In actuality, Elvis had been on the rise for a month. By January, Elvis's first RCA Victor single, "Heartbreak Hotel," reached nearly one million copies sold and climbed the charts in pop, country, and rhythm and blues. His self-titled album was "a sure bet to be RCA's first million-dollar album."[5] Despite the commercial success of his work, Elvis struggled to escape the scrutiny of critics who worked to police his identity as a rock artist who, on occasion, brought Black music to racially integrated audiences and expressed his sexuality in unconventional ways. To a substantial number of Americans, Elvis was seen as undermining dominant American values through appearance, sound, and personality.

Americans understood Elvis as dangerous for a multitude of reasons. His songs brought Black sounds and genres to a white teenage audience. His appearance, while seeming conservative in 2025, was understood as an expression of youthful rebellion against dominant American norms. Presley symbolized deviant and excessive sexuality, which, due to his primarily teenage audience, was seen as ushering in moral decline in the Cold War Era. Cold War cultural politics illustrate the complexity of Elvis's emergence in a time when racial segregation was, despite being deemed unconstitutional in 1954 through *Brown v. Board of Education,* culturally maintained in the American South, and representations of American exceptionalism were driven through "domesticity of the nuclear

family."[6] Despite the larger sense of cultural conservatism, scholars have noted that "teenagers were starting to use mass media and leisurely consumption as ways to create distinct youth cultures that differentiated them from their parents."[7] Regarding larger American culture, Elvis was positioned against the hegemonic values of white families that maintained domestic conservatism and was adopted by youth who used media such as music to disrupt social and cultural norms. The anxieties held closely by white Americans were harnessed and validated by critics who, as voices of authority regarding music, connected Elvis to social issues of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States. Critics, at that time, writing primarily in mainstream newspapers, played a pivotal role in producing an image of Presley that frightened Americans who wanted to uphold the dominant norms of segregation and sexuality.

Despite the success of "Heartbreak Hotel" in pre-established popular music genres, Elvis's sound was based on a genre white Americans were uncomfortable engaging and was viewed as a sign of social and moral degradation: rock 'n' roll. The sound originated from rhythm and blues (R&B), a genre pioneered and largely consumed by Black Americans but dubbed rock 'n' roll by Alan Freed, a white radio jockey from Cleveland. The sound of R&B is not monolithic and has many different styles. The styles and aesthetics of rock largely emulate the strain of R&B performed by "shouters." This sound was "the most controversial strain" that "dominated and defined" R&B.[8] Shouters, equipped with the amplified electric guitar, openly celebrated Black sexuality through language that white Americans understood to be crude and provocative.[9]

Because of this link between the sound of rock 'n' roll and deviant behavior, rock fans quickly came under attack in print. Their alcohol-driven antics and rowdy crowd etiquette invited critics to label rock fans as immature and dangerous. In addition, rock shows on occasion hosted multiracial audiences and critics argued that the crowds signaled social decline. Glenn Altschuler highlights how articles from the *New York Times* aimed to connect, "destructive activities at, outside, or in the aftermath of concerts to 'the beat and booze' or the music alone."[10] One article featured a psychiatrist, Francis Braceland, who described the genre as "a cannibalistic and tribalistic form of music."[11] Braceland's language connects the

perceived degeneracy surrounding rock music with its racial history, coding Altschuler's anti-Blackness in the language of "primitivism." The controversy surrounding the emergence of rock 'n' roll is heavily racialized, and even the white "King of Rock" Elvis Presley struggled to escape its complexities.

Critics did not limit their condemnation of Elvis to his work in music. In a musical landscape dominated by the radio, questions arose about Elvis's race as listeners could not differentiate whether he was Black or white. However, as television and film became more prominent mediums, issues of gender and sexuality arose around scripted and live performances where people could *see* Presley perform and move on stage. Elvis's appearance and his trademark gyrations on stage drew backlash from critics and viewers.[12] As a result, managerial decisions made to clean up the musician's image deployed with varying success. Scholars have argued that his service in the military from 1958 to 1960 "reframed the erstwhile rebel into a patriotic all-American boy" and his film career beginning in 1956 is equally understood as an attempt to expand the potential of Elvis's audience through a more palatable and sensitive image.[13] I primarily focus on representations of Elvis in 1956, the year when Americans found his sound and image most controversial, resulting in more critical coverage.

By the time of Elvis's launch into the mainstream, popular music criticism of the 1950s differed from our modern understanding. Publications like *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, and other media focus on covering music and musicians and offered opinions from writers with the formal title of "music critic." Instead, as scholars have argued, "Until the mid-sixties, writing on rock music still amounted to little more than news and gossip. The music press was serving the record industry, going for what sold or might sell to teenagers, and there was nothing very remarkable."[14] In 1956, most reporters and journalists covering Elvis were cultural commentators. Their work rarely touched on the techniques, sound, or aesthetics of Elvis's music and instead prioritized larger social discourse. And yet, I argue that we should engage with these critics, whom I have identified as "proto-popular music critics." By repeating and mass publicizing this gossip, they highlighted issues of identity and foreshadowed the political policing future critics would do in

creating and affirming the link between music aesthetics and race, gender, and sexuality.

The proto-popular music critics perpetuated biases toward Presley, Black artists, and a female youth fanbase who pushed the limits of sexual decorum. These early critics were not equipped nor willing to criticize and engage with Elvis's sound, and instead, focused on his impact on larger American audiences and culture. By arguing that "the period 1964-69 marks the genesis of rock criticism proper," scholars have dismissed early commentary on popular music.[15] This section, instead, shows how cultural commentators played a significant role in informing and perpetuating opinions toward musicians through larger sociopolitical discourse before the formation of formal popular music criticism. Their interpretations of Elvis not only reflected their opinions on a singular artist but highlighted attitudes toward rock 'n' roll, its female fans, and American culture. If their columns did not feature their own opinions, then columnists provided platforms to readers with prejudices regarding race and sexuality. Many of these commentators' opinions on Elvis's expression of sexuality emulated the actions of television hosts who aimed to censor it. Despite not operating within a concrete methodology for approaching music discourse, these early music critics and their work still highlight how music discourse in media addresses and attempts to contain complex themes of identity.

Elvis's early hits climbed to the top of radio charts across multiple genres. While television was becoming the predominant form of media consumption in the 1950s for white families, radio executives shifted their priorities to appeal to white teenagers.[16] Elvis's musical style appealed to teenagers who looked for an alternative voice to the singers who "harmonized with white tastes in style, sound, and lyrics," such as the ballads of Nat King Cole—which white Americans understood as romantic, not sexual.[17] When "Heartbreak Hotel" emerged as the dominating charting song on *Billboard* in May of 1956, its main competition was Perry Como's "Hot Diggity Dog Diggity," a calm song with a steady rhythm and xylophones.[18] Conversely, Elvis's music could be interpreted as sexually charged. On his cover of Ray Charles's song, "I Got A Woman," Elvis sings, "She's there to love me both day and night/ No groans or fusses, just treats me right" and "She knows a woman's

place is right there, now, in her home."[19] While "I Got A Woman" did not dramatically shift how Americans perceived identities of sexuality and gender, Elvis brought lustful music written by Black musicians to white audiences. This song specifically depicts a woman who, while still comfortably instilled in the domestic sphere, also expresses sexual agency and desires that might be seen as unfeminine or hypersexual. While the song does emphasize monogamy on behalf of this imagined feminine subject as Elvis sings that "She saves her loving, early in the morning/ Just for me, oh yeah," the audience response to this and his other songs were intense.[20] Today, scholars acknowledge that the songs of Elvis and other rock musicians were not as radical as the backlash made them seem; these songs largely reinforced traditional roles in gender, relationships, and sexuality.[21] Still, at the time, American adults grew concerned with rock musicians' ability to tap into the emotions and culture shared among white teenagers, which they interpreted as delinquency and immorality. Instead, Presley could be understood as a "rebellion of sterility and conformity of their social lives."[22] Critics began to reproduce these anxieties in their work, highlighting that Elvis and his fans signaled a collapse of American ideals.

Critics rarely discussed Elvis's sound alone. Often, their comments about his sound were entangled in his appearance and on-stage movement. Their commentary in the early stages of Presley's career typically invoked the ideas of delinquency, unchecked sexuality, and offensive noise. Jack Gould of the *New York Times* wrote that there was "Hardly any reason he should be billed as a vocalist," describing Presley's vocals as "an undistinguished whine."[23] Gould noted that Elvis's vocals paled in comparison to the romantic and palatable sounds of Frank Sinatra and claimed the reason for Elvis's success among fans was his gyrations.[24] Critics such as Gould, who did not discuss the aesthetics of music at length or spend significant time identifying musical qualities, resorted to criticizing Elvis through other, more scandalizing factors that referenced his hypersexual and racially promiscuous influences.

