

# Critical Race Theory and Rap Music: Analysis of Tupac Shakur, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar's Discography

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Critical Race Theory and Rap Music: Analysis of Tupac Shakur, Dead Prez and Kendrick  
Lamar's Discography

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## 1. Introduction

Rap music has been a part of American culture for a long time. Its beginnings can be traced back to the 1970s underground New York culture. In the next two decades it has grown exponentially until it reached its peak around 1990s with many different authors (Cypress Hill, NWA, Wu-Tang Clan, Snoop Dogg, Biggie, 2Pac...) whose music was considered both notorious, as well as inspiring. Among other elements of American society, they spoke about the injustice that occurs on the streets of the United States. This genre of music reached the level of popularity it has today on account of its controversial nature. Many argued about the disadvantages rap music carries noting it causes violent behavior in people. Nevertheless, rap has maintained its status as one of the most relevant genres of music. Rap music has been chosen for the analysis of this paper on account of its activist spirit. Many authors have chosen rap to give themselves a voice when nobody was keen on listening to the colored communities. It is a music of protest and rebellion. It speaks volumes about the detrimental effect continuous injustice has on the psychological health of Black individuals.

Since the beginnings, rap music might have changed its appearance, but it has not changed its message; 'to fight the power.' On account of the aforementioned reasons, rap has been chosen for the analysis of this paper, the focus of which is racial injustice. It will be connected to the theoretical frameworks of chosen racial theories: critical race theory and black nihilism. Critical race theory (CRT), combined with West's (2001) ideas about the nihilism that has devoured black communities, will represent the main theoretical approaches that will be used in this analysis. CRT is a theory which ensued after the liberalistic solutions for fighting the institutional racial injustice hit plateau. Scholars recognized the need for more complex solutions, as racism is no ordinary issue. This theory founds its roots in law studies as it was the first, and the most necessary level of defense against the injustice occurring in the United States, with the judicial system being one of the biggest problems for the colored communities. It soon transferred into other areas of studies, such as cultural studies. It has been chosen for the purposes of this paper as it has a great connection to the true, everyday events permeated with horrors of racial injustice, violence, incarcerations, etc. Realities, which are an everyday occurrence only for a percentage of people, people who are a different shade than the white majority.

In order to examine the way that rap tradition has fought against institutionalized injustice, this paper will analyze three different rap musicians as representatives of three

decades of rap music; from 1990s until today. The artists are the following: Tupac Shakur (a representative of the nineties rap generation), Dead Prez (the representatives of 2000s rap generation), and Kendrick Lamar (a representative of 2010s rap generation). These authors have been chosen for the said analysis because they have all talked about the issues important for this thesis, however; they presented these problems in different ways and from different points-of-view. Three songs from each of these artists will be analyzed more closely – nine in total. Lastly, the analyzed work will then be compared and contrasted in order to discover the similarities and differences between these three generations of artists and the means through which they spread their message.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

The main analytical focus of this paper will be rap music and some of its authors, respectfully: 2Pac, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar, which will be analyzed within the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and black nihilism. It will aim to connect the concrete events such as the ‘war on drugs,’ or Los Angeles riots in the nineties, with the critical race theory that encompasses the analysis of racism by explaining the reality of incarcerations, police brutality, and racial profiling through analytical frameworks and methods such as intersectionality and counter-storytelling, as well as the theoretical concepts of nihilism in black communities and social constructivism. All of the aforementioned notions will be explained in detail in further text.

### 2.1. Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) represents an interdisciplinary approach to race. One can find the origins of the CRT in the 1970s in law studies. It was used by scholars who were trying to find a unique perspective on the inequality and oppression people of color face in the United States. It was born after the changes of civil rights movements came to a stop and after racism (because of the civil rights activism) in the United States took on a new dimension – it became subtler, harder to notice, but still alive and present. New techniques were needed to fight it, and thus – CRT came to life. Critical race theory differs from other theoretical frameworks as it has an activist approach – it does not only define and study the current state of a certain phenomenon, but it also tries to make a difference. And as such, it finds its roots in the theory of law as scholars tried to raise awareness of a percentage of incarcerated people of color, as well as to shed light on police brutality and inequality such people face within the judicial system. Even though it started out as a law theory, it did not take long until it spread out into the other fields of research. Critical race theory considers several varied factors such as statistics, socio-historical context, unconsciousness, economics (Delgado, Stefancic 2 - 11).

The interdisciplinarity of this theory is noticeable. The broadness of this theory and its practical nature which is evident in the statistical perspective, as well as the analysis of factors such as the incarceration rate and racial profiling is the reason why this theory has been chosen as the basic theoretical framework for this paper. It presents the evidence and the theoretical

foundation for the examples of the wrongdoings represented in the songs which will be analyzed in the continuation of this thesis.

There are six basic CRT principles:

- “1. racism is ordinary, not aberrational,
2. interest convergence,
3. race as a social construction,
4. differential racialization
5. intersectionality
6. storytelling and counter-storytelling” (the unique voice-of-color thesis)

(Delgado, Stefancic 7 - 9).

These six basic elements represent the pillars of critical race theory. They encompass the basics of what this theory stands for and they will be examined more thoroughly in further text.

### 2.1.1. Racism is Ordinary

The first element takes on a bit of pessimistic note – racism is not aberrational. It is not an unknown, or out-of-the-ordinary appearance. In the United States of America, racism represents a normal occurrence. And as such, it should be acknowledged. Jones (2002) defines racism in the following manner:

Racism is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on phenotype (‘race’), that:

- unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities
- unfairly advantages other individuals and communities
- undermines realization of the full potential of the whole society through the waste of human resources (10).

This definition of racism is important for this analysis, as it points out, in the simplest manner, the irony and unfairness of racism.

Critical race theory differs from liberalistic and civil rights movement solutions for racism. It tries to analyze the problem from a realistic perspective, and it contrasts the equalitarian and libertarian solutions (color-blindness and an equal approach<sup>1</sup>). As they may

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<sup>1</sup> The approach noting that one should completely disregard the color of a person and that everybody should be treated equally.

solve the surface issues that represent only a small percentage of problems people of color face in their everyday life. CRT scholars note that equality is possible only in theory and not in practice (Delgado and Stefancic 7). If one does not see color, one does not see the suffering people of color have endured throughout the centuries and the real consequences it left behind. Such attitudes only allow for the racial problems to become subtler and as such, more difficult to deal with. West (2001) adds on the critical race theory's criticism of liberal, and adds a criticism of conservatist solutions as well, noting the following:

Hence, for liberals, black people are to be "included" and "integrated" into "our" society and culture, while for conservatives, they are to be "well behaved" and "worthy of acceptance" by "our" way of life. Both fail to see that the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather constitutive elements of that life (3).

Internalized racism works on another dimension - almost no one would call themselves a racist, but almost everyone bears racist attitudes that have been embedded in their brains since childhood. And how is it possible to fight a problem that does not exist? It is not, and this is exactly what the power structure wants – to make racism ordinary. Thus, critical race theory tries to deal with these problems from a different, more proactive perspective and tries to find an interdisciplinary approach to deal with it. Rap songs which will be analyzed in this paper take on this exact approach; noting how racism is an ordinary occurrence. 2Pac in his songs notes how the society acknowledges instances present in the black community, instances which are signs of inequality, as ordinary events. For example; in *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991) a man can be found saying that the teenage pregnancy is not their problem: "That's not our problem, that's up to Brenda's family." (00:00:47 – 00:00:48). However, 2Pac adamantly continues by saying that it is the problem of the whole community and as such it should be dealt with, as it encompasses statutory rape, family abuse and other instances of violations of human and youth rights. One can argue that all of the authors which will be analyzed in this paper, in one way or another, note how racism became ordinary. The said notion is the basis of these songs; if racism was not ordinary, it would be dealt with in a different, more effective way. However, it is a starting point for the inequality the black community faces on an everyday basis as Black individuals are perceived not as a constitutive part of the American life, rather as an unwanted addition. Such issues represent the predominant themes in the songs which will be analyzed in the continuation of the text.

### 2.1.2. Interest Convergence

Critical race theory notes that one of the biggest problems of racism is the fact that it suits to a great percentage of people. Both white upper and middle classes profit from it, leaving small percentage of people to whom it suits to destroy racism. And that small percentage of people is dealt with in a unique way. Firstly, there is the psychological aspect of racism – people of color are learned to hate themselves, and they live without any perspective of a better life for themselves and their children. They were taught that the situation as such is not suitable for change and they have learned how to survive, versus how to live. Cornel West (2001) talks about this phenomenon calling it ‘the nihilistic threat in Black America,’ or ‘black nihilism’ – a complete hopelessness for a better tomorrow (12 - 13). Secondly, people of color represent the poorest people in the United States. According to Poverty USA, Black Americans represent 20,8 % of all people below the poverty line, Hispanics, 17,6 %. Combined, there are four times more people of color below the poverty line than there is White Americans (10,1 %) below the poverty line (*The population of Poverty USA* 2018). The interest convergence principle states that racism is suitable for too many people in the US, and as such, it will not change until it becomes unprofitable. This is a relatively subtle message that many people do not comprehend, even though these artists talk openly about such issues. Kendrick Lamar in his song *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* (2015) draws the line between the genocide which occurred in the Second World War, to the killings of the members of his community:

Dark as the midnight hour or bright as the mornin' sun  
Give a fuck about your complexion, I know what the Germans done (00:00:26  
– 00:00:31)

Lamar can be found exemplifying how it is, and it always was about the survival of the fittest – the dominant community profiting from the subordinate ones.

### 2.1.3. Race as a Social Construct

Race is an overly complex notion; abstract and unpalpable. It is often described as the physical differences people of different origins have in common. There are three races that are most used as a reference: ‘Caucasoid,’ ‘Negroid,’ and ‘Mongoloid.’ However, these races are limited to certain parts of the Earth and do not encompass all the variety of human differences there is. Thus, this division becomes unambiguous evidence of the social usage of race for the

prosperities of the ruling classes. However, 'race' as a concept is a difficult one to define. Rivkin and Ryan (2004) noted:

"race" as a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry. I argue that race must be understood as a sui generis social phenomenon in which contested systems of meaning serve as the connections between physical features, faces, and personal characteristics (966).

In this definition the authors analyze the very nature of race. They accept the physical characteristics but put emphasis on the social construction of the meaning behind the term.