Other music critics wrote more leniently about Elvis due to a possible awareness of their biases. John S. Wilson of the *New York Times* referred to Elvis as a "startling newcomer" and "another highly mannered country twanger" who "on rhythm numbers […] takes off with a drive that is startling, hair-raising, and thoroughly

provocative."[25] Wilson's review demonstrates his skepticism toward Elvis and the sounds of rock, but his language indicates a sense of curiosity and honest engagement. Not all critics, actively or subconsciously, replicated the anxieties harbored by white Americans and instead illustrated that Elvis's music was more of a novelty than a threat.

Other critics went beyond their own voice to reproduce anxieties and provide platforms for more extreme reasons as to why Elvis should be feared and suppressed. One way these attitudes spread was through the inclusion of reader voices in newspapers. Harry Harris of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reaffirmed the concerns regarding Elvis by describing him as "the personification of juvenile delinquency, which may explain part of his allure for rebellious teenagers."[26] Harris continued, claiming Presley's performance was "exciting in a primitive, sexual way."[27] Harris's review replicated the anxieties that Elvis was both part of a culture that corrupted American teenagers and a racially charged sexual threat. Two days later, Harris included reader responses to his writing on Presley. One reader criticized Harris for his earlier work, writing, "don't brand him a criminal because you don't happen to like his style."[28] This reader seemed to identify that critics should separate the musical qualities of Presley from their social and cultural biases toward musicians. Another reader wrote in to argue, "It is regrettable that a character like this Elvis Presley is permitted to run loose, perform in public, and infect our youngsters. He should be treated like any other contagious disease—by isolation."[29] This intense language reflects more than disdain for Presley; it echoes sentiments of how Elvis distastefully brought Black music to white audiences.

By including reader voices, critics provided a platform for listeners to feed into the idea of Elvis as a racialized figure and police the politics of his music. The latter quote, provided by William R. Branz of Abington, Pennsylvania, shares similar language to southern segregationists such as Asa Carter. Carter, a former radio jockey and member of the Ku Klux Klan, believed "race mixing led to miscegenation" and "exposure to Black culture promoted juvenile delinquency and sexual immorality."[30] Carter fueled physical attacks on popular Black musicians through his rhetoric and picketed concerts with integrated crowds.[31] Elvis's sound and its connection to Black music and culture tapped into the anxieties of white parents

and the prejudices of segregationists. Meanwhile, critics such as Gould and Harris repeated these biases in public media and provided a platform for potential outside prejudice.

As television became an increasingly important form of media consumption through the 1950s, Elvis was both seen as a threat to American culture sonically and visually. Presley's first television appearance was at *Stage Show* on January 28, 1956, two months before RCA Victor would release *Elvis Presley*. After being introduced during the 8-8:30 pm slot, Elvis walked out on stage, "looking as if he'd been shot out of a cannon. Wearing a black shirt, white tie, dress pants with a shiny stripe, and a tweed jacket so loud that it almost sparkled."[32] Not only was his attire fascinating, but his long sideburns and aggressively gelled ducktail hairstyle were a sign of difference; a signifier of rebellion.[33] In an interview with the *Chicago Daily Tribune,* two school superintendents explained that high school students who wore long sideburns were "projecting themselves into becoming Presley" to assert independence from their parents. In the same article, an unnamed psychiatrist added that Elvis served young women by "doing for girls what burlesque shows do for boys."[34] Critics eventually reproduced the anxiety that Elvis promoted devious male sexuality to the unacceptable sexual delight of his female fans.

It was not his bold outfits and rebellious hairstyle that made Elvis burlesque for women, but his on-stage movement, his signature gyration. This was the move that motivated critics to repeat the nickname, "Elvis the Pelvis," incorporating the sexual representation of Elvis into their work. In many newspaper references to Elvis's dance moves, there was equal coverage of the behavior of his young, female fans. After Elvis appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* for the first time in September 1956, Cecil Smith of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "the wild screams of the audience indicate that he was gyrating as he sang." When one viewer complained they did not show the crowd's reaction enough, Smith noted, "A screenful of teen-age females" who idolize "a side burned hillbilly" sounded like something "[he'd] prefer not to see."[35] Critics shifted their scrutiny from Elvis's music to his sexual appeal and dragged his fans down with him. By labeling Elvis as a "hillbilly," a derogatory term used to describe the social isolation and poverty southern/rural whites faced, critics attacked

Elvis's identity as an American man and belittled the young women who idolized him.

During his early career, efforts were made to clean up or censor Elvis's image through television and film. With "Elvis the Pelvis" becoming a nickname commonly employed by print journalists, Presley was reduced to an image of juvenile delinquency and deviant sexuality. During his first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, Elvis transitioned into playing his rock hits after slower ballads, and the camera purposefully zoomed in on Elvis's upper half.[36] Anything below his torso stayed out of sight, and his dancing could only be inferred by the audience's surge. Ironically, two months earlier, after Presley's performance on *Stage Show,* Sullivan claimed he would not control Elvis's gyrations, arguing, "They're nothing like the publicity about them."[37] Then, when Presley was signed on to perform, Sullivan prevented the television audience from seeing Elvis's offensive movements. Scholars have noted that Sullivan constantly shifted his opinions on controversial artists based on their commercial viability.[38] Elvis's cultural popularity encouraged Sullivan to bring him on, but the controversies surrounding Presley meant that Sullivan would have to sanitize Elvis visually for the show's commercial success.

Instead of focusing on Elvis's sound and the quality of his performance, proto-critics again reduced his music to discuss his sexual appeal. Harry Harris wrote of the censored television view, "Certainly it couldn't have been his voice […] that inspired all the commotion."[39] Here, Harris *again* attributed Elvis's success to an idea that young women simply appreciated the artist for his visual performance, reducing Elvis to a sexual symbol and his female fans to immature, sex-crazed teenagers. Dorothy Kilgallen of the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* simply wrote of his performance, "No talent, but great kisser."[40] She wrote nothing about the quality of Elvis's guitar playing, how his voice endured compared to popular artists of the time, or anything about the significance of Elvis performing on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Instead, Kilgallen offered readers a reaffirmation that, above all, Elvis existed as a symbol of sexuality for America to love or hate. By critiquing Elvis through his appearance on visual media, commentators emphasized his sexual appeal, belittled his female fans and their adoration, and by doing so, largely reduced Elvis to an object of sexual discourse. As Lindberg

argues, critics of the time did not effectively demonstrate capabilities as formal music critics.[41] Yet, their work cannot be disregarded since the critics actively informed perceptions of Elvis as a sexual threat toward young women, merging cultural anxieties with music discourse.

While television aimed to control Elvis through censoring his physical expression, his first movie appearance, *Love Me Tender* (1956), sought to redefine America's perception of Elvis.[42] While Presley decided to join Hollywood, it was also a larger project in making Elvis culturally appealing and, therefore, expanding his commercial potential. His time in Hollywood, "showcased him as a one-dimensional happy-go-lucky chap in ways that completely ignored the racial and sexual dimensions that had been at the heart of his earlier appeal."[43] Despite the fact that Elvis did not bring juvenile delinquency, racialized music, or sexualized dance moves to theater audiences, critics still attacked Elvis for his former unpalatable image.

Elvis's first film's title was changed to match Elvis's hit single "Love Me Tender" (originally named *The Reno Brothers* after the titular characters) and released in September of 1956. The single first appeared in *Billboard's* Hot 100 at number twelve in October of that year and landed at number one right before the film's release.[44] In the movie, Elvis is a passionate yet naive romantic who turns to crime to solve his issues. While his hair stays aggressively gelled, his clothing is subtle. Following the movie's plot, which takes place on a farm after the conclusion of the American Civil War, Presley wears attire suitable for farm labor and a typical wardrobe of polo shirts and loose-fitted trousers. Elvis performs four songs throughout the movie, including the ballad "Love Me Tender," country songs, and rockabilly, but nothing as controversial as rock 'n' roll. *Love Me Tender* presents an image of Elvis void of his on-stage antics and musical controversies, nonetheless, critics remained unswayed. According to one Elvis biographer, Peter Guralnick, the reviews were "extremely condescending" and "led an all-out assault on popular culture with a vilification of Elvis."[45] The film was largely disregarded by critics as a "juve" film, a film only appealing to teenagers and not to be taken seriously by other audiences.[46] Despite the attempts to make Elvis palatable to white Americans, critics continued to simultaneously disregard Elvis as a fad while maintaining the idea that he was a larger

social threat who could undermine the dominant ideologies on race, sexuality, and gender in America.

The work of critics regarding Elvis aimed to label the artist as a cultural danger and perpetuate discourses of a hypersexualized white man drawing from deviant Black music to whip young girls into a tizzy. By doing so, they echoed the rhetoric of segregationists and white Americans working to control racialized and gendered expressions of sexuality. The language used in their criticisms often conflates themes of identity with the aesthetic and cultural values of Elvis's music. These critics also expanded past his music. Their work reduced Elvis to traits of sexuality across media such as television performances, where his gyrations were visually censored, and in film, where, despite a sanitized image, he was still vulnerable to critical perceptions. While their work does not merit them a role as "music critics," their criticisms allow people to understand how music reviews can impose opinions beyond the aesthetics of music and instead inform reader perceptions of identity in America.