Critical race theory notes that race is a social construct. This notion is one of the predominant themes in this paper as many songs go into further depth behind this thematic. For example, Lamar in his song *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* (2015) talks explicitly about the color of a person, and notes how it is not important:

I'm with this  
Complexion (two-step)  
Complexion don't mean a thing (it's a Zulu love)  
Ooh, complexion (two-step)  
It all feels the same (it's a Zulu love, uh) (00:00:04 – 00:00:24)

The color of one's skin is important only when it needs to be, and as such it is the same as some other features. For example: religion, Lamar in this song draws connection between the Holocaust and racism. This issue has also been highly debated in the scientific community, and even though one side argues that there are strong genetic differences which separate different races, these differences regard only the physical attributes a person has. Apiah (1992) notes that different races cannot be separated equally and easily (according to Rivkin and Ryan 1105). There are great physical differences between people of the same skin color regarding a place of living (for example: Spaniards and Scandinavians differ in their physical appearance but are members of the same race). Thus, one cannot clearly distinguish these differences into clear categories. Even the term 'people of color' may be an indicator of race being a social construct. Why is the white race the norm? White people's skin also bears some color – usually a shade of pink. Why are they not referred to as 'people of color,' as well? Race as a social construct has been devised by the white majority because it suited them and their political agendas, and it still does.

Moreover, Rivkin and Ryan (2004) argue that there is scientific evidence claiming there is no single gene or a genetic predisposition separating different races. Races emerged as such division suited the ruling class. The proof of this can be found in the following example: in the period of slavery, one could argue for the release of their enslavement if they were descendants of free people. There was a woman whose ancestry could not have been determined, thus her

freedom was at stake. She went in front of a judge demanding freedom in a trial that became known as *Hudgins v. Wright*. The judge, to determine her race, has produced a test that took into consideration the physical attributes of African descendants:

Nature has stamped upon the African and his descendants two characteristic marks, besides the difference of complexion, which often remain visible long after the characteristic distinction of color either disappears or becomes doubtful; a flat nose and woolly head of hair. The latter of these disappears the last of all; and so strong an ingredient in the African constitution is this latter character, that it predominates uniformly where the party is in equal degree descended from parents of different complexions, whether white or Indians. So pointed is this distinction between the natives of Africa and the aborigines of America, that a man might as easily mistake the glossy, jetty clothing of an American bear for the wool of a black sheep, as the hair of an American Indian for that of an African, or the descendant of an African. Upon these distinctions as connected with our laws, the burden of proof depends (Rivkin, Ryan 2004, 964 - 965).

Due to her straight hair, the woman from the aforementioned example was freed. Even though such a test might seem unreasonable now, racial profiling, police brutality, percentage of incarceration and poverty of people of color are all the proofs needed for one to argue that individuals are still being judged by their physical attributions – by the shape of their nose and curls in their hair, and of course, the color of their skin. It has been scientifically proven that race is a social construct, and still, these differences are the ones representing the fine line between freedom and enslavement. These are some of the predominant themes of this thesis, as they are the predominant thematic of the songs to be analyzed in the continuation of the text.

#### 2.1.4. Differential Racialization

Differential racialization represents one of the newer pillars of critical race theory. Scholars argue that at different points in time separate groups of people of color have been useful to the power structure (Delgado, Stefancic 8). For example, once the Chinese immigrants established themselves in the United States, they were started to be seen as a threat to the white American society and were banned from working in the factories, railroads, etc. New job spaces opened, and they were taken by the Japanese immigrants. At the beginning, they seemed benign, and they suited the needs of the dominant majority. However, as time passed by, they established their homes and started to seek out jobs in other areas of work. Once again, the power structure saw this as a threat to the white majority. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order by which all the Japanese citizens needed to be taken away

from their homes into the intermittent camps and their belongings were to be distributed to the white citizens. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor became an excuse for racism and bigotry. Fort Minor (2005) published a song; *Kenji*, about this event. The song came out as a true story and was based on Mike Shinoda's (lead singer) interviews with his father and his aunt. The lyrics transmit the fear and the reality of Japanese people during those disturbing times:

Right there, front page news  
 Three weeks before 1942  
 Pearl Harbor's been bombed and "The Japs are Coming"  
 Pictures of soldiers dying and running

Ken knew what it would lead to  
 And just like he guessed, the president said  
 "The evil Japanese in our home country  
 Would be locked away" (00:01:05 – 00:01:20)

The lyrics present the evidence of media propaganda in this case. In this way the power structure racializes their needs towards marginalized groups of people of color. The negative portrayal of Japanese lasted until President Reagan turned his attention to Black and Latino Americans. Also, Japanese Americans acquired much more positive connotations – currently they are connected to intelligence and academic success.

#### 2.1.5. Intersectionality

No person can fit into one box. If a person is black and a woman, she immediately fits two minority groups. In this sense we cannot look at a person through lenses of only one box, as that person does not fit into that box – she is not only black, nor is she only a woman. For example, one may say that women finally fought their right to vote in 1920; however, Black women did not get their right to vote until 1965 - almost half of a century later. One cannot talk about women's rights if those rights do not encompass all women. Bell Hooks talks about this injustice in her 1981 book *Ain't I a Woman*. She notes that many different elements of a person are interconnected: class, sex, race, religion. This notion represents one of the newer, but just as essential elements of critical race theory. For example, she notes that the Civil Rights movement of the sixties was not a movement for the equality of Black Americans, it was the movement for the equality of Black men, while women were supposed to be subservient to their male counterparts. She notes the following:

What had begun as a movement to free all black people from racist oppression became a movement with its primary goal the establishment of Black male patriarchy. It is not surprising that a movement so concerned with promoting the interests of Black men should fail to draw any attention to the dual impact of sexist and racist oppression on the social status of Black women (5 – 6).

One cannot look at race through just one lenses and cannot fight racism without fighting patriarchy. If one fights for equality, why not fight for the equality of all? As this notion shows exactly how much racism and oppression of inferior and minority groups in the United States is a complex and layered issue, which cannot be solved by the easy solutions proposed by the liberalist and the equalitarian activists, solutions which propose color-blindness and equality for all. Race may be a social construct, but nobody can argue that it does not exist.

This notion is important for the analytical part of this paper, not only does it represent the complexity of oppression of any sort, it is one of the main themes in 2Pac's songs, and as such it should be more closely analyzed. 2Pac grew up under a strong influence of his mother and his songs reflect that. All of 2Pac's songs which will be further analyzed in this paper encompass intersectionality as one of its main themes: *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991), *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993), *White Manz World* (1996). Other authors have not been so vocal about fighting for Black women's rights. The said notion is interesting to compare and contrast as all of the artists to be analyzed in this paper are men, and such a strong theme deserves a greater coverage.

#### 2.1.6. Storytelling and counter-storytelling

The stories of colored people are usually told through the narrative of the dominant majority. And the truth is relative – it depends on the narrative and the attitudes of the ones telling the story. Facts can be distorted, and false images can be painted to the broader community. Critical race theory argues that it is impossible for the dominant community to portray a picture of the minority existence as it could never grasp the true essence of life in those communities. Even the ones who are not directly interested in distorting the facts of truth, do it unintentionally by talking about something they do not know about (Delgado, Stefancic 9). Rap music is a good example of counter-storytelling. It is the element needed to subvert the initially distorted truth. For example, according to the documentary series *Hip-hop Evolution* (2016), episode “The Birth of Gangsta Rap,” Ice-T is usually perceived as the father of Gangsta' rap. His song, *6 'n the mornin'* (1987) tells the story of a drug dealer's escape from



the police. He notes that he used to sell marihuana and that most of his acquaintances and friends did the same. In other words, he told the truth about what truly was, and still is, happening in the streets (00:06:01 – 00:11:23). This was the counter-storytelling that subverted the narrative of the dominant majority. He told the truth about the life of a young black man. The reason this can be accounted for as counter-storytelling is because one can understand the reasons why the reality of Black Americans is filled with drugs and violence – it has its cause.

#### 2.4. Nihilistic Threat in Black America

Racism in the United States has had a long history. It has adapted to new situations and circumstances as the decades and centuries went by. It has perfected itself in the sense it has become subtle (West viii) and, as such, exceedingly difficult to eradicate. The strongest element of racism is one of psychological nature - Black Americans are taught to hate themselves from an incredibly early age. They are taught that they are not the norm and that they should try to fit into a little white box created by the dominant majority. As they learn to hate themselves, they learn to hate others like them. Cornel West (2001) proposes the aforementioned concept by noting the following:

No other people have been taught to hate themselves – psychic violence – reinforced by the power of state and civic coercion – physical violence – for the primary purpose of controlling their minds and exploiting their labor for nearly four hundred years (vii).

West (2001) points out to the fact that this type of systemic racism has caused Black Americans to show feelings of hatred towards themselves and towards others in their communities. He notes how there has always been a sense of nihilism in the Black communities. However, recently, this loss of meaning is becoming worse. He notes how there is a complete: “collapse of meaning in life – the eclipse of hope and absence of love of self and other.” (5) The family ties are being severed by the incarceration rate, the black communities are under attack, people are turning against one another and the structural social network is collapsing; bringing about a great despair. In the past, these communal ties have been stronger, there was a system maintained by religion and social institutions creating a feeling of meaning in the world of meaninglessness, and people would rely on each other in difficult times. Such despair leads to the increase in violent actions in search for simple pleasures (West 5, 15). He also notes that nihilism in this sense is

to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more. The lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness (14).

This psychological aspect of racist oppression is almost perfect – it is subtle, ordinary; if the oppressed minority internalizes this hatred towards themselves, the resistance to the majority's rule will be easier to handle. The notion of black nihilism can be connected to the critical race theory in many aspects. As aforementioned, it represents one of the key reasons why racism is an ordinary, and not an aberrational occurrence. It is accepted as such by both the white majority and the colored community. If one hates oneself, and longs for the normality of the majority – their looks, acceptance, and white privilege, then it is impossible to even think of oneself as deserving more rights and a fairer treatment. It is a luxury one feels does not belong to him/her. Many rap artists talk about the notion of hopelessness in their communities. Kubrin (2005) analyzed the main themes in the rap music of the 1990s. He came to a conclusion that nihilism represents 25 percent of the thematic present in the analyzed rap songs. And one must note that his analysis was comprehensive: 400 songs were taken into consideration. He found three major themes connected with nihilism in the analyzed artwork:

1. Bleak surroundings with little hope
2. Pervasive violence in the ghetto
3. Preoccupation with death and dying (444).

2Pac, in his song *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993) talks about this notion and the ensuing violence which can be matched with the second nihilistic subtheme – pervasive violence in the ghetto:

Why we rape our women, do we hate our women? (Why? Why?)  
I think it's time to kill for our women (why? Why? Why? Why?) (00:01:05 – 00:01:09)

The nihilistic spirit can be found in the example of the songs of both Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar as well: Dead Prez's *We Want Freedom* (2000), it can be connected to the third nihilistic subtheme – preoccupation with death and dying:

I was born black, I live black  
And I'ma die probably because I'm black (00:00:10 – 00:00:14)

One can note the complete hopelessness in these lyrics as it is mentioned that the color of one's skin is the only reason for one's death.

And in the Kendrick Lamar's *m.A.A.D City* (2012) which matches the first nihilistic subtheme – bleak surroundings with little hope:

Bgs up to pre-approve, bodies on top of bodies  
IV's on top of IV's (00:01:45 – 00:01:50)

Similarly, to the previous example, Lamar also notes a nihilistic spirit in his song, by portraying the reality of the black community. However, it must be noted that all of the aforementioned artists try to subvert this notion of nihilism with an attempt of unification of the black community. The examples of black nihilism will be analyzed in more detail in the continuation of the paper.

### 2.3. War on Drugs

Many believe that ‘war on drugs’ is one of the most obvious forms of systemic racism to date. It started in the seventies, when President Richard Nixon (1971) declared to the American public how: “America’s number one enemy in the United States is drug abuse” (00:00:32 – 00:00:35). The ‘war on drugs’ started in the seventies and it has grown exponentially in the following few decades. The issue is not if the Blacks and Latinos consume drugs, it is the fact that the white community does it as well. Later, with the rule of President Reagan in the eighties, the war on drugs continued in full effect. He made punishments for drug related crimes extremely severe, and the increase of incarcerations of mostly Black and Latino Americans ensued (History.com Editors, *War on drugs* 2017). As the time went by, this action became increasingly racist: if one would possess 5 grams of crack cocaine, one would be sentenced to five years in prison. The same sentence that a person with 500 grams of powder cocaine would receive. So, where is the difference? The difference is in the fact that Black Americans were mostly using crack cocaine, while White Americans were associated with the powder alternative. The dangers of these drugs are the same, thus the difference cannot be found in this issue. War on drugs reached its peak in the 1990s. According to Small (2001), in some parts of the United States, 75 – 90% of all offenders were Black Americans. In New York, more than 94% of drug offenders were either Latino or Black Americans. They were sent to prison on account of drugs possession and/or use 20 to 50 times more than Whites (897). These statistics are often overlooked, and the colored community is being perceived as dangerous. This notion reenforces the existing stereotypes, creating a vicious cycle resulting in police brutality, racial profiling, and great percentage of incarcerations of Black and Latino Americans.

The ‘war on drugs’ represents the predominant reason to the number of Black individuals being incarcerated. It is the direct link to the destruction of many families and the reinforcement of the inequality and injustice members of the black community endure. As such,

it is important for this paper as it shows the complexity and depth of the issues related to racism in the United States. A lot of rap musicians, and especially the ones that will be analyzed in this paper: 2Pac, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar, talk about the unequal percentage of incarcerations. 2Pac himself was incarcerated, as well as his mother. Moreover, Dead Prez talks about this issue in their song *We Want Freedom* (2000):

Locked up you get three hot meals and one cot

Then you sit and rot, never even got a fair shot (00:03:03 – 00:03:07)

These two lines become even more meaningful when one notes how M1's mother (a member of the rap group Dead Prez) was incarcerated.

According to the *Human Rights Watch* (2022) Black Americans are killed three times more than White Americans by the police. This means they are still subject to police brutality and are victims of the system. On account of the aforementioned notion, one must note how this issue is important for the structure of this thesis as it shows the complexity and the underlying issues connected to racism. It can be connected to the critical race theory as it is direct evidence needed to subvert the notions and proposals of the liberalistic political parties, and it is linked with the analytical part of this paper as one of the main themes in the songs which will be further analyzed in the continuation of the text are both drugs and the incarceration rate of Black individuals.

#### 2.4. The Los Angeles Riots

In 1991 two legal cases ignited what Stevenson (2015) called “the most deadly and costly race riots in the United States history” (1). The first case was the beating of Rodney King by the police officers and the second one was the murder of Latasha Harlins. One must note how these are just highlighted cases of injustice these individuals endure on an everyday basis and there are many more names to be incorporated into the list. However, these two cases represented the breaking point which ignited the Los Angeles riots. Rodney King was stopped by the members of the police force. Once they stopped him, they proceeded with the beating. This case has been documented by George Holliday, who sent the tape to the television news. Even though, this tape was undisputable evidence of King being a victim of police brutality, all four members of the LA police force have not been charged for any violent crimes. This was a heartbreaking moment for the black community (Stevenson 284).

Latasha Harlins was a 15-year-old girl who was shot dead in a Compton's store by the storeowner, after a meaningless argument, she was shot dead. This shooting occurred two weeks after the beating of Rodney King. Her murderer, a middle-aged, Korean shop-owner received no additional jail-time, 300 hours of probation and she had to pay for the funeral expenses (Stevenson xvii).

The only plausible connection these two cases had together was race. In every other way, these two individuals were different. This racial connection between them might be the main cause for the riots because, as Stevenson (2015) notes:

The backstory bound Latasha and Rodney tightly and resonated deeply in the historical consciousness and reality of the black community across class, gender, and generational lines (287).

The riots themselves caused even more violence in the name of the two Black Americans who have been let down by the American judicial system: Rodney King and Latasha Harlins. Angered by their fate, individuals started beating people up. They targeted White males – as for Rodney King, and Koreans – as for Latasha Harlins. These riots became infamous for their brutality: beatings, theft and violence ensued all over the capital city of California for over a week in April 1992. It resulted in deaths of 30 Black Americans and 4 non-Black Americans. This notion made it possible for the black community to be demonized. However, it must be noted that 64 percent of all arrested people were non-Black individuals and Black individuals who were arrested were active and functional members of the society, as most of them had full-time jobs (West 1). According to the documentary movie *LA 92*, the chief of Los Angeles police department stated that the Black Americans were behaving “As monkeys in a ZOO” (00:02:39 – 00:02:40). Such a racist slur just describes the reality of these people who were left without any other option but to fight back. The mainstream media was distorting these situations and was looking only at the symptoms – the current behavior, and not at the causes – the reason behind such violence. The city was burning to the ground. Los Angeles was put in the state of emergency.

This ‘war’ speaks about the bottled-up anger Black Americans are holding inside them, and rap musicians are vocal in their expression of this anger through their art. 2Pac mentions Latasha Harlins in different songs. For example, in *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993) the music video starts with a note: “Dedicated to the memory of Latasha Harlins ... it’s still on.” (00:00:00 – 00:00:01) These two cases are only a small representation of the inequality members of the black community must endure, the inequality that rap music is trying to convey to the outer

world; as such this notion is an important part of this paper, and a starting point for the further analysis.

## 2.5. Rap music

Rap music has become an extremely popular music genre. Today, everybody is familiar with artists such as 2Pac, Snoop Dogg, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, and others. Artists who are a part of what has become known as the hip hop culture. To begin the story of rap music and hip-hop culture, one must first differentiate between the two terms which are often used synonymously: 'hip hop' and 'rap.' 'Hip hop' represents a broader, umbrella term. It is often defined as a way of expressing oneself through four elements: DJs (disc jockeys), break-dancers, MCs (mic controllers, rappers) and graffiti (Keyes 4). Even though hip hop is often looked through the prism of these four notions, it is so much more. It is a culture<sup>2</sup> in the true sense of the word. It encompasses customs, beliefs, social norms, etc. On the other hand, 'rap' relates to an MC – a person who raps. In this sense it is a subordinate term to 'hip hop,' as it represents only one of its four aspects.

Rap music has received widespread praise and its success has been growing exponentially since its beginnings in the 1970s. It is a controversial music, one which represents the truth, and breaks the American glass wall of equality. As such, it has also been highly demonized by the power structure, mass media and general public (Binder 753 – 754; Keyes 2; Maxwell 2; Richardson, Scott 1). Despite many attempts to shut down this music genre, it has lived on and powerful for over half a decade, and it shows no signs of stopping. Rap music may have altered its form, but it certainly did not change its message.

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<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Dictionary defines culture as “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.” (*Culture* Cambridge Dictionary)

### 3. The Analysis

This analysis will encompass the timeframe of thirty years: from 1990s until 2010s. This period of time has been chosen for the purposes of the analysis of this paper, as the nineties represented a period in which rap music reached its peak regarding its popularity which ensued after the culmination of social injustice in the beginning of the decade – the beating of Rodney King, LA riots, the growing incarceration rates. As such, rap music acquired a political and activist perspective in this period of time. Later decades have been chosen in order for this paper to reach a more contemporary perspective. Moreover, one artist from each decade will be analyzed more closely: 2Pac, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar. They have been chosen as the representatives of that decade, as it suits the purposes and the scope of this paper. Finally, these artists have been purposely chosen for the analysis of this paper as their music is activist in the sense it speaks about the injustice present in their communities, and their songs have similar thematic presented in different ways. However, one must note that it is impossible to compress the whole decade of one genre of music into one artist, especially if one is talking about such a politically and/or socially aware genre.

The following 2Pac's songs will be analyzed: *Brenda's Got a Baby* (from the album *2Pacalypse Now* - 1991), *Keep Ya Head Up* (from the album *Strictly for My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* - 1993), *White Manz World* (from the album *The Don Killuminati: 7 Day Theory* – 1996). These songs have been chosen for this analysis as they talk about everyday occurrences in the black communities. *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991) was his breakthrough song and it speaks about a real event. The predominant themes of these songs are the following: the ordinariness of racism, intersectionality, counter-storytelling and black nihilism. This music represents the practical exemplification of the theoretical notions mentioned in this paper - race theories; critical race theory and black nihilism, as they speak about the injustice black communities face and the detrimental effect such a treatment has on black individuals.

Songs to be analyzed by Dead Prez are the following: *We Want Freedom* (from the album *Let's Get Free* - 2000), *That's War* (from the album *Turn Off the Radio: The Mixtape Vol.1* - 2002). and *I Have a Dream Too* (from the album *RBG: Revolutionary but Gangsta* – 2004). They have been chosen for the purposes of this paper as they are a good representation of their opus of work. The predominant motifs of these songs are freedom and war; and the notions mentioned in this artwork can be connected to the ordinariness of racism, counter-storytelling and black nihilism.

Kendrick Lamar's songs for analysis are the following: *m.A.A.d city* (from the album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* – 2012) *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* and *The Blacker the Berry* (from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* – 2015). They have been chosen for the purposes of this paper as they represent the realities of the lives of black communities, as such they can be considered activist. They will be connected to social constructivism, counter-storytelling and black nihilism in the continuation of this analysis.

### 3.1. Tupac Shakur, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar

Tupac Amaru Shakur was born on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1971, in New York. His mother was a famous activist and a member of the Black Panther Party – Afeni Shakur. She spent most of her pregnancy with Tupac in prison and was released after she defended herself in court. Afeni was tenacious to make Tupac educated and enlightened. Light (1997) notes how he and his family moved to California to avoid life filled with violence (3). Tupac's first album - '2Pacalypse Now' (1991), already caused controversy as he was publicly condemned by the Vice President Dan Quayle. He was often in the spotlight of the media as he became demonized by the public and the political parties for his lyrics which were pointing out to police brutality. 'Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z' was his second album. It came out in 1993, and it was his first album to become platinum (Light 3). His career was on the rise. Nevertheless, his problems with the police and the authorities became even bigger. Couple of years later, his name got torn even more; he was convicted of sexual assault and sentenced to jail; but just before he went to jail, he was shot in New York and barely survived. Tupac was shot in Las Vegas on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1996, and died in the hospital six days later. He was only 25 at the time of his death (Light 7). He can serve as an example of what a society can do to such a young black man and a black community; they are pushed into ghettos, learned to hate themselves and their own race. They are raised in violence and traumas which lead to a lifetime of struggle. Even though he was extremely intelligent and well educated, the media demonized him, his life, and his doings – he was portrayed as a gangster, as an abuser. He got lost in the fog of the streets. He thought he was betrayed by his friends; the media gave room for those stories, and then he went through the system and was never the same after that.