As reviews became formalized, most music critics tended to be white men with a college education. After 1956, new magazines and publications emerged that were dedicated specifically to coverage of popular music, musicians, and critical opinions. *Rolling Stone, Creem,* and other music publications featured criticism from writers operating under the title of "music critic." The introduction of critical opinions in these "legitimate publications" is the reason Ulf Lindberg claims, "the period 1964-69 marks the genesis of rock criticism proper."[47] The glorification of critical voices in this era has resulted in the canonization of opinions from writers such as Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs, and Dave Marsh. While these critics' opinions may have differed, they were all analyzing popular music through their white, male identity. In 1998, a survey by Robert Wyatt and Geoffery Hall concluded that the popular music critic is "a well-educated male in his 30s with about 10 years experience covering music. He has at least a bachelor's degree with maybe even some graduate work."[48] Steve Jones then adds, "It is not until rap music leads to the development of publications devoted to its coverage that Black music critics begin to be widely heard and noticed."[49] While critics are becoming more formalized with a dedication to both music value and social meanings, the array of critical opinions does not reflect the racial and gendered demographics of artists and

consumers in the 1990s. In the next section, this essay explores how artists engage with themes of interracial violence and Black nationalism, while male critics display biases regarding how they hold artists accountable for their lyrical content.

III. Ice Cube, Porno for Pyros, and Decontextualization in Album Reviews

In April and May 1992, American newspapers, radio stations, and television networks depicted the events of the Los Angeles Uprising as chaos. The country witnessed imagery of burning buildings, commercial windows being smashed by "looters," and, eventually, the California National Guard and the United States military operating together to bring "law and order" to a city struck by interracial conflict. One year later, in April 1993, the alternative/punk rock band Porno for Pyros released their self-titled album. At the Los Angeles alternative station 106.7 K-ROQ, one would likely have heard the most popular single from the album, "Pets," but K-ROQ DJ Jed the Fish had also played the record in its entirety.[50] Unlike "Pets," a song that imagines the eventual conquering of humans by an unknown species (and would reach #1 on *Billboard's* Modern Rock Track Chart), the album featured songs inspired by the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising. These songs—"Porno for Pyros," "Packin' 25," and "Black Girlfriend"—either directly addressed the event itself ("Porno for Pyros") or considered themes inspired by the Uprising such as law and order, vigilante violence, and interracial relationships ("Packin' 25" and "Black Girlfriend"). The band largely faced mixed reviews for their first album, but few music critics noted the album's thematic and political content.

This lack of social analysis is surprising because almost two years earlier, Los Angeles rapper Ice Cube released his controversial album *Death Certificate,* and critics quickly took aim at the content behind the uproar. Ice Cube, whose album was released months before the Uprising, illustrated the frustrations of Black Americans in Los Angeles who faced increasingly visible violence and discrimination from other community members, such as Korean Americans, white Americans, and the Los Angeles Police Department. His track "Black Korea" aimed his anger toward Korean Americans through threats of violence and racist language. In response to this content, critics attacked Ice Cube as an artist,

made their own inflammatory comments, and inserted themselves into the larger political discourse surrounding the Uprising by seeking to push back against Ice Cube's political claims.

What makes the role of critics important in this situation is their challenging of Ice Cube's platform and their silence toward bands like Porno for Pyros who could be interpreted as equally controversial but remained uncontested. In their reviews of Ice Cube, critics rarely address the album's context, including the murder of a young Black girl, fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins, by a Korean-American grocer and the filmed beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department, who were eventually acquitted on charges of assault and excessive force. Their criticisms also fail to address the importance of embedded politics in rap, specifically the cohesion between the genre and Black nationalism in the 1990s.[51] As Ice Cube embraced the politics of the Nation of Islam, a Black nationalist religious organization, his political views continued to push back against the rhetoric of "law and order" and pushed for radical changes in American society through violence. As a result, Ice Cube's *Death Certificate* projected real but unpalatable emotions that stemmed from the murder of Latasha Harlins and the lived experiences of Black Americans in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Porno for Pyros feigned ignorance of the larger economic and social tensions that produced many of the conflicts between Korean and Black Americans. Their work delegitimized and dismissed the significance of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, sexualized and objectified Black women, and demonstrated a lack of empathy toward the struggles of Black and Korean Americans. In response to the respective pieces, critics separated the music from its political context which further demonized Ice Cube, who espoused radical views embedded in Black nationalism, but steered potential criticism away from Porno for Pyros.

On March 16, 1991, fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins entered the convenience store that Soon Ja Du and her family owned. After accusations that Harlins intended to steal a bottle of orange juice, Du pulled on Harlins' sweater, physically escalating the situation, and began to fight with her. When Harlins tried to flee, Du pulled out her revolver and fatally shot her in the head. Two weeks after *Death Certificate* was released, Soon Ja Du was found guilty of manslaughter, but instead of the possible sixteen-year sentence, Judge Joyce Karlin

Fahey decided Du would only serve five years of probation alongside community service.[52] It was clear to Black Americans that a fifteen-year-old Black girl was not given justice.

While the killing of Harlins, the assault on Rodney King by LAPD officers, and the eventual acquittal of those officers are all understood to be catalysts for the Uprising, the existing tensions between Black and Korean Americans explain how marginalized communities were both powerful and powerless. George Lipsitz argues, "The powder keg that exploded in Los Angeles in 1992 made more visible the perpetual powder keg of race and class polarization created by twenty years of neoconservative economics and politics."[53] Individual acts of racial violence added to the tensions that already existed between Black and Korean Americans. Edward T. Chang complicates this understanding by identifying the pre-established friction between Black and Korean Americans. He argues that Korean Americans were typically located in a higher economic class than Black Americans, who felt that their communities were being economically preyed upon: "African Americans perceive Korean merchants as a threat to their own economic survival. Some African Americans perceive Korean merchants as a long line of 'outsiders' who exploit the African American community."[54] Here, Chang addresses the economic pressures Black Americans face to explain their skepticism toward Korean American merchants, but adds that, due to this skepticism, Korean Americans are seen as "outsiders" or foreign within multi-racial communities. Scholar Claire Jean Kim adds to this debate by outlining that, while Korean Americans can assert economic power over Black Americans, Black Americans can claim power over Korean Americans through notions of Americanness.[55] By positioning Korean Americans as foreign to American culture, Black Americans can confine Asian identities to an "other" in American society.[56] When a Korean-American attorney argued that Ice Cube's album "reflects an attitude urging blacks to take the law into their own hands by burning down stores if they don't like the store owners," Jeff Chang asserts that this position spins the conflicts between the two groups as racial and not class-based, an argument that is made "often by the white mainstream media."[57] While the issue of Black and Korean conflict can be attributed to issues of race *and* class, the scholars above show how communities viewed the cause of their issues differently. The

perspectives regarding *Death Certificate* are equally as complex, and responses can be shaped by an individual's or community's experiences.

These economic and social tensions between Black and Korean Americans are key to understanding Ice Cube's lyrics. By not providing this context in their reviews, music critics framed Ice Cube's isolated lyrics as ungrounded prejudice. I am *not* arguing that Ice Cube's lyrics in "Black Korea" are unproblematic or that his calls for violence should be ignored. Instead, I aim to exemplify how Ice Cube exists in a larger framework of understanding expressions of identity and politics alongside how critics work to police these expressions.

"Black Korea," which is featured on the "Life" side of *Death Certificate*—the side which Ice Cube urges on the album's opening track as "a vision of where we need to go"—is a brief rap song featuring a scene sampled from Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.[58] The sampled scene features an argument between a young Black man and Korean American convenience store owners over their language barrier, reinforcing the cultural and economic differences between Black and Korean Americans. After the sample, Ice Cube flies through verses such as the opener, "Everytime I wanna go get a fuckin' brew/ I gotta go down to the store with the two/ Oriental one-penny countin'."[59] Here, Ice Cube's use of the word "oriental" establishes the "foreign" identity assigned to Korean Americans while the reference to "penny countin'" hints at the economic tension between the two communities. His narration intensifies as he raps, "Thinkin' every brother in the world out to take/ So they watch every damn move that I make." Here, Ice Cube stages a confrontation with Korean American perceptions toward Black customers and points to them as the reason for Latasha Harlins' murder.[60] Ice Cube then continues with, "So don't follow me, up and down your market/ Or your little chop suey ass will be a target/ Of the nationwide boycott" before he threatens, "So pay respect to the black fist/ Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp."[61] While these economic and violent threats could be read as self-defense from a community that had just experienced the lethal results of these racist stereotypes, many failed to consider that context and, as a result, these lines were viewed as inflammatory to both Korean Americans and the media.