Dead Prez will be analyzed in this paper as the representatives of the decade of the new millennia. They have been chosen for this analysis due to the activist spirit of their songs; they are calling for the unification of the members of black communities in the common fight



against the dominant majority in order to get a chance for a brighter future. Such thematic is comparable to the rap music of the nineties, as well as their resistance to commercialization. Dead Prez is a rap duo created by two MCs: Stic.man (Clayton Gavin) and M-1 (Lavon Alfred). Their lives were marked by the horrors of living in the ghetto: Gavin grew up in a family where crack was constantly present, and Alfred, himself, sold crack cocaine to support himself before enrolling into Florida A&M University, and his mother was arrested on the drug-possession claims. However, such lifestyles made them realize the long-term effects of such issues. They became extremely socially active and even after they received widespread recognition, their activist spirit was still present - they were a part of the National People's Democratic Uhuru Movement and were handing out the Burning Spear newspaper<sup>3</sup> on a metro in New York (*Dead Prez Biography. Hip Hop Scriptures*). Their name refers to a slang term – dead presidents, meaning money. They began their journey in the late nineties when they moved to New York and became affiliated with rap music, and by the 2000s, they issued their debut album – ‘Lets Get Free,’ this album features many politically motivated songs such as *I'm a African, Hip-Hop, Police State, We Want Freedom* (2000) and many others, some of which will be analyzed more closely in this paper. Their music and their way of life differed from most rap musicians as they promoted peace and healthy lifestyle. Their next work was a two-volume mixtape: ‘Turn off the Radio: The Mixtape, Vol. 1’ and ‘Turn off the Radio: The Mixtape, Vol. 2: Get Free or Die Tryin’.’ Some of the songs featured in these mixtapes were *That's War, We Need a Revolution, B.I.G. Respect, Know Your Enemy* (2002), *Fuck the Law, When Mama Cries, Out in the World* (2003), and others. Due to the political and activist nature of these lyrics, most of Dead Prez's work was never featured on the radio, and forever stayed underground.

Kendrick Lamar Ducksworth will be discussed in this paper as the representative of the last decade to be analyzed – 2010s. A representative of the West coast – born and raised in Compton, California, Kendrick Lamar is one of the biggest stars of the contemporary rap genre in the world. He, as well as the other representatives of different decades in this paper, grew up in the life of violence. To mentally escape such a reality, he started writing poetry and rhymes. Kendrick Lamar is an individual with his own style that has been universally acknowledged. One can find the instances of previous generations in his music, mostly gangsta' rap influences. However, he has separated himself with his own unique style. According to Moore (2021): for

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<sup>3</sup> The National People's Democratic Uhuru Movement – refers to the branch of The Uhuru Movement located in the USA. The Uhuru Movement represents an association dedicated to unification of African people worldwide. And the Burning Sphere is the official newspapers of the African People's Socialist Party. It is connected to the Uhuru Movement (*About the Uhuru Movement* n.d.).

Lamar “hip-hop was a way to document the trauma of racism and celebrate the unparalleled fortitude of blackness.” (7). In March 2012, Kendrick Lamar joined the Aftermath Entertainment (Dr. Dre’s production label). The first album he released under this label was ‘Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City’ in 2012. This represented an album which put him on top. He talked about racism and the realities of the black communities in a different, but a realistic way. In 2015, he released another album which became an instant hit - ‘To Pimp a Butterfly,’ for which Lamar won a Grammy for the best rap album in 2016. He won numerous awards for his later work, some of which will be more closely analyzed in this paper.

### 3.2. Critical Race Theory and Rap Music

By using critical race theory as theoretical and methodological framework, this work will analyze the narrative potential of specific rap artists that use storytelling and counter-storytelling practices in their songs. Other aspects important for this paper will be the state of racism as an ordinary occurrence as represented within the framework of CRT, social constructivism and intersectional analytical framework. The analyzed music will be further connected to the notion of black nihilism, as it is one of the most pervasive concepts to be found in rap music, and it can be incorporated into the theoretical framework of critical race theory. As mentioned before, in the continuation of this text the songs of the previously analyzed artists: 2Pac, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar, will be put into focus more closely.

#### 3.2.1. Ordinarity of Racism in the Analyzed Music

Instance of ordinarity of racism can be found in the following songs: 2Pac’s *Brenda’s Got a Baby* (1991), as well as Dead Prez’s *We Want Freedom* (2000). *Brenda’s Got a Baby* (1991) from the album *2Pacalypse Now*, was 2Pac’s first successful song. This song was inspired by real-life events; a newspaper article featuring a teenage Black girl who threw her baby in the trash can. He wanted to show the world how such horror situations are the representation of what truly is happening in the black community. This song elaborately notes the causes and consequences of life in the ghetto. Brenda was not educated; and her family was dysfunctional. Her older cousin got her pregnant at the age of 12:

She’s 12 years old and she’s having a baby

In love with the molester, who's sexing her crazy... (00:01:35 – 00:01:37)  
 She gave birth to the child in the lonesomeness of the bathroom floor. Her family wanted the child-support check from the government and did not care for the wellbeing of her, or her baby. They kicked her out of the apartment. To support herself at that age, she started selling crack. It did not take long until she was robbed, so she started prostituting. Until one day, a newspaper article said:

“Prostitute found slain” (00:02:33 – 00:02:34)

This song talks about deeper issues regarding racism and black communities. Nobody cares about what happens to Brenda, even an observer can be found saying: “That’s not our problem, that’s up to Brenda’s family.” (00:00:47 – 00:00:48) He represents the rest of society, including the black community. One can argue that this song can be connected to the ordinariness of racism; such instances are regarded as normal occurrences. If it were a White 12-year-old girl in question, the horror reactions would ensue. However, it was a Black girl, so such instance was regarded as normal. If 2Pac was not adamant to make this story heard, it would have been forgotten quickly.

Moreover, *We Want Freedom* (2000) can also be connected to the ordinariness of racism as it is trying to subvert this concept by inviting people in the fight for freedom and justice for their community. Racism is not ordinary and this is exactly what they are trying to convey. Their music is a reaction to the previous couple of years of rap in which it became highly commercialized following the deaths of 2Pac and Biggie. The producers were saying they needed a break from the activist spirit surrounding rap, but Dead Prez did not agree. They are criticizing MC’s saying they need “more than MC’s,” they need “Hueys, and revolutionaries.” (00:01:32 – 00:01:34). Dead Prez is referring to the Black Panther Party by mentioning Huey P. Newton who was a co-founder of the Black Panther Party. One can note the similarities in motifs with 2Pac’s music. Not only by the mention of the Black Panther Party, but by the activist spirit and the expression of anger and frustration.

### 3.2.2. Social Constructivism in the Analyzed Music

One can find instances of social constructivism in the following songs by Kendrick Lamar: *M.A.A.d City* (2012), *Complexion (A Zulu<sup>4</sup> Love)* (2015) feat. Rapsody and *The Blacker the Berry* (2015). *M.A.A.d City* is a song from the album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012) in this song he notes “Make sure your color’s correct” (00:01:55 – 00:01:57) this line can have a double meaning: 1. make sure you are white (as that is the correct color), or 2. make sure you are the correct shade of black. If you are light skinned, you might not survive the ghetto: “Seen a light-skinned nigga with his brains blown out.” (00:00:55 – 00:00:59) The color of your skin is the only thing separating a person from life and death, from freedom and prison. The notion of race as a social construct can be mentioned here. It is heartbreaking how much it influences the reality of the world, countries, and communities. Lamar continues: “Make sure you’re corporate or they’ll be calling your mother collect,” (00:01:57 – 00:02:00) he clearly connects the importance of knowing people, whether it is institutional connections, or connections within the streets themselves, or otherwise: “Go buy a chopper and have a doctor on speed dial, I guess.” (00:02:10 – 00:02:12)

Furthermore, *Complexion (A Zulu<sup>5</sup> Love)* (2015) feat. Rapsody is featured on the album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This song represents a beautiful homage to the black community. Lamar notes how your skin color is just that; a color and nothing else. The song starts with the following refrain:

I'm with this  
Complexion (two-step)  
Complexion don't mean a thing (it's a Zulu love)  
Ooh, complexion (two-step)  
It all feels the same (it's a Zulu love, uh) (00:00:04 – 00:00:24)

Every Black person is beautiful, no matter their shade. He is connecting it with the word Zulu, which serves here as a reference to Africa. One can connect this to the notion of race as a social construct. The whole song refers to this concept.

Dark as the midnight hour or bright as the mornin' sun  
Give a fuck about your complexion, I know what the Germans done (00:00:26 – 00:00:31)

Lamar is referencing the Second World War in these lines. He is drawing the comparison between the genocide that took so many lives; which is being regarded as monstrous, with racism in America; which is being considered as normal. His rhetoric might be that in the same

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<sup>4</sup> Zulu is a South-African nation.

way that it did not made sense from a human perspective to take all those lives more than eighty years ago, it does not make sense now. History is constantly repeating itself, and humans never learn. However, it is all about the interest convergence. Somebody is profiting from this suffering, and until the dominant majority makes profit, racism will exist. As a logical continuation, the song turns into the direction of slavery. And one can connect the physical slavery of the past with the current lack of freedom and safety of Black Americans:

Sneak me through the back window, I'm a good field nigga  
 I made a flower for you outta cotton just to chill with you  
 You know I'd go the distance, you know I'm ten toes down  
 Even if massa listenin', cover your ears, he 'bout to mention  
 Complexion (two-step) (00:00:35 – 00:00:39)

He is mentioning 'cotton' and 'massa' (master) which are both motifs of the slavery period. These lines are uttered quite ironically to hyperbolize the meaning behind these words. The American society expects that Black Americans be a "good field niggas," and not to complain about the injustice occurring around them. Lamar is using a lot of stereotypical statements, for example: "Brown skinned, but your blue eyes tell me your mamma can't run," (00:01:12 – 00:01:14) referring to the stereotype that Black Americans are gifted in sports and referring to the stereotype that the White Americans ('blue eyes') are not. The song also notes the importance of media representation, as Rapsody continues: "And spike your self-esteem the new James Bond gon' be black as me." (00:03:45 – 00:03:47), as well as previous artists in this field, as the song pays homage to 2Pac, connecting both of their works and songs, Rapsody continues:

Let me talk my Stu Scott, 'scuse me on my 2Pac  
 Keep your head up, when did you stop  
 Loving thy color of your skin, color of your eyes (00:02:45 – 00:02:53)

*The Blacker the Berry* (2015) is the third song from Lamar to be analyzed in this paper, and it is also from his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This song talks about the reality of lives in black community in relation to the institutionalized racism. It is based on stereotypes and irony, as well as bluntness and honesty. The song begins with the following refrain which can be described as an inner turmoil of a Black American which is a mirror representation of how the American society treats Black Americans:

Everything black, I don't want black (They want us to bow)  
 I want everything black, I ain't need black (Down to our knees)  
 Some white, some black, I ain't mean black (And pray to a God)  
 I want everything black (That we don't believe)  
 Everything black, want all things black  
 I don't need black, want everything black

Don't need black, our eyes ain't black  
 I own black, own everything black (00:00:03 – 00:00:17)

After such an introduction, the song starts with the line: “Six in the morning” (00:00:18 – 00:00:19), which can be regarded as an homage to the first gangsta’ rap song that has been attributed such a title and was put in this subgenre: Ice-Ts *6'n the Morning'* (1987). Lamar is continuing with the following verse:

Burn, baby, burn, that's all I wanna see  
 And sometimes I get off watchin' you die in vain  
 It's such a shame they may call me crazy  
 They may say I suffer from schizophrenia or somethin'  
 But homie, you made me  
 Black don't crack, my nigga (00:00:21 – 00:00:49)

He is referring to the fact that this society has created such individuals, they have created a war where there was no need for violence, and for that they got real violence. They have created generations of people with mental illnesses which sometimes can be benign, but sometimes can cause genuine issues. Lamar continues with the way society creates such individuals:

I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society  
 That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me  
 Curse me till I'm dead (00:02:20 – 00:02:23)

Lamar is referring to the institutionalized racism and referencing the number of Black Americans who are incarcerated. He is using stereotypes and the difference in appearance to convey his point, as well as dismantling the complexity of his identity:

I'm African-American, I'm African  
 I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village  
 Pardon my residence  
 Came from the bottom of mankind (00:01:05 – 00:01:09)  
 My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide

Throughout this song, Lamar is using a simple question which is constantly repeated. These five words carry an important message: “You hate me don't you?” (00:01:17 – 00:01:18) He is calling out every person that has said he/she is not a racist, and yet the internalized representation of the Black Americans was still embedded in their minds. He is calling out higher institutions, and powers in play which profit from racism. In this simple sentence, he is calling out to any individual who has been hypocritical about such issues. He also highlights throughout the song how: “You made me a killer...” (00:01:37 – 00:01:38) and ‘you’ is referring to the whole society. One might argue that an homage is again given to the late 2Pac in this song: “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” were his original lyrics from the song *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993). He also connects the way they are treated in society with the way the slaves were treated in the past, indicating that slavery never ended, it just acquired new forms:

I said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black  
 Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black  
 And man a say they put me inna chains, cah' we black  
 Imagine now, big gold chains full of rocks  
 How you no see the whip, left scars pon' me back  
 But now we have a big whip parked pon' the block  
 All them say we doomed from the start, cah' we black  
 Remember this, every race start from the block, just remember that (00:03:31  
 – 00:03:39)

The way in which these refrain lyrics are uttered can be connected both to slavery and the vernacular – pidgin English present in the period of slavery and to the stereotypical imagery of Black Americans as less intelligent individuals. But the final line in this verse is an important one as it connects race to societies, and it conveys the message this whole song carries throughout: how race and racism are social constructs. One line stands out from the rest: “I'm black as the heart of a fuckin' Aryan,” (00:03:43 – 00:03:44) Aryan is referencing the Caucasians and it signals all the hate crimes that have been committed throughout the history. Throughout the song, Lamar calls himself a hypocrite. He is talking about these hate crimes, crimes that the dominant majority have done to black communities, and at the end he positions himself in their shoes by saying: “gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me.” (00:04:31 – 00:04:33).

### 3.2.3. Intersectionality in the Analyzed Music

One can find instances of intersectionality in the following 2Pac's songs: *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991), *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993), and *White Manz World* (1996). It is more difficult for Black women than men or white women, as they belong to two of the minority groups, rather than only one. *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991) bluntly talks about the injustice Black women must endure. It is a song inspired by real-life events, and it encompasses statutory rape, as well as complete violation of human rights as it tells the tale about a young girl who got pregnant by her cousin at 12 years old. Danyel Smith (a journalist) in the Netflix's documentary the *Hip-hop Evolution* (2018), episode “Out the Trunk: The Bay,” season 2, notes about the song *Brenda's Got a Baby*, with tears in her eyes the following statement:

*She didn't know what to throw away and what to keep.* It says so much about being a teenage black girl who finds herself uncomfortably pregnant. And it was him, a guy, that wrote that? It's one of the best lines of poetry, of rap lyrics, of literature (00:43:48 – 00:43:55).

As an artist, 2Pac has been extremely sensitive to such issues, he can be seen talking about this issue:

Nobody talks about that. No young black males. No black males talk about black females like we should. We need to take more responsibility for our sisters, because if we don't, who will? ("Out the Trunk: The Bay" *Hip-hop Evolution 2018*, 00:43:01 – 00:43:15)

He was raised by his mother, Afeni Shakur who was an extremely strong woman who fought for the rights of the Black community within Black Panthers. Her son was extremely emphatic and enlightened which can be exemplified by the aforementioned quote.

*Keep Ya Head Up* (1993) is a song from his second studio album *Strictly for My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* It also talks about the plights Black Americans, and especially the female members of this community must endure. In the beginning of the music video, it is noted the following: "Dedicated to the memory of Latasha Harlins ... it's still on." (00:00:00 – 00:00:01) As mentioned before, Latasha Harlins was a 15-year-old girl who was shot dead in a Compton's store by the storeowner. This song sends the message of an empowerment to the young Black females. It tells a tale of a Black woman struggle. Thus, one can also connect this song, as well as the previous one, to intersectionality. It follows:

You know it makes me unhappy (what's that)  
When brothers make babies, and leave young mothers to be a pappy (00:00:49 – 00:00:54)

The struggle of a Black female goes into two directions: that of being Black: poverty, incarcerations, discriminations, etc., and those of being a female. It is no aberrational instance that a woman is left alone to raise a child, or children. The struggle becomes worse if the said woman is Black. 2Pac continues:

And since we all came from a woman  
Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman (yeah, yeah)  
I wonder why we take from our women  
Why we rape our women, do we hate our women? (Why? Why?)  
I think it's time to kill for our women (why? Why? Why? Why?)  
Time to heal our women, be real to our women  
And if we don't we'll have a race of babies  
That will hate the ladies, that make the babies (oh, yeah, baby)  
And since a man can't make one  
He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one (00:00:56 – 00:01:22)

2Pac talks about the unification of the Black community – justice for all, which can be connected to intersectionality. As mentioned before, 2Pac was sensitive to the suffering of Black women, as he grew up with a woman who enlightened him and taught him about the struggles of their community. Also, he notes how he does not understand how they can hate



women as women are the one who created them. He points out to the illogical premise of sexism and misogyny. One must note how this song is still relevant in the present day, especially with recent instances in the United States: *Roe vs. Wade*<sup>6</sup> overturning, banning the right to abortion. 2Pac talks about this same right in his lyrics:

And since a man can't make one (a baby)  
He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one (00:01:17 –  
00:01:22)

This decision is extremely devastating, as it will affect the healthcare of so many young women, within whom, the Black and Latino females will be mostly affected by it. And the fact that 2Pac talked about it almost twenty years ago is powerful.

Moreover, *White Manz World* is a song from his 1996 album *The Don Killuminati: 7 Day Theory*. This was the last album to be published before his premature death on September 13<sup>th</sup> 1996. This song, similarly, to the previous two, talks about the struggles of Black females:

Every woman in America, especially black  
Bear with me, can't you see, that we under attack  
I never meant to cause drama, to my sister and mama  
Hope we make it to better times, in this white man's world (00:03:40 – 00:03:52)

Struggles of Black women is a recurrent theme of his songs and can be connected to the notion of intersectionality. This connection to female struggles in this song is especially important in this period as he just came out of the prison on the charges of sexual abuse. There are no words to encompass the suffering Black communities have gone through in the United States. The situation only gets worse if a person is a member of more than one minority group. Intersectionality teaches the masses about such a concept; one cannot fight for the right of the Black Americans, if within those rights, every single person is not involved.

#### 3.2.4. Storytelling and Counter-storytelling in the Analyzed Music

The songs that can be connected to critical race theory's notion of counter-storytelling are the following: 2Pac's *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991), *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993) and *White Manz World* (1996); Dead Prez's *We Want Freedom* (2000); *That's War* (2002) and *I Have a Dream, Too* (2004); and Lamar's *M.A.A.d City* (2012). In the song *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991), 2Pac took a story that has been published in national newspapers such as 'The Times' and tried to show the reality and the struggle the teenage girl had to go through. The original story made

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<sup>6</sup> *Roe vs. Wade* was a court case in 1973 by which abortion was made legal in the United States.

it seem like the girl was a monster for doing such a terrible deed, and the police even believed she tried to kill the baby. According to the New York Times, the maintenance workers said the following: "There was the baby, lying on top of the garbage. He wasn't making a peep when I got there." If the machine had started, he said, "the kid was history." (1). Even the newspaper article's title suggests it was the girl's fault: *Baby Saved from Compactor, Where mother, 12, Says She Put Him* (1). But nobody really cared about what happened to the little girl to have a baby at 12-years-old, and what exactly scared her so much to put him in the compactor. This motivated 2Pac to write this song, and one can argue that this is an example of counter-storytelling, as it subverts the narrative provided by the mainstream media.

The song *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993) also features concepts that can be connected to the notion of counter-storytelling:

Said it ain't no hope for the youth and the truth is  
It ain't no hope for the future  
And then they wonder why we crazy... (00:02:46 – 00:02:51)

2Pac proposes the question: how can one remain sane after the injustice present? It is simply impossible, and many young people, members of the black community become victims of this lifestyle. This notion can be connected to the idea of counter-storytelling because the public is given a stereotypical image of Black individuals. Sometimes this image may even be true on the surface, but it cannot be analyzed without looking at the broader picture; of death, insecurity, and poverty. The song continues: "We ain't meant to survive, cause it's a setup..." (00:02:56 – 00:02:58) The notion of a 'setup' can be seen as a representative of the society, the young Black individuals are forced to live in. Their ancestors have been brought to the USA as slaves, and now their descendants are forced to live a life of violence which they did not asked for nor agreed upon.