After the release of *Death Certificate*, numerous Korean American merchants across the country began to boycott St. Ides malt liquor, a brand which Ice Cube promoted. In response to this, Ice Cube's publicist Lesley Pitts spoke with a reporter from the *Washington Post*: "He and I have talked at length about this," said Pitts, and "It was never his intention to tell black kids to go out and burn down Korean stores or to be violent against Koreans. He was just explaining the resentment he personally feels."[62] While Ice Cube has reinforced the themes and motivations of *Death Certificate,* he eventually worked to resolve the conflict between himself and Korean American grocers. His motivations for resolving the conflict are debated, but in February 1992, Ice Cube met with the Korean American Grocers' Association and settled on plans to work through tense community relationships via sensitivity training for Korean merchants and investments in scholarships for Black youth.[63] Unfortunately, as Jeff Chang notes, the newspaper story on the reconciliation, which ran with the headline "Ice Cube the Peacemaker," was published in the *Korea Times* on May 4th, 1992, a day after the Los Angeles Uprising ended, when the story was simply overlooked by Americans.[64]

While Ice Cube faced backlash within Los Angeles, music magazines and critics brought the controversy to a national audience. In their published criticism of *Death Certificate*, *Billboard* magazine's editorial board condemned the album. In their review, they wrote, "Ice Cube's songs represent the anger of a community that has been neglected and abused in many ways, […] but he lowers himself and his ideas by advocating violence against individuals or groups."[65] *Billboard* acknowledged the conditions that inspired the album's content but did not tolerate the expression of Ice Cube's resistance, characterizing it as too violent. The board fails to note how this resistance is fundamental to rap, since the genre as a whole works as a vehicle for social critique. Critics displayed ignorance, whether real or feigned, of rap's capacity for alternative forms of political and social expression and wrote as if Ice Cube was a dangerous threat who should not be justly represented in their works.

Robert Christgau similarly decontextualized the racial environment from the political claims within his music reviews. Christgau reviewed both *Death Certificate* and *Porno for Pyros* in the years they were released. In his review of *Death Certificate*, Christgau

appears as less of a music critic and more of a celebrity personality critic, almost emulating the style of proto-popular music critics who conflated political meanings with musical value. First, to emasculate Ice Cube, Christgau argued that in his prior projects, the artist "was acting like a 'faggot.' So here he reclaims his perpetually threatened manhood."[66] Christgau likely refers to Ice Cube's part in the 1991 film *Boyz N The Hood,* where he plays a young Black man who experiences the murder of his friends and brother. Ice Cube's role as Doughboy aims to demonstrate the pain young Black men were going through in the face of gentrification, gang violence, and financial instability. By emasculating Ice Cube and delegitimizing his portrayal of issues prevalent for Black men, Christgau further polices Ice Cube's political expression. Additionally, he concludes the attack on Ice Cube by stating, "Call him Ice KKKube—a straight-up bigot simple and plain."[67] In his one attempt to reference larger political moments, Christgau mentions that Ice Cube called for "a nationwide boycott."[68] Christgau did not elaborate on why Ice Cube called for this boycott and left every other piece of the sociopolitical backdrop behind. While it is important to note the absence of political context to help readers understand where Ice Cube's frustrations stem from, it is equally surprising that Christgau *never* mentions a critique of the music itself. His review is absent of any commentary regarding sampling, beats, style, or the other fundamental elements of rap music.[69] Christgau, a figure of authority in popular music criticism, did not bring informative criticism to his audience and instead perpetuated pre-established biases toward Ice Cube including the policing of political expression and themes of identity. Christgau ultimately gave *Death Certificat*e album a "C+" which is, according to his website, "a not disreputable performance, most likely a failed experiment or a pleasant piece of hackwork."[70] He openly conflated political and social values, which he attacked consistently throughout his review, with a musical worth he ignored completely. Despite this, Christgau felt empowered through his authority as a music critic to inform readers that *Death Certificate* was heavily flawed and not worth their time.

Some listeners perceived rap as a political and cultural threat due to its association with the Nation of Islam, a group that asserted its prominence in the scene during the 1990s. Their growing popularity among rappers during this era brought Black nationalism

and their politics to the forefront of the genre.[71] Jeff Chang writes, "Cube shaved off his jheri-curl and took refuge in the Nation of Islam. Full of new ideas, he was confident his next album, *Death Certificate*, would be his masterpiece."[72] This transition toward Nation of Islam's beliefs, as Angela Davis argues, produced both internal and external complications for cultural movements intertwined with Black nationalism. She asserts that the movement is limited by misogynistic overtones and may not be as revolutionary as they would consider themselves to be.[73] Davis's critique is that Black nationalist ideas can be portrayed in prejudicial ways toward those who also possess limited power in America. One can find evidence of Davis's claim in songs like "Black Korea," where Ice Cube articulates Black nationalist politics, even at the cost of violence toward another marginalized community.

While it is necessary to understand the biases and limitations of Black nationalism in rap, it is equally important to illustrate the genre as an artistic and commercial vehicle for Black ideologies. Loren Kajikawa writes, "By inverting conventional morality and racial hierarchy through their irreverent and boastful signifying, gangsta rappers had carved out a space where they could critique the police brutality, racial profiling, and socioeconomic forces criminalizing black youth."[74] Ice Cube, despite reconciling with Korean American merchants, still supported and advocated for understanding *Death Certificate* through this lens. For the album's twenty-fifth anniversary in 2017, Ice Cube sat down with a writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and discussed the album's significance. The writer, Gerrick Kennedy, described *Death Certificate* as "Empowering and socially conscious messaging commingled with misogynistic, homophobic and bigoted posturing."[75] To justify the inclusion of "Black Korea" in the album, Ice Cube said, "Nobody is safe when you listen to 'Death Certificate.' Any of us that has any kind of flaws in our character, [the album] was probably going to find it."[76] Even after twenty-five years of criticism, Ice Cube continued to reinforce that *Death Certificate* and "Black Korea" were authentic expressions based on the lived conditions of Black Americans and their relationships with Korean Americans.

Some music critics gave Ice Cube leeway in their reviews and provided multiple perspectives on *Death Certificate*. In his review titled "A Crucial Message, A Crude Delivery from Ice Cube," *Los Angeles*

Times critic Robert Hilburn effectively explained Ice Cube's inspirations and the importance of political messaging within rap. Hilburn wrote, "it would be wrong to dismiss 'Death Certificate.' Rap is one of the few ways mainstream media can plug into the frustrations felt by many in the inner city."[77] However, Hilburn also played into the stereotype of the aggressive Black man when he wrote that Ice Cube "succumbs to the rage" on his album, that his references to women, other minorities such as Korean-Americans, and gay men "are clearly misguided," and that his delivery of the messages "undercuts his impact."[78] For a different perspective, rap periodical *The Source* wrote that "Timeless gems like 'Black Korea' addressed real lived issues in urban settings."[79] The opinions on *Death Certificate* in music journalism spanning from 1991 to the 2010s are complex and vary depending on whether critics want to handle political matters over lyrical substance, or thematic content over musical elements. In the context of "Black Korea," Jeff Chang writes, "Interpretations of the song varied widely because of the positions of its different audiences by class, generation, and social power."[80] This is illustrated through the varied Korean American responses, interpretations from music journalists, and attitudes toward the expression of Black nationalism. Critics and magazines that failed to encapsulate and contextualize these overlapping narratives denied Ice Cube's agency as a writer, an artist, and a Black man, delegitimized the concerns of both Black and Korean Americans, and, in the case of Robert Christgau, inappropriately conflated thematic content and musical quality. Ultimately, these reviews played into the idea that Ice Cube's prejudices were unfounded and irrational and that his beliefs had no place in rap, causing his music to suffer. However, other bands that handled interracial conflict in America with humor and questionable views, such as Porno for Pyros, were not critically punished even though they perpetuated these same critical principles.

Porno for Pyros was a side project of the more popular rock band Jane's Addiction; their formation was catalyzed by the *first* break up of Jane's Addiction in 1992. The new band featured Jane's Addiction leader and vocalist Perry Farrell, drummer Stephen Perkins, bassist Martyn LeNoble, and introduced guitarist Peter DiStefano. They would release two studio albums: *Porno for Pyros* and *Good God's Urge*. Their eponymous album, released a year after the

Uprising, was considered "a more ethereal and psychedelic affair" compared to the work of Jane's Addiction and was praised for the way it "specializes more in textured guitar sounds."[81] As Mike Watt (the bassist during *Good God's Urge)* explains in an oral history book about Farrell, Jane's Addiction, and Porno for Pyros, the Uprising directly inspired the band's name.[82] As addressed earlier, the band's most successful single, "Pets," did not take inspiration from the Los Angeles Uprising. However, other songs on the album demonstrated the ignorance of Farrell and his bandmates for satirizing the Uprising of 1992, an event that was largely produced by the white supremacist economic and social hierarchies that pitted white cops and the Korean community against Black Angelenos.