Furthermore, 2Pac, in his song *White Manz World* (1996) mentions members of the Black Panther:

We must fight, for brother Mumia  
We must fight, for brother Mutulu  
We must fight, for brother Ruchell Magee  
We must fight, for brother Geronimo Pratt  
We must fight, for the government's political prisoners  
They are locked up falsely by this white man (00:02:43 – 00:03:07).

Mumia Abu-Jamal was a member of the Black Panther Party, as well as Mutulu (2Pac's stepfather), and Geronimo Pratt (2Pac's godfather). Ruchell Magee is a Black man wrongly accused of aggravated rape, who has been imprisoned for the last 59 years. He is often referred to as one of the political prisoners. All these men were wronged by the system and wrongly

accused and imprisoned. As such, it can be connected to counter-storytelling because it subverts the stereotypical narrative present: Black individuals are inherently dangerous. The Black Panther Party is extremely important in Black history. They fought for justice of the black community. 2Pac's mother and stepfather were members of it, and 2Pac almost became one of the division leaders. However, his music career became more important. But he always kept a strong connection to the Panthers. Furthermore, 2Pac notes some of the Black children who were murdered and for whom justice has not been found such as: Latisha Harlins (15 years young at the time of her premature death), and Lil Yummy (11 years young).

Moreover *We Want Freedom* is a song from the Dead Prez's first studio album *Let's Get Free* (2000). Dead Prez represent a strong connection to Africa and their ancestry. This can be noted in the beginning of this song, in which a voice can be heard uttering the following lyrics accompanied by the sound of African drums:

I was born black, I live black  
 And I'ma die probably because I'm black  
 Because some cracker that knows I'm black  
 Better than you nigga  
 Is probably gonna put a bullet in the back of my head (00:00:10 – 00:00:23)

They note how they are going to die exclusively because of their race. One can argue that they are in fact talking about how a white man will kill them. This is a representation of a sad reality of such individuals, many of whom have lost their friends and/or family members during their lifetime in instances like the one described in these lyrics. This line can be connected to counter-storytelling as it talks about the reality of life in the streets. It subverts the notion how Black individuals are killed on account of their own wrongdoings which is often, false. Moreover, one of the most recurrent elements in their music is the mentioning of 'freedom.' Just the title of this song *We Want Freedom* represents a powerful message. It refers to slavery and points out to the fact that it, in fact, never ended. It just changed its shape. Black Americans are not free, both figuratively and literally. A great percentage of Black Americans is incarcerated. This notion can also be connected to counter-storytelling. In this song, they note the following:

Locked up you get three hot meals and one cot  
 Then you sit and rot, never even got a fair shot  
 That's where a whole lotta niggas end up  
 My man moms even got sent up, tryin' to keep the rent up (00:03:03 – 00:03:13)

Once a person is incarcerated, their whole life is changed. Families get torn apart. Stic.man is talking about how M1's mother was sent to jail. The media coverage often demonizes the Black community and the crimes they commit, but rarely do they look at the broader picture, to why

is someone pushed to commit such crimes. A lot of people steal as they have no other way of paying rent. They are often turned away at job interviews because they are Black, and/or uneducated. They are uneducated because they must start earning money early, or they get into the drugs... The point is that there is a cause, a deeper reason, to why so many Black Americans commit crimes. Also, one must note that the rate of incarceration, as well as the punishments for Black Americans, in contrast to White Americans (who also commit crimes), are much more severe.

*Thats War* (2002) is a song from their second album called *Turn off the Radio: The Mixtape Vol. 1*. Dead Prez's revolutionary approach to hip-hop is seen in the usage of such terminology as 'war.' They connect their lives with war. It is a known fact that a lot of Black Americans enroll and have been enrolling into the army. Going to the 'real' war, for them, is a better option than staying home and participating in the 'war' that is going on in their surroundings; at least there, they have the institutional support. One which they have never had in their everyday lives. The usage of such terminology is made to hyperbolize the problems of the black community. Because the mainstream narrative often distorts the truth. For M1 and Stic, every instance of racism is a sign of war. One could argue that such a comparison is not a bad one. M1 starts the song by rapping: "the cops stop you just because you black – that's war!" (00:00:22 – 00:00:24) referring to racial profiling, continuing with the following: "When they call my hood a drug zone – that's war! ... If you are young and black, you sell crack – that's war!" (00:00:30 – 00:00:38) referring to one of the most obviously racist actions in the history: the war on drugs.

Po-po do the same damn thing – that's war!

When they murdered Amadou Diallo – that's war! (00:00:48 – 00:00:52)

Referring to the police brutality; Amadou Diallo was unarmed at the time of his murder; he was shot dead by the police. Finally, they ask the question: "What about you real niggas 'gainst the 5-0?" (00:01:15 – 00:01:17) Referring to the fact that nobody is safe when the police come. This can be connected to counter-storytelling; trying to position their own narrative to subvert the dominant one. They are trying to make people realize it is time to stop fighting with each other and start looking at the real enemy: "It's not 'Pac vs. Big," it's who's getting the power," (00:01:32 – 00:01:34) meaning it is not about the fight within themselves, for which the unfortunate story of 2Pac and Biggie remains the biggest metaphor. They are dead because of the system they lived in, and not because of the fight against each other.

*I Have a Dream Too* is a song from their album *RBG: Revolutionary but Gangsta*, from 2004. In this song, Dead Prez wants to subvert the narrative: "We 'bout to make drive-bys

revolutionary.” (00:01:02 – 00:01:04), metaphorically meaning they want to start shooting at the police, in the same way the police have been shooting them dead for decades:

Just when you thought it was safe  
 Police kill a little boy last night  
 They said it was a mistake  
 But that won't bring back his life (00:01:41 – 00:01:51)

Mistakes like this have been too common, as mentioned before, they are putting forward their own narrative, their own truth, and as such these lines and this song can be connected to the notion of counter-storytelling. Dead Prez is trying to subvert the mainstream message saying that Black individuals who were shot dead, were shot for a reason. What is the reason to shoot at a child? Or an unarmed man or a woman? Stic and M1 are conveying the message in this violent manner, trying to show the other side to the world, trying to get them to understand what if it was different. What if they were to start shooting at police officers for no reason, or at White individuals? It would be a much bigger problem, than the one that is when a Black individual is shot dead. Moreover, similarly to 2Pac they are uttering names of people who have been wronged by the system. Again, the recurrent theme of this song is freedom, they are fighting for freedom – Uhuru,<sup>7</sup> and they are mentioning the names of revolutionaries, and activists, such as: Kuwasi Balagoon, Kunta Hari, Rushell Magee, Twyman Meyers... a lot of the mentioned individuals have been wrongly accused, and sentenced to prison; or, they have been killed. Twyman Meyers has been killed before he got a right to be trialed. They are mentioning these individuals for them not to be forgotten. The very last word of the song is symbolic and carries a lot of weight: ‘uhuru’ – freedom. They are conveying the message that they are not going to stop until their people are freed.

Lamar’s song *M.A.A.d City* (2012) tells the tale of life in the streets; specifically, the streets of Compton. He talks about the gangs he grew up next to and the conditions Black Americans must endure in their lifetime:

Bgs up to pre-approve, bodies on top of bodies  
 IV’s on top of IV’s (00:01:45 – 00:01:50)

The whole song has an ominous sound, one which suits its thematic of street life and death. He is talking about his childhood. The horror reality in which these children are raised, and nobody cares. This can be noted as an example of counter-storytelling. Telling his side of the story, the side of his community. The song starts with a refrain chant:

If Pirus and Crips all got along  
 They’d probably gun me down by the end of this song

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<sup>7</sup> Uhuru is a Swahili name for freedom.

Seem like the whole city go against me  
 Every time I'm in the street I hear  
 "Yawk! Yawk! Yawk! Yawk!" (00:00:05 – 00:00:1)

Lamar ends the refrain with the onomatopoeic sounds of gunshots to hyperbolize the reality of such a life. This song is a tale of the grim reality of gang related issues which represent one of the biggest concerns of Black Americans. Children become gangs' members at an early age. They learn to kill and to die for the other gang members. They are often related to drugs and are connected to the stereotypical representation of Black Americans and black communities. He is also noting allegedly his first encounter with drugs:

Cocaine laced in marijuana  
 And they wonder why I rarely smoke now  
 Imagine if your first blunt had you foaming at the mouth  
 I was straight tweaking the next weekend we broke even (00:03:34 – 00:03:35)

Such experiences are extremely dangerous for children. However, they are representing the reality and the life of such individuals. Drugs in these communities represent a never-ending cycle, as they are often the last option for these people. As 2Pac noted in his song: *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991), Brenda wanted to work, but she was uneducated and at the end, the only thing she had left was prostitution. The same reality is with drugs, and they have become a norm in their communities. In the continuation of the song, he is presenting a question, an important one to the listeners:

If I told you I killed a nigga at sixteen, would you believe me?  
 Or see me to be innocent Kendrick you seen in the street  
 With a basketball and some Now & Later's to eat  
 If I mentioned all of my skeletons, would you jump in the seat?  
 Would you say my intelligence now is great relief? (00:04:46 – 00:04:53)

He is noting how he became a famous person and when an individual is famous, others might relate to him/her. But in this situation, he mentions that the public might not be as happy with him, and might not praise him as much, if they knew everything he has done in the past. This is an extremely important notion and can be also connected to counter-storytelling. Everybody has an idea of a person in their minds, and the dominant narrative about him might not be who he truly is.

### 3.2.5. Black Nihilism in the Analyzed Music

The following songs can be connected to West's (2001) concept of black nihilism: 2Pac's *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991), *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993) and *White Manz World* (1996); Dead Prez's *We Want Freedom* (2000) and *I Have a Dream, Too* (2004); and Lamar's *M.A.A.d City* (2012) and *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* (2015) feat Rapsody. *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991) carries a nihilistic notion. In the music video, a Black man can be seen uttering the sentence: "That's not our problem, that's up to Brenda's family." (00:00:47 – 00:00:48). Meaning he is accepting the ordinariness of such occurrence and is accepting the complete hopelessness for such individuals, and their own people. It can be connected to the first subgroup of nihilistic themes in rap music: bleak surroundings with little hope (Kubrin 444). West (2001) argues that such a system has created generations of Black individuals who are passive to such instances, they do not have a hope for a better future, as this type of horror stories are a part of their present life. So, the problem is being transferred from one individual to another, without addressing the real issue in question which is of a systemic nature. Such a manner is extremely suitable for the dominant majority, as it makes the cause of the problem masked and only the symptoms are being dealt with. And the question remains if the symptoms are even being dealt with.

In the following song: *Keep Ya Head Up* (1993), 2Pac again talks about notions that can be connected to the concept of black nihilism, mentioning the hatred they carry towards one of their own, but he talks about it while calling his peers accountable and advocating for a positive change. It matches the second nihilistic subtheme: pervasive violence in the ghetto (Kubrin 444). His message is a powerful one, as it describes so simply the system that is broken. The sexist ideas that are transmitted from generation to generation, making it a never-ending cycle of superiority of men over women. Moreover, this song notes the detrimental psychological effect racism has. After mentioning the devastating reality of the life in black community: poverty, death, and drugs, 2Pac notes:

It's going to take a man in me  
To conquer this insanity (00:02:32 – 00:02:34)

Nevertheless, this song is still uplifting, in the sense that it shows the tremendous strength needed for such a life, and his unwillingness to give up. However, as the song continues, the nihilistic spirit takes on:

Said it ain't no hope for the youth and the truth is  
It ain't no hope for the future  
And then they wonder why we crazy... (00:02:46 – 00:02:51)

This lyric perfectly describes the irony of racism and everything it stands for. And this notion can be connected to West's idea about black nihilism. Also, it can be connected to first nihilistic subtheme present in rap music: bleak surroundings with little hope (Kubrin 444). However, the song ends in a more positive note; 2Pac subverts West's notion and calls for hope, a hope in the community, as that is the only way in which survival is possible.

*White Manz World* (1996) also talks about the hatred the Black community has towards themselves, towards both male and female members. 2Pac expresses frustration and pure disbelief at the way they are conducting themselves. He expresses understanding but notes how the system wants to divide them because then, they are easier to manage and to oppress. Divide et vince; divide and conquer, is the easiest method of ruling over minority groups. In the beginning of the song, 2Pac quotes a 1992 movie *Malcom X*: "You'll go busting your fist against a stone wall. You're not using your brain! That's what the white man wants you to do." (00:00:00 – 00:00:02) This quote is powerful and represents a perfect beginning of such a song. Malcolm X is an inspiration to many aspiring hip-hop artists as he fought for the justice of the black community. In a powerful speech from 1962, Malcolm X notes the following:

We are oppressed, we are exploited, we are downtrodden. We are denied not only civil rights, but also human rights. So, the only way we are going to get some of this oppression and exploitation away from us or aside from us, is to come together against the common enemy (00:01:00 – 00:01:20)

This notion is an important one. The unification of black communities. Without it, one cannot win against such a strong enemy: White America. This notion can be found in this song, as 2Pac often questions how the members of their community can be so mean towards each other, when in fact, they must unite and fight for a better tomorrow. However, as racism functions on a psychological level, such task is not an easy one. This concept can be connected to the notion of black nihilism: the hatred towards themselves, and their own community, as well as hopelessness for such a future:

I was born black, I live black  
And I'ma die probably because I'm black  
Because some cracker that knows I'm black  
Better than you nigga  
Is probably gonna put a bullet in the back of my head (00:00:10 – 00:00:23)

...

Who knows what tomorrow brings  
In this world, where everyone's blind...  
And the only thing they ever did wrong (yes, yes)  
Was bein' born in this white man's world. (00:01:26 – 00:01:55)



These lines breathe with hopelessness and frustration, and it can be connected to the first nihilistic subtheme: bleak surroundings with little hope (Kubrin 444). Moreover, this can be connected to the notion of internalized racism. It is an extremely big issue, as it is pointed out in this song, even the members of the black community are racist in a sense that they have internalized the hatred and racism they grew up with. They were taught something is wrong with them, when in fact, something is wrong with the rest of the world. Furthermore, this song also talks about the struggles of living in the ghetto, of living in the black communities: from police brutality, and killings by the members of the police force, to the killings by the members of their own communities. Constant shootings, drive-bys, gang wars, etc., have left a mark on these young individuals, and as such it can also be connected to Kubrin's second nihilistic subtheme: pervasive violence in the ghetto. However, 2Pac can be seen subverting this nihilistic notion:

Use your brain, use your brain,

It's not them that's killin' us, it's us that's killing us (00:04:52 – 00:04:55)

2Pac calls for an intelligent approach in this fight for justice, as everything, every single tiny mistake can be distorted and used against their community; as such it presents a note of hope for a better tomorrow. One can also notice the difference in the 2Pac's expression in this song, and previously analyzed songs. Here, 2Pac expresses more anger, but he is still adamant about this fight, the fight for justice. The unification of the black community and the love for one another.

*We Want Freedom* (2000) can be connected to the black nihilism as it utters the complete hopelessness of black existence and it can be connected to the third nihilistic subtheme: preoccupation with death and dying (Kubrin 444):

Locked up you get three hot meals and one cot

Then you sit and rot, never even got a fair shot

That's where a whole lotta niggas end up

My man moms even got sent up, tryin' to keep the rent up (00:03:03 – 00:03:13)

However, this hopelessness is subverted:

And we gon' a people army

And we gon' get control over our own lives (00:00:47 – 00:00:50)

They, in the same manner that 2Pac did, are talking about the unification of the black community in the fight against the common enemy – the white majority. They are asking for their right to live life freely in a country that is rightfully theirs. This song sounds like a preparation for war. It is a warning to every Black individual to be prepared as such instance can occur anytime.

*I Have a Dream Too* (2004) is powerful. It is calling for a revolution in their communities. Dead Prez is telling the story of life in the streets as it is. The song itself starts with what can be described as a news report saying the following:

There was an incident where a police had shot a black man in the back and then went and plant a gun next to him and say that the guy draw a gun on him which they find out after the investigation that the guy didn't have no gun – the police shot him in cold blood (00:00:00 – 00:00:16).

They are calling for revolution and unification. One can notice the sense of aggravation in their music. They are angry, and rightfully so. This is an everyday tale of their lives. And even after the Civil Rights Movement in the 60s, and LA riots in the 90s, everything remained the same. As such, this can be connected to black nihilism as this line conveys the feelings of utter despair and hopelessness. People are getting shot by the police, unarmed individuals losing their lives on account of internalized racism. Stic and M1 note how they are preparing for a fight. They are preparing for a revolution as one is much needed. However, they note that they need to be armed for this revolution, as the enemy will come bearing weapons as well.

Lamar, in his song, *M.A.A.d City* (2012), notes the following notion nihilistically:

And it's safe to say that our next generation maybe can sleep  
With dreams of being a lawyer or doctor  
Instead of boy with a chopper that holds the cul de sac hostage (00:05:01 – 00:05:05)

However, he himself does not believe these lines which he uttered quite sarcastically. One can connect this notion with black nihilism, and the first nihilistic subtheme: bleak surroundings with little hope (Kubrin 444), on account of the tone by which these words are being said. He is noting the way the dominant majority is rationalizing the misdeeds and the realities of Black individuals – noting how one day it will be better, but will that day ever come? And what does it mean for the individuals who have suffered so far on account of racism?

On the other hand, Lamar's song *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* (2015), can be understood as subverting the rhetoric behind black nihilism noting how black individuals should love themselves and their own people, Rapsody can be heard singing:

Call your brothers magnificent, call all the sisters queens  
We all on the same team, blues and pirus, no colors ain't a thing (00:03:52 – 00:03:55).

This song is a perfect representation of black love, of the love individuals should have for themselves and one another which is the perfect way to fight the devastating effects of the nihilistic attitudes in black communities.

### 3.3. The Dominant Themes and Motifs in the Analyzed Music

This paper has analyzed three artists: 2Pac, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar. The analysis encompassed a total of nine songs produced by them: 2Pac's *Brenda's Got a Baby* (from the album '2Pacalypse Now - 1991), *Keep Ya Head Up* (from the album 'Strictly for My N.I.G.G.A.Z.' - 1993), *White Manz World* (from the album 'The Don Killuminati: 7 Day Theory' - 1996), Dead Prez's *We Want Freedom* (from the album 'Let's Get Free' - 2000), *That's War* (from the album 'Turn Off the Radio: The Mixtape Vol. 1' - 2002) and *I Have a Dream Too* (from the album 'RBG: Revolutionary but Gangsta' - 2004); and Kendrick Lamar's *m.A.A.d city* (from the album 'Good Kid, M.A.A.D City' - 2012) *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* and *The Blacker the Berry* (from the album 'To Pimp a Butterfly' - 2015).

These songs have been discussed in greater detail within the framework of race theories: critical race theory and black nihilism. This chapter will focus on the in-depth discussion of these artists and their approach to music and fighting racism.

The artists and their songs have already been extensively analyzed. One can notice how these three authors have similar backgrounds. In other words, all of them have grown up in the streets and have gotten close or have been victims of the dangers such life presents: drugs, shootings, poverty. This similarity is important to note as they present the same and/or similar ideas in their music. Every one of them tries to convey what life in the streets really is about. They tell a story of their everyday lives filled with danger, the story of institutionalized racism and the hardships such individuals must endure. All the artists' motifs have been completely or partially of activist spirit: 2Pac was already connected to the Black Panther's Movement even before he started his music career. Dead Prez's music is completely motivated by activism. Their every song contemplates a problem present in the black community and Kendrick Lamar openly talks about the love one needs to have for his/her fellow community members, as well as mental illnesses such lifestyle has caused. All of this is compelling evidence that they genuinely wanted to change the image and the lifestyle of the black community, or at least to educate the masses about the dangers and the realities of such a lifestyle. They are voices for the voiceless community. A community that has had their voices taken away from them by the dominant majority and institutionalized racism.

These works of art have been analyzed in relation to race theories: critical race theory and black nihilism. Every song is actually fighting and trying to subvert the narrative that racism is ordinary, as well as the narratives proposed by the dominant majority; every artist is

doing so in their own way. For example; 2Pac's *Brenda's Got a Baby* (1991) is talking about a real-life event. A story which narrative has been manipulated by the media. Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar are trying to subvert the notion and bring attention to the people dying on account of their skin-color/tone. Dead Prez in their song *I Have a Dream Too* (2004) is mentioning people who have been wronged by the system supported by the institutional racism; Kuwasi Balagoon, Kunta Hari, Rushell Magee, Twyman Meyers... As an instance of counter-storytelling, Kendrick Lamar, in his song *m.A.A.d City* (2012), is talking how he is not what the mainstream media portrays him to be, and if people knew the truth about his life, he would not be so popular.

Moreover, there are some themes and theoretical notions mentioned that differ within these three authors. 2Pac talked about the struggles Black females had to endure. All of his songs analyzed in this paper talk about this notion which can be connected to the analytical framework of intersectionality, a framework which the other authors in this paper are not talking about. The themes 2Pac talked about thirty years ago, are still relevant in today's society, especially in the newer climate in which it seems that female rights are only diminishing. As mentioned before, abortion has been made illegal in most of the States. And such instances are not only connected to the USA. Such occurrences are present in Europe as well, with Poland being the leader of such devastating changes. Also, his song *Changes* (1998) has been widely used in the protests in 2020 after a video of a police suffocating and killing an unarmed Black man – George Floyd, came out. What might be interesting to note is that both Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar are mentioning 2Pac in their music. Dead Prez differs from 2Pac in their sound – they are more militant and Afrocentric. They try to connect with their roots and are calling for a revolution. The main recurrent motifs in their songs are freedom and war. Kendrick Lamar also refers to the African roots in his songs, by mentioning a South-African nation – Zulu, and connecting it to the concept of love. All of these artists are calling for the unification of the black communities in the fight against the common enemy – the dominant majority. Even though, this unification sounds hopeful, one of the main themes in the music of these artists is nihilism. They are showing a complete hopelessness for a better tomorrow and are presenting the true detrimental effects racism had on their communities: drugs, incarceration, poverty, racial profiling, etc.