Three songs on their albums directly deal with the riots or themes of interracial relationships and violence, of which two will be analyzed. The second track, "Porno for Pyros," imagines a situation where pyromaniacs watch the Uprising, sexually satisfy themselves to the events occurring, and eventually participate in the chaos. The opening verse, "Came home last night/ There was fire and smoke on the T.V./ Cops and the army/ People running out in the street looting" plays into the spectacle of the Uprising: police beating and subduing participants, buildings on fire, and the sensationalizing of interracial conflict.[83] Farrell then sings, "I took off my clothes/ And came four times/ Could not leave myself alone," before chanting "it was porno for pyros!/ porno for pyros!" and so on.[84] The band is openly mocking the violence and destruction in Los Angeles committed by both community members and the state, reducing the interracial violence to a spectacle for implicitly white pyromaniacs to sexually satisfy themselves.

"Black Girlfriend" also uses sexualization as a tool for delegitimization. To open, Farrell whines, "ever since the riots/ All I really wanted/ Was a Black girlfriend."[85] The song's first half has a slow pace, with the narrator sexualizing Black women (every member of the band at that time was white) and getting his hair braided by his crush.[86] He sings, "Looking out her window/ It's so exciting and foreign/ But I'm staying/ With my black girlfriend," romanticizing the "foreign" nature of a Black neighborhood and positioning Black Americans as external to Los Angeles identity.[87] The song then explodes into piercing guitar and Farrell shouting, "Drivin' through the 'hood/ In my Chevy Nova '62/ My arm around my/ Little black

girl."[88] Throughout the song, Black women are treated like accessories; their lives, neighborhoods, and sexuality are free to be toured by white musicians and sensationalized for their predominantly white audiences. By the end of the song, the narrator invites his Black partner to dine with his family; an act that can be interpreted as rebellious within the white family structure or a desire to make his interracial dating life a spectacle at dinner. Whether or not this is the intention of Farrell's lyrics, Black women are portrayed as passive attachments for white men.

Both "Porno for Pyros" and "Black Girlfriend" portray situations in which the Uprising is reduced to a joke or used as a tool to reinforce the subjugation of Black women while centering and celebrating white male sexuality. While analyzing these songs, consideration was given to satirical commentary; the band could be critiquing white ignorance and hegemonic takeaways from interracial violence. However, their comments indicate otherwise. In Brendan Mullen's oral history of Farrell's musical trajectory, he asks Porno for Pyros members for their thoughts and experiences with the Uprising. Farrell responds, "We [Martyn, Peter, and myself, not Stephen] went out and did our thing and rioted. We wanted to feel the street and the rush of what was going on. So we headed over toward Crenshaw. We were toting guns, that was like the years when I thought it was cool to carry a gun."[89] Most of the band actively participated in the Los Angeles Uprising, but they do not indicate that their involvement intended to challenge economic and social hierarchies or protest police brutality. Instead, Farrell's comments portray their participation as nothing more than a self-fulfilling search for an adrenaline rush. He continues, "We'd watch each other's backs and bust into stores along with the other locals."[90] The band's engagement with the Uprising appears apathetic toward social or economic causes and instead emphasizes ideas of chaos and boredom.

Taking the lyrics and political context into account, one would assume critics would treat Porno for Pyros similarly to Ice Cube. Instead, critics primarily addressed the musical substance of the band, with many comparisons to the more critically acclaimed and popular Jane's Addiction, while avoiding comments on political matters. "Like L.A. itself, Perry Farrell's mind may not be pretty, but it's worth a visit."[91] Not only does this review from Arion Berger

avoid political commentary, it, like Farrell's lyrics, equates the city with white masculinity and relegates the Black community to the "foreign." In his review for *Rolling Stone*, Berger largely spends his time commenting on the quality of Porno for Pyros' sound. He argues that "most of the lyrics are challenging and evocative" but that the quality of the music is less than expected of the former Jane's Addiction members.[92] Berger's only reference to any thematic content is to "Black Girlfriend." He writes, "A fever dream of racial lust and fear, 'Black Girlfriend' is so confused that neither the singer nor the listener can take a stand on it."[93] Other critics also refrained from evaluating and "taking a stand" on thematic elements of the album, although, as argued earlier, the politics and themes of identity in songs such as "Porno for Pyros" and "Black Girlfriend" are displayed by Farell. Greg Prato of *AllMusic* only went so far as to recognize that the title track deals with the Uprising.[94] Even in the *Los Angeles Times*, critic Jonathan Gold avoids any acknowledgment of how the Uprising shaped this album.[95] Most surprising is that Robert Christgau, who bashed Ice Cube for his misogynistic lyrics and racial biases on *Death Certificate*, had *nothing* to say about the ways Porno for Pyros delegitimized the violence and tensions deeply entrenched in the Uprising. On his website, his review is blank, leaving only a bomb symbol. The bomb represents Christgau's grade of a "dud"; "a bad record whose details rarely merit further thought. At the upper level it may merely be overrated, disappointing, or dull. Down below it may be contemptible."[96] As a music critic, Christgau took a politically complex and inflammatory album and decided that it should not be examined as a cultural text. However, upon interrogation of *Porno For Pyros*, the ignorance of Farrell and his bandmates are clear. Why does Ice Cube deserve to be identified as akin to the KKK while *Porno for Pyros,* an album that insensitively discusses Uprising discourse, displays racial biases, and fails as a punk rock project, remains critically uncontested?

Punk has a history dominated by white musicians and fans. Punks of color were present and involved during the scene in the 90s, but were largely marginalized, and their contributions were ignored. Some argue that the punk scene's commitment to anti-racism has been overemphasized in music historiography.[97] As Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay argue, the largely white-centric scene would not evolve consciously regarding race until the

late 1990s when punk bands of color emerged and "demanded that 'raceless' White punks acknowledged the history of people of color in punk rock."[98] This is not to say that themes of race were absent from punk, as David Ensminger notes,

> Punks projected personas and practices based on a kind of mimicry of those they felt were authentic outsiders, like blacks, Hispanics, and others, which disturbed and perturbed the powers that be in their lives, thus loosening and fragmenting the restrictive web of their interpersonal narratives.[99]

This mimicry of marginalization that Ensminger notes should be present in Porno for Pyros' work but is ultimately absent. The band displays zero empathy or solidarity toward Black and Korean Americans. Their songs on the Uprising could have made fun of whites demanding "law and order" as self-anti-whiteness was very prevalent in punk, according to Duncombe and Tremblay.[100] Farrell could have written lyrics bashing the economic structures that produced interracial tensions or he could have even criticized police brutality. He and the band had plenty of lenses through which they could challenge the society that caused the riots, since themes of class and distrust for police and politicians are deeply ingrained in the punk ethos.[101] Yet, the white punk rockers failed to engage with the political motivations of their genre.

One argument against the empathy performed through the process of self-marginalization is that it is inherently inauthentic. As Daniel Traber writes, "L.A. punk more often frames itself in language intimating they engage in this practice to rebel against the bourgeoisie, not to bemoan their dwindling opportunities to join it."[102] While scholars such as Traber find this practice to be employed by white punks to reflect their grievances and not as a display of empathy toward marginalized Americans, the idea of authenticity is challenging. On one hand, Ice Cube was demonized by critics for expressing his authentic views on Black-Korean tensions. So, how can we measure authenticity when critics attack and ignore the question? Should the authentic expression of politics and identity, as they are experienced by the artist, truly matter for critics, or should the focus instead be the substance of that expression? Farrell has not been forced to speak publicly about his motivations for writing on the Uprising like Ice Cube has over and over again, and the thematic

content within the album never illustrates a clear stance. However, considering the band's description of their participation in the Uprising, their sexualization of both the Uprising and Black women (which is a tool for delegitimization), and their inability to demonstrate a commitment to the "spirit" of punk rock, it seems evident that Farrell and Porno for Pyros did not care about the Uprising, the social and economic factors, or the implications for Los Angeles and the United States.

IV. Kendrick Lamar and Critics' Political Expectations

Throughout the 2010s, Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar went from releasing his first album, *Section.80* (2011), to winning the Pulitzer Prize for Music with his 2017 album *DAMN*. His projects were constantly featured on *Pitchfork* as "Best New Music," and his albums dominated *Billboard* charts.[103] Lamar's albums typically provide an introspective look at the artist or celebrate and reflect upon Black American culture. Focusing on the music criticism surrounding Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and his self-reflective *DAMN* (2017), critics understood Lamar to fill a particular role in popular music as a political advocate for the Black community in the face of police brutality, somebody who would address the nation on how to cope with violence and political turbulence in America while illuminating a path forward. When Lamar did not fill this role on his latter album, critics revealed their previous political expectations and expressed their disappointment, challenging the worth of *DAMN* in American culture.