The motifs of these songs are remarkably similar but have been brought to life by different authors with different sounds. 2Pac's sound has changed a bit throughout the years. In the beginning he was calmer and as the years went by, he became more aggressive in his

tone. A difference one can understand considering the conditions under which he lived and worked. Dead Prez has always had a bit of an aggressive tone, which suits the message of their music: they are inviting people to revolution, to war. They are inviting the black communities to unite and fight for the well-deserved justice. Lamar's sound can be characterized by a calm, nihilistic undertone. He is inviting people to fight and to unite; however, he is aware of the strength racism has, and the possibility it might never get better.

It seems that the direct influence on racism as such and on people's perception of black communities has been lowering since the nineties. There are many different explanations for such a phenomenon and the answer might be the combination of different elements. Firstly, nineties were a period when the government action, famously known as the 'war on drugs' hit its peak. People were being incarcerated unfairly, children were losing their parents and families were being ripped apart. Apart from this, the murder of Latasha Harlins, as well as the beating of Rodney King ignited the LA riots in 1992. So, these issues hit the surface, and nobody could stay neutral to such problems. People became ready to listen, and rap musicians were the ones talking. However, as the years went by, racism remained. It seems as if it has only changed its form – it became subtler. In recent years the number of incarcerated people of color has lowered; however, those numbers are still extremely high. The music produced in the 2000s and 2010s reached high popularity standards, but such ideas and notions are not new, as they were at the peak of the nineties rap music. However, in the case of George Floyd, a positive change must be noted as well, the perpetrators in this case have been sentenced to jail. Although, there is a possibility this is a result of a high media presence and coverage regarding this case and the public has superficially become extremely sensitive to such notions, which explains why nobody has been charged for the murder of Breonna Taylor (2020), after the police falsely raided her apartment and murdered her while she was sleeping. As mentioned before, racism is suitable to somebody. As interest convergence and the CRT tries to teach the wider masses, until racism becomes unprofitable, it will not stop. It will only find new ways to survive. The most essential element of racism is of psychological nature. The masses are taught that black equals danger. And the black community is taught they do not fit into this white world and white narrative. In order not to be considered dangerous, they should change their manner to resemble the members of the white community. As such, racism remains strong. And even the actions provided by the liberal parties conveying color-blindness and the equalitarian approach might be detrimental to the movement; as such things are impossible because these notions are embedded in people's minds and cannot be solved consciously. A

systemic approach is needed. Also, one cannot just blindly erase the centuries of misdoings as a proposition to better their position in society. Thus, one can note that the approach rap music has had on the perception of racism by the society has changed. Not because the message these artists are trying to convey changed, it is because racism adapted to the newly founded conditions: as West (2001) notes, it became more careful and subtler (viii). For example, Childish Gambino's *This Is America* (2018) seemingly had an extremely significant impact on society as it reached wider masses by becoming the number one song of 2018. But what must be noted is that the audience is aware of these monstrosities and is praising artists who are talking about them; but they are not really changing their perception as it is present subconsciously. Moreover, the image of music has changed since the 1990s, and with it, rap music has changed as well. But one cannot take this as the main reason for the lowered impact this music has on the perception of racism by the masses as there have always been artists whose music has been highly commercialized.

One must note that rap music did not start in the nineties and cannot be summarized into three performers. It is diverse and every coast, every period, every country and every author are special due to something. What can be noted as the significant common point of rap music in general is the fact that it speaks about the reality of life of colored communities, and that as such it has often been under attack from the authorities and media. Nevertheless, rap has survived, and will continue to transmit the realities of lives in the streets to the broader public until the situation becomes better to the point where there is nothing to speak about anymore.

#### 4. Conclusion

Slavery lasted for more than a hundred years – from 1776, since the United States have been founded, until 1865. Even though, slavery was abolished almost two-hundred years ago, Black individuals are still not free. They are imprisoned, both literally and figuratively, by the racial injustice and the overall racism present in the United States. If one talks about racism, one must note how complex of an issue it is. It cannot be fixed by simple solutions, and it is questionable if it can be fixed at all. It is subtle, and embedded in people's brains from a relatively young age. Children are learned to be afraid of Black individuals, and they grow up into adults who are afraid of the same people, only on account of their skin color. The 'war on drugs' resulted with the imprisonment of so many Black men and women, which only reinforced the existing stereotype of the black communities being dangerous. It has destroyed families and lives of both individuals and communities. Racism has another psychological component – Black individuals are told they are not enough, they do not fit into the American society, and they have to do whatever they can to try to fit into that white box proposed by the dominant majority. This task is impossible and creates generations of Black individuals hating themselves, and hating others like them as well. They, themselves have internalized the racism present in their world. The white majority often writes the realities of the black communities, and these realities are often terrifying and unreal – proposing the hatred of themselves and their bodies. However, many Black individuals have come forward in an attempt to subvert this narrative. For example, Malcolm X (1962) can be found noting the following:

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin to that extent that you bleach it to get like a white man? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race you belong to that extent you don't want to be around each other? (00:01:22 – 00:02:00)

His emotional and powerful speech presents a good question? One that very rarely is taught about. Notions and elements of life are accepted in their 'original' form. And rarely does anybody question why such a detrimental concept is accepted as a norm. Malcolm X is a huge inspiration to many Black activists, as well as members of the hip-hop community. Many rap artists try to subvert this notion as well. They talk about the realities the black communities face, and the way they are ruled over. Divide and conquer is the best, and easiest way of ruling. If the members of black communities are preoccupied with the war between themselves, they will never rebel against the real enemy. The one enemy who created this war in the first place.

This paper has analyzed rap music of three different rap artists in three different decades – 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. The artists in question are the following: Tupac Shakur, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar. One must note how no concrete conclusions can be drawn from this paper as the nature of it is descriptive, and its scope is relatively small. However, it provides a good insight into the realities of the lives of colored communities and it can be a good foundation for further, more comprehensive research. These artists have been chosen for the purposes of this paper in order to investigate the way in which they subvert the aforementioned narrative. Nine different songs have been more closely analyzed (three of each author). It has been discovered that nihilism is one of the main themes in these songs. Artists are complying with West's (2001) notion of black nihilism and hopelessness in the black communities. An understandable notion considering the realities they live through. However, what can be found in this music is an attempt to subvert this concept as well. These artists are calling their communities to unify and fight against the common enemy – the internalized and institutionalized racism. They are aware of the realities of their everyday lives and understand the scope and complexness of racism. Other important themes in their songs are freedom and war – especially in Dead Prez's music; the ordinariness of racism, racism as a social construct, and counter-storytelling. Rap music represents a good example of counter-storytelling – artists noting their own narrative and subverting the existing one produced by the dominant majority, reinforced by the media. Both Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar pay homage to 2Pac in their songs. However, 2Pac was the only one who talked about the plights Black women go through which can be connected to the analytical framework of intersectionality. These artists talk about similar issues in different ways and manners. So, one can note that rap music has not so much changed its form and its message as much as the reception of this message has been changed by the public perception. In other words, 1990s represented a period where the form of racism present was unsustainable and it reached its end. Murders of innocent Black individuals led to riots and even more violence. And this was the perfect ground for the message that rap music was trying to spread. Thus, it probably has had the most influence in that period of time. People are praising those who speak volume about the injustice happening, but will not do anything to change that injustice because they do not think they carry racist attitudes; when in fact racism is still embedded deep into the brains and the system of the United States and its citizens. Racism is a constitutional part of the United States, and as such it is not easy to eradicate. It has been present since the beginnings, and it has been, and it still is, profitable to a certain amount of people. Thus, a more complex and layered approach is needed in order to fight this



injustice, an approach which would encompass many different layers of the everyday American life; such as, school system, judicial system, media representations, etc. And most importantly, an individual approach is needed. Black individuals need to learn they are enough from a young age, to love themselves and others like them in order to be able to fight against the injustice present in their communities.

## 5. CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND RAP MUSIC: ANALYSIS OF TUPAC SHAKUR, DEAD PREZ AND KENDRICK LAMAR'S DISCOGRAPHY: Summary and Key Words

Rap music has been around in this form for more than fifty years. However, this music genre has reached its peak in the 1990s due to the activist nature of this music: fighting against the racial injustice, as well as the socio-historical context of the 1990s American society: racism reached its peak with murders of innocent Black individuals, percentage of incarcerations, racial profiling and police brutality towards black communities. This paper tries to analyze rap music and some of its authors: 2Pac, Dead Prez and Kendrick Lamar, who will be analyzed within the context of critical race theory and black nihilism. Nine songs are analyzed: three of each author. This thesis aims to analyze rap music in order to connect the concrete events such as the 'war on drugs,' or Los Angeles riots in the nineties, with the critical race theory that encompasses the analysis of racism by explaining the reality of incarcerations, police brutality, and racial profiling.

Key words: racism, critical race theory, black nihilism, rap music, 2Pac, Dead Prez Kendrick Lamar

## 6. KRITIČKA TEORIJA RASE I RAP GLAZBA: ANALIZA DISKOGRAFIJE TUPACA SHAKURA, DEAD PREZA I KENDRICKA LAMARA: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Rap glazba postoji u ovom obliku više od pedeset godina. Međutim, ovaj je glazbeni žanr dosegao svoj vrhunac 1990-ih upravo zbog aktivističke prirode ove glazbe: borba protiv rasne nepravde, kao i socio-povijesnog konteksta američkog društva 1990-ih: rasizam je dosegao svoj vrhunac ubojstvima nedužnih crnaca, stopi zatvaranja pripadnika crnačkih zajednica, rasnom profiliranju i brutalnosti policije prema crnačkim zajednicama. Ovaj rad analizira rap glazbu i neke od njenih autora: 2Pac, Dead Prez i Kendrick Lamar, koji će biti analizirani u kontekstu kritičke teorije rase i nihilizma u crnačkim zajednicama. Analizira se devet pjesama: po tri od svakog autora i svakog desetljeća. Ovaj diplomski rad ima za cilj analizirati rap glazbu kako bi se povezali konkretni događaji poput 'rata protiv droge' ili nemira u Los Angelesu devedesetih s kritičkom teorijom rase.

Ključne riječi: rasizam, kritička teorija rase, nihilizam u crnačkim zajednicama, rap glazba, 2Pac, Dead Prez, Kendrick Lamar

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