Modern music criticism has changed since 1993. In the 2000s, web-based publications began to emerge. The internet made finding reviews of new albums both a quicker and easier process. Critics today have noted the significance of these changes, since they have turned music criticism into an industry focused on quality with a quick output.[104] When Kendrick Lamar released *DAMN* on April 14th, 2017, *Pitchfork*'s review released April 18, 2017, just four days later. While this immediacy of output from critics can be counteracted by the fact that many music listeners have instantaneous access to albums when released through streaming services, it has raised concerns that listeners see reviews before engaging with the music. Kellner uses cultural studies to understand how media can inform consumer taste and perpetuate dominant

ideologies, and, in the case of popular music criticism, readers and listeners may take in hegemonic ideologies from critics before engaging directly with or understanding Kendrick Lamar's alternative viewpoints.[105] The possibility of critical influence facilitated by immediate access to reviews is a concern since audiences may not be interpreting and internalizing Lamar's message themselves but rather filtering their listening through the reviews. Critics now have a vastly expanded platform and greater power to further reproduce dominant ideologies.

In their reviews of Kendrick Lamar, critics expressed concern and doubt about Lamar's role as an artist in political discourse. While his projects are thematically political, the politics Lamar engages with did not primarily pertain to national concerns about police brutality, racial inequality, and Donald Trump's presidency, which other rappers were doing to the satisfaction of mainstream audiences. Instead, Lamar chose to focus on politics central to Black communities and his personal development as an artist. Critics responded by questioning the importance of the self-reflective and micro-political themes Lamar explored and conflated his albums' political value with their worth. However, unlike the critics who equated *Death Certificate*'s political value with its musical value, critics' works on Lamar's projects are overwhelmingly positive despite policing his lack of attention toward the growing inroads of nationalized Black Lives Matter rhetoric.

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 when a social media hashtag of the same name was created by three Black women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. They posted the hashtag after George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old Black teenager who was racially profiled and confronted by Zimmerman while walking through their Florida neighborhood at night in 2012. Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, ignored police recommendations to avoid approaching Martin and, after initiating a physical altercation with the teenager, fatally shot him.

The acquittal of Zimmerman catalyzed Black Lives Matter as a decentralized movement against racial injustices in the United States. Since 2013, protestors have organized and employed the rhetoric of "Black Lives Matter" to bring awareness to police brutality, the over-policing of Black communities, and the systematic

incarceration of Black men. Despite creating and placing the corresponding hashtag (#blacklivesmatter) into the social media environment, Garza and her fellow hashtag creators were not the leaders of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Instead, as Christopher Lebron argues, the movement "is akin to a social movement brand that can be picked up and deployed by any interested group of activists inclined to speak out and act against racial injustice."[106] Protests occurred on college campuses, at political conferences, and in the streets of American cities.

As the Black Lives Matter Movement progressed and developed, the themes of racial inequality integral to the movement's mission became increasingly visible in American popular music. American musicians such as J. Cole, Janelle Monáe, and The Game released songs that "provided a thematic soundscape" in "a new period of activism for the second millennium."[107] One of these songs was Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," released as a single for his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. According to Lamar, the track is meant to be "more uplifting, but aggressive. Like Ice Cube, he is not interested in playing the victim, but still having that 'Yeah, we strong.'"[108] Lamar's embedded message translated smoothly to Black Lives Matter protesters, who chanted the song's chorus: "We gon' be alright."[109] Videos across the internet demonstrate the employment of "Alright" as an anthem to the movement. One video, recorded outside the Los Angeles Police Department headquarters, shows protestors holding hands and chanting the song's chorus alongside members with megaphones shouting, "it is our duty to fight for our freedom."[110] Beyond the chorus, "Alright" features other politically explicit lyrics such as "What you want you, a house? You, a car?/ Forty acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar?"[111] Here, Lamar delves into the materialism he finds prevalent in Black communities while addressing the historical economic inequities Black Americans still deal with today. By conflating cars and homes with forty acres and a mule, a promise made to Black Americans during the American Civil War that was not upheld in Reconstruction, Lamar identifies how Black Americans have been manipulated by material promises that do not solve the issues within Black communities. "Alright" argues that economic inequities hold Black Americans back, but there is also more to overcome, and warns against the limited focus on material gain. The song presents a kaleidoscopic breadth of complex issues

pertinent to Black communities across America and reflects the many issues Black Lives Matter aims to bring attention to and reform.

The discourse surrounding "Alright" and its adoption by protestors elevated the song so that it spoke to racial inequalities at a national level. One publication detailing the track headlined it as a "civil rights anthem."[112] When Lamar performed "Alright" at the 2015 Black Entertainment Television Awards, he rapped from atop a vandalized police car with a large American flag waving in the background. In response to this performance, Fox News host Geraldo Rivera claimed, "Hip Hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years."[113] Rivera had attacked Lamar and claimed that the institution of hip-hop was a corrupting force for Black teenagers in America, disregarding the historically complicated issues that Black Americans face on both a macro-American level and in everyday experiences. "Alright" meant something larger to those who participated in and sympathized with the Black Lives Matter Movement and to those who aimed to delegitimize the national problem of racial injustice and violence.

Despite the sense of national identity and conflict apparent in "Alright," Kendrick Lamar used *To Pimp a Butterfly* to address themes of individual and communal accountability, specifically regarding Black communities. The opening track, "Wesley's Theory," references actor Wesley Snipes' imprisonment for tax evasion to discuss the importance of financial responsibility, in which Lamar argues that America purposefully fails to educate Black men.[114] Lamar raps about how he plans to spend the money from his music career irresponsibly: "When I get signed, homie, I'ma act like a fool […] Platinum on everythin', platinum on wedding ring."[115] The track is sonically cluttered with saxophones, synthesizers, and violins as Kendrick Lamar raps, eventually switching from his voice to the perspective of Uncle Sam and detailing the ways the materialistic United States fails to provide Black men with a financial education.[116] "Wesley's Theory" speaks to prevalent issues in American politics, but not the issues that dominated the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement.

"Wesley's Theory" is not alone in its complex treatment of the problems facing Black communities. In "The Blacker the Berry," Lamar reflects on how Black self-hatred is created and upheld by

systemic racism in the United States ("You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me") and has produced colorism and division within Black communities such as Lamar's Compton ("This plot is bigger than me, it's generational hatred/ It's genocism, it's grimy, little justification").[117] The lyrics are direct in identifying how crimes committed by Black Americans against other Black Americans further damage their communities. Lamar concludes "The Blacker the Berry" by criticizing what he sees as hypocrisy: "So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street/ When gang-banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me? Hypocrite!"[118] Lamar's lyrics are pointed toward Black Americans and their own biases in a way that alarmed popular music critics. When *To Pimp a Butterfly was* released in March 2015, Black Lives Matter had been organizing in multiple regions of the United States to protest the police brutality present in the murders of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Charley Leundeu Keunang. Instead of putting out an album that contributed to a national demand for police reform, Lamar rapped to Black Americans about reflecting on their communities and working toward improving them by addressing specific and prevalent issues.

Critics quickly gave mixed responses to Lamar's lessons in *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In *Spin*, Dan Weiss, a white music critic, wrote that the themes of Black-on-Black violence in "The Blacker the Berry" are "dangerous ideas in macro (essentially victim-blaming)."[119] Weiss identifies the directness of Lamar's lyrics coming from his identity as a rapper who speaks on these themes, "because he's comfortable speaking for others."[120] In this review, Weiss balances his assessment of Lamar's politics and the album's musical qualities. This is in stark contrast to reviews of *Death Certificate*, where critics who disagreed with the album's politics devalued its musical content. Weiss writes that Lamar's focus on Black issues could be understood as problematic in a time when Black Americans are being killed by white police officers. Weiss does not insert his voice into the politics of *To Pimp a Butterfly* in the way critics did for *Death Certificate*. Instead, he interprets how this album *may* come off as problematic to listeners when Lamar is "castigating himself on 'The Blacker the Berry' for being no better than the police."[121] Weiss is not directly criticizing Lamar's politics but instead placing them into a national context of

police violence and racial inequities to show how all listeners, or critics, might not welcome Lamar's message.

A review by Craig Jenkins (who was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Criticism for 2021) in *Pitchfork* follows a similar pattern to Weiss's review. Jenkins identifies Lamar's voice as "a guiding hand at work" across the album in his goal to identify how Black Americans can build up their communities together. [122] Jenkins addressed both the album's politics and sound in his review. But, like Weiss identified earlier, he claimed that Lamar's focus on the issues in Black communities, such as Compton, could be "dangerous." Through this, Jenkins began to produce a narrative surrounding his politics.[123] First, Jenkins argues that Lamar's "principle of personal responsibility has treaded dangerously close to respectability politics."[124] Here, Jenkins inserts his voice to claim that Lamar lectures Black Americans on Black culture. He then identifies how this album has a focus on small communal improvement as opposed to national change in the context of Black Lives Matter protests. Jenkins writes of the album, "It might not be the message we want in a year where systemic police and judicial inequality have cost many the ultimate price, but that doesn't bankrupt it of value."[125] Jenkins' claim here places Lamar's album back into the discourse of national politics. He speaks as though Lamar was *expected* to make an album that would add to the voices demanding police reform. It places "systemic police" and "judicial inequality" as more pressing issues than what Lamar has illustrated in communities such as Compton. Critics such as Jenkins have not only informed audiences on how they should view and interpret albums but are now deciding what an artist *should* speak on politically.

This raises the question of who this album was written or created for. Jenkins argues that this album should address the nation, providing the answers for how people could move forward "in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds."[126] Lamar finds a different purpose in *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In a 2015 article with *Billboard*, two months before his album would release, Lamar was asked about police brutality enacted on Black Americans across the nation. To that question, he responded: "I wish somebody would look in our neighborhood knowing that it's already a situation, mentally, where it's f—ked up."[127] To explain how he thought change would begin, Lamar stated, "when we don't have respect for ourselves, how do we

expect them to respect us? It starts from within."[128] *To Pimp a Butterfly* is an album that looks inward at a Black mentality featuring colorism, materialism, and violence. Robert Christgau, wrote in his *Consumer Guide* review, "What I admire most and enjoy most about this album is that it addresses African-Americans straight up and leaves the rest of the hip-hop audience to listen in if it wants."[129] Unlike in his review of Ice Cube's *Death Certificate*, Christgau illustrates an understanding of who Lamar aimed to address in his album. While music critics in the twenty-first century may still perpetuate the cultural regulation of musicians and their projects, the work of critics such as Christgau demonstrates album reviews as a way to acknowledge and address artists' messages and politics in a manner separated from the music.

When Kendrick Lamar's 2017 album came out, critics noted that it was a far deviation from the themes within *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Instead, what Lamar produced was an introspective album; one that showed him "coming to terms with his new position" as "a mouthpiece for a viciously angry generation."[130] Regardless of its political value, critics praised *DAMN* as an integral part of Lamar's discography. It was awarded "Best New Music" by *Pitchfork,* received five stars in *DIY Magazine*, and sits at position ninety-five out of a hundred on *Metacritic,* a site that compiles and averages out critic reviews. Most notably, Lamar won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his work on *DAMN*. He is the only non-jazz or classical musician to do so. However, Lamar's pivot toward a personal, self-reflective album was understood as a retreat by critics. In the same way critics asked Lamar to produce songs that encapsulated America's frustrations, they again pushed the idea that Lamar's responsibility as an artist was to provide answers in a seemingly new political and social context.

Three months before *DAMN* was released, Donald Trump was inaugurated as President of the United States. To those sympathetic with the Black Lives Matter movement, this represented, "a symptom […] of this nation's tragically anemic inability to reliably and robustly express concern for nonwhite citizens."[131] Trump's victory was viewed as a setback for protesters demanding police reform and aiming to improve economic and social conditions for Americans of color. In their reviews, critics allude to their anticipation that Kendrick Lamar's album would add to the voices

resisting Donald Trump and his policies. Artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, and other popular musicians issued cease-and-desist orders toward the Trump campaign and administration, while rappers such as Jeezy, Mac Miller, and Meek Mill publicly spoke out against Trump and his policies.[132] Musicians vocally shared their contempt for Trump and in their reviews, critics revealed their expectations for Lamar to do the same on *DAMN*.

This is not to say that *DAMN* was devoid of references to national politics: Lamar references both the conservative media outlet Fox News and Trump. In the second track, "DNA," Lamar samples Fox News host Geraldo Rivera's response to Lamar's 2015 BET performance, where he claimed hip-hop was more dangerous to Black Americans than racism.[133] In the same bridge where Rivera is sampled, Lamar asserts that he has "loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA" to contest Rivera's notion that hip-hop damages Black culture.[134] On "XXX," Lamar notes, "Donald Trump's in office/ We lost Barack and promised to never doubt him again" and asks, "but is America honest or do we bask in sin?"[135] Lamar expresses a desire for the nation to return to the administration of Barack Obama and questions American values in response to Trump's victory. Besides these two explicit moments, Lamar used *DAMN* to pivot away from the voices resisting shifting political conditions and instead promote self-reflection and understanding. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine four months after *DAMN* was released, Lamar explained his reasons for avoiding political topics on his new album. When interviewer Brian Haitt asked why Lamar had "been quiet about Donald Trump," Lamar responded, "it's like beating a dead horse. We already know what it is. Are we gonna keep talking about it or are we gonna take action? […] On the record, I made an action to not speak about what's going on in the world or the places they put us in. Speak on self; reflection of self first. That's where the initial change will start from."[136] Lamar's response resembles his justification of the themes in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, encouraging listeners to empower and better themselves instead of searching for answers elsewhere. Lamar felt that other musicians were doing enough to speak on national conflict, and he needed to take a different path. To Lamar, *DAMN* was not simply a retreat from politics but an alternative way for listeners to situate themselves and exercise agency when feeling powerless.

As the follow-up of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, critics made it clear that *DAMN* was a surprise in its personal focus. In a review for *Drowned In Sound*, Jude Clarke claims that *DAMN* meets the expectations held after *To Pimp a Butterfly*, but does so "by taking a surprising side-step rather than a pace forward in its artistic development."[137] While Clarke names Lamar as an artist "in his absolute prime," she asserts that *DAMN* is "not what you might have expected or even—on one or two initial listens—have been hoping for from Kendrick Lamar."[138] Here, Clarke conflates Lamar's lack of politics with his artistic development. By claiming that Lamar's focus on himself and his mental health in *DAMN* prohibits his "artistic development," she reasons that his value as an artist stems from his input on political discourse as opposed to innovation in lyrics and production.

In other reviews, Lamar's output cannot escape the shadow of *To Pimp a Butterfly*. While it is common for critics to reference artists' previous projects to show the trajectory of their development, it seems Lamar's critics are suggesting the lack of politics in *DAMN* may hinder its value to others across races. Andy Kellman, a white critic at *AllMusic*, taps into this sentiment in his review. Kellman wrote that *DAMN*, "on the surface seems like a comparatively simple rap album that demands less from the listener" when compared to *To Pimp a Butterfly,* but ultimately, "is just as lavish and singular as the preceding albums."[139] Jesse Farifax, a Black critic for *HipHopDX,* wrote, "Whether it's a future classic or impenetrable catalog builder remains to be seen."[140] While some critics such as Clarke anticipated a politically focused project from Lamar and expressed skepticism or disappointment toward *DAMN*, others aware of this expectation instead aimed to highlight why the themes of the album made it a unique entry in Lamar's discography while still admitting that it may not reach the cultural peak of *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

Critics reviewing Kendrick Lamar were able to disagree with his politics and their importance while still highlighting Lamar as a unique and influential artist musically. This shows progression from the work of critics regarding *Death Certificate,* who either failed to discuss the music and focused only on the album's politics, or conflated the radical politics with musical value. However, the work of critics pushed to confine Lamar as an artist who should only

engage with national politics in a frame understandable to white audiences after the adoption of "Alright" by the Black Lives Matter movement and the surge of musicians who condemned Donald Trump. Critics policed Lamar, a Black man, on what discussions are appropriate within his projects, instead of allowing him to illustrate an alternative way to understand Black experiences in America. They revealed their expectations for Lamar as someone who was supposed to predictably channel complex national issues into a commercially viable medium palatable for mainstream audiences.

V. Conclusion

Critics policed identity and political expression in various ways during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By conflating their opinions of political meanings and artistic projects, critics constructed Elvis and Ice Cube as cultural threats to impose their own norms upon and to suppress the alternative ideologies in their music. While critics ignored the politics implicit in Porno for Pyros' eponymous album, they demanded that Kendrick Lamar, a Black rapper, translate the suffering of Black communities amid police violence and racial discrimination into a commercially viable album for white mainstream audiences to enjoy. Critics went far beyond evaluating music.

Instead, in each of these cases, they used their position as figures of authority to decide whether these musicians and their projects were acceptable in a larger context of hegemonic American culture. Elvis was labeled as un-American by critics who reduced the artist to a representation of deviant sexuality and as one who would threaten the norms that dictated the need for segregated crowds, the expression of male sexuality, and the expectations that limited female sexual agency. Over thirty years later, Ice Cube's *Death Certificate* was heavily scrutinized for one track that espoused Black Nationalist ideals. Ice Cube's ideology ran against the dominant American notions that valued "law and order" over physical resistance. Yet when Porno for Pyros released a project that undermined the legitimacy of the Los Angeles Uprising and heavily sexualized Black women, critics did not critically engage with the politics of their album. This demonstrated a clear bias in how Black musicians are held accountable for expressing politics and identity, especially in hip-hop, in a way that their white peers are not. Finally, while critics

showed an openness to Kendrick Lamar and the music of hip-hop, they willingly shared their disappointment that Lamar had not addressed accessible mainstream politics. This study shows that passive acceptance of music criticism is not a true reflection on or a pure evaluation of artists and their projects. Instead, we should interrogate popular music criticism as cultural texts that reproduce dominant norms and attack alternative expressions of race, gender, and sexuality.

While this essay has explored a trajectory of music criticism where critics have become slightly more diligent in how they ascribe musical value considering political and social contexts, they still largely police and regulate artists' expressions of identity and politics. As alluded to in section three, this is especially concerning when occurring in a time where publications focused on criticism, such as *Pitchfork, Slant,* and *AllMusic,* can subject listeners to critical opinions before engaging with the music themselves. On YouTube, music critic Anthony Fantano (whose channel "theneedledrop" has three million subscribers) will livestream new albums, typically at the time of release, to his fans and insert his commentary during the stream either between songs or by simply pausing the music. Not only is Fantano actively influencing listener experience by interjecting his opinion, but he is also doing so at the immediate release of an album. This raises the possibility that both critics and fans are engaging with the album for the first time together.

Some have argued that critics should take their time exploring and evaluating albums before releasing their opinions for fans to either passively accept or actively interpret. In *Bloomberg*, columnist Jessica Karl wrote the headline, "Taylor Swift Is Proof That How We Critique Music Is Broken." Karl's claim was in reference to criticism of Swift's 2024 album *The Tortured Poets Department,* which featured thirty-one songs. While Karl makes the incorrect assumption that critics churn out reviews immediately after albums release (when, in fact, critics who have connections in the industry or work at esteemed publications often receive advance copies), she is right in considering that for listeners without advance copies, it is extremely difficult to thoughtfully analyze a thirty-one song album before being subjected to the opinion of critics on social media.[141] Ultimately, this marks a shift of music criticism into a large industry that, through the

internet, provides listeners with instant access to critics' opinions when fans are unlikely to have engaged with the album critically.

So, when considering the immediacy of reviews, how can we address the issue that critics are imposing dominant norms on readers? At a minimum, critics should avoid policing artistic expression by becoming social and political translators for readers, and they should encourage using their platform to explore identity as opposed to suppressing it. Critics can provide judgment on musical aesthetics and technique but should also address themes of identity and politics with a desire to contextualize and explain, rather than condemning artists who fail to meet their unwritten, racialized, and gendered expectations. It is important to identify how diverse identities bring perspectives on social and political tensions in the United States as well. If critics were to avoid discussing politics and identity, one could imagine that this would be understood as silencing perspectives that run against dominant social norms. The possibilities for how people can improve music criticism are complex and entail exploring alternative lifestyles and expressions of identity, while also asking critics to avoid delegitimizing or attacking these perspectives. Ultimately, it is important to recognize music criticism as a cultural text and for scholars to continue asking questions as to how popular music criticism has shaped perspectives on individual artists, genres, and alternative expressions of politics of identity.

Notes

[1] Christgau, "Death Certificate."
[2] Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture," 9.
[3] Ibid., 10.
[4] "April 11, 1956," *The Philadelphia Inquirer Public Ledger* (PA), 34.
[5] Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis,* 259.
[6] Haeussler, *Inventing Elvis,* 18.
[7] Ibid., 32.
[8] Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 12.
[9] Ibid., 12-13.
[10] Ibid., 3.
[11] Ibid., 6.
[12] Gould, "TV: New Phenomenon," 41.
[13] Haeussler, *Inventing Elvis*, 5.
[14] Lindberg, "Turning Points in British Rock Criticism," 41.
[15] Ibid., 41.
[16] Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 15.
[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] "The *Billboard* Music Popularity Charts," 30.
[19] Elvis Presley, "I Got A Woman."
[20] Ibid.
[21] Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 67.
[22] Haeussler, *Inventing Elvis,* 37.
[23] Gould, "TV: New Phenomenon," 41.
[24] Ibid., 41.
[25] Wilson, "Stylists in Jazz."
[26] Harris, "Rock 'n' Roll Earful Shatters Critic," 33.
[27] Ibid., 33.
[28] Harris, "June 8, 1956," 32.
[29] Ibid., 32.
[30] Altschuler, *All Shook Up,* 37.
[31] Ibid., 39.
[32] Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 270.
[33] Ibid., 85.
[34] Anderson, "Experts Call Elvis Craze Passing Fancy—Teen Fling," 24.
[35] Smith, "Elvis Sways Pelvis (and Audience Too) on Sullivan Show."
[36] Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 90-91.
[37] Toree, "Sullivan to Unleash Elvis for Uninhibited Wiggling," 35.
[38] Inglis, "The Ed Sullivan Show and the (Censored) Sounds of the Sixties," 566-567.

[39] Harris, "Sullivan's $50,000 Boy Cutoff Amidships."
[40] Kilgallen "On Broadway."
[41] Lindberg, "Turning Points in British Rock Criticism," 41.
[42] Haeussler, *Inventing Elvis*, 5.
[43] Ibid., 9.
[44] "The Billboard's Music Popularity Charts…Pop Songs," *The Billboard Magazine*.
[45] Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 362.
[46] "Love Me Tender," *Variety Magazine*.
[47] Lindberg, "Turning Points in British Rock Criticism," 41.
[48] Jones, "The Intro," 5.
[49] Ibid., 5.
[50] Mullen, *Whores,* 422.
[51] Davis, "Black Nationalism," 324.
[52] Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins,* 17.
[53] Lipsitz, "We Know What Time It Is," 18.
[54] Chang, "Los Angeles Riots and Korean-African American Conflict," 308.
[55] Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," 122.
[56] Ibid., 106.
[57] Chang, "Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment," 94.
[58] Ice Cube, "The Funeral."
[59] Ice Cube, "Black Korea."
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Duke, "Rapper's Number Chills Black-Korean Relations," 32.
[63] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop,* 375.
[64] Ibid., 375.
[65] Harrington, "Billboard's Hot Refrain," 41.
[66] Christgau, "Death Certificate."
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Rose, "A Style Nobody Can Deal With," 71-72.
[70] Christgau, "Robert Christgau: CG 70s: The Grades."
[71] Lusane, "Rap, Race, and Politics," 408.
[72] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop,* 356-57.
[73] Davis, "Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties," 324.
[74] Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs,* 85.
[75] Kennedy, "Ice Cube Reflects on the 25 Years Since the Release of 'Death Certificate.'"

[76] Ibid.
[77] Hilburn, "A Crucial Message, a Crude Delivery from Ice Cube," 33.
[78] Ibid., 33.
[79] Allah, "Today in Hip Hop History."
[80] Chang, "Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment," 89.
[81] Prato, "Porno for Pyros."
[82] Mullen, *Whores,* 422.
[83] Porno for Pyros, "Porno for Pyros."
[84] Ibid.
[85] Porno for Pyros, "Black Girlfriend."
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Mullen, *Whores,* 422.
[90] Ibid., 422.
[91] Berger, "Porno for Pyros."
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Prato, "Porno for Pyros."
[95] Gold, "Album Review."
[96] Christgau, "Robert Christgau: CG 70s."
[97] Sabin, "Rethinking Punk and Racism," 199.
[98] Duncombe and Tremblay, *White Riot*, 11.
[99] Ensminger, *The Politics of Punk,* 44.
[100] Duncombe and Tremblay, *White Riot,* 12.
[101] Ensminger, *The Politics of Punk,* 45-46.
[102] Traber, "L.A.'s 'White Minority,"'38.
[103] "Kendrick Lamar," *The Billboard.*
[104] Karl, "Taylor Swift Is Proof That How We Critique Music Is Broken."
[105] Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture," 14.
[106] Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, 14.
[107] Orejuela, and Shonekan, *Black Lives Matter and Music,* 2.
[108] "Kendrick Lamar Talks to Rick Rubin About 'Alright,' Eminem, and Kendrick's Next Album."
[109] Lamar, "Alright."
[110] "BlackLivesMatter - We Gonna Be Alright DTLA Protest 7-7-2016."
[111] Lamar, "Alright."
[112] Gilbert, "Kendrick Lamar's Civil Rights Anthem 'Alright' Almost Didn't Happen."

[113] Fox News, "Kendrick Lamar Raps at BET Awards, Says Police Want to 'Kill Us Dead in the Street.'
[114] Lamar, "Wesley's Theory."
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Lamar, "The Blacker the Berry."
[118] Ibid.
[119] Weiss, "Review."
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Jenkins, "To Pimp a Butterfly."
[123] Weiss, "Review."
[124] Jenkins, "To Pimp a Butterfly."
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Edwards, "Billboard Cover."
[128] Ibid.
[129] Christgau, "*To Pimp a Butterfly."*
[130] Richards, "Kendrick Lamar—Damn."
[131] Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter,* 12.
[132] Craddock, "29 Artists Who Have Spoken Out Against Donald Trump (So Far)."
[133] Fox News, "Kendrick Lamar Raps at BET Awards, Says Police Want to 'Kill Us Dead in the Street.'"
[134] Lamar, "DNA."
[135] Lamar, "XXX."
[136] Hiatt, "Kendrick Lamar: The Rolling Stone Interview."
[137] Clarke, "Kendrick Lamar - *DAMN*."
[138] Ibid.
[139] Kellman, "*DAMN*."
[140] Fairfax, "Review."
[141] Karl, "Taylor Swift Is Proof That How We Critique Music Is Broken."

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