

Two Speakers, One Song: Unreliable Narration in Kendrick

Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry"

When Kendrick Lamar released "The Blacker the Berry" in February 2015 as the second single from *To Pimp a Butterfly*, the song's final three lines set off a fight that lasted most of the year. The track spends five furious minutes indicting American racism, and then the narrator turns the accusation on himself. He asks why he wept over Trayvon Martin's killing in the street while his own part in gang violence meant the death of another Black man, and he answers with a single word, hypocrite. A large share of listeners read that ending as a lecture. They heard Kendrick blaming Black communities for their own suffering, softening Trayvon's killing by pointing at Black-on-Black violence, and the charge of respectability politics trailed him for months. That reading is coherent. It is also, I think, a misreading, and the error is an error about who is talking.

The speaker of "The Blacker the Berry" is an unreliable narrator, and the song announces it out loud. Three separate times the narrator brands himself the biggest hypocrite of the year. In fiction, when a narrator declares that he cannot be trusted, a careful reader adjusts everything that follows. The furious voice that rails at white America is a constructed persona, and the closing confession is the trap the whole song was built to spring. There are, in effect, two speakers here. One accuses the world. The other accuses the first. They share a single mouth, and the friction between them is the meaning of the track.

Take the hypocrite refrain seriously, because Kendrick plainly means you to. A rapper of his precision does not repeat a self-accusation three times by accident. The line works as a warning label fixed to the narrator. It tells you that the man delivering this tirade already knows he falls

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short of it, so his own admission of failure qualifies every proud, enraged claim in the verses before you even reach it. You are hearing an accuser who has already confessed that he belongs among the guilty.

The song also demonstrates that its narration is a performance, because the "I" changes identity within it. In the pre-chorus Kendrick takes an old proverb about the blacker berry and the sweeter juice, a saying rooted in Black beauty, and warps its second half into a threat of gunfire that he delivers in the voice of a racist policeman. That is open ventriloquism. He speaks as the cop for a moment and then drops the voice. Once you have watched him inhabit a character who plainly is not him, you cannot return to treating the rest of the "I" as a straight transcript of Kendrick Lamar's private opinions. The whole song is voiced. The angry nationalist is one more role, and he plays it with total commitment, and it is still a role.

The album around the song backs this up. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is a concept record whose voices keep shifting across its run, one of the most argued-over releases of its era. The same "I" becomes a preacher, a survivor, a self-loathing man, and a sinner, and the record keeps reminding you that a voice on a Kendrick song is a chosen instrument. To read one track's "I" as Kendrick's unfiltered thesis, while ignoring the theatrical design of the album it belongs to, misses how the man makes meaning. He works through masks. He always has.

Now go back to the ending with the right listener in mind. The respectability-politics charge only lands when you assume a sincere narrator handing down a policy position. Read the speaker as a divided man who has warned you three times that he cannot be trusted, and the last lines stop being a prescription for Black America. They become a confession. The narrator is not excusing the killing of Trayvon Martin or ranking one death against another. He is admitting that his grief

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and his conduct do not line up, and that the contradiction sickens him. The word hypocrite is aimed inward. It is a verdict he passes on himself, out loud, in public. He began writing the song in 2012, soon after he learned a 17-year-old had been shot dead, so the grief in it is not a rhetorical prop. I have watched this exact split play out in a classroom, one group defending Kendrick and one group condemning him, and both groups had taken the narrator at his word.

So the song holds two speakers, and it never lets either one win. The accuser has genuine force, and the confession is genuine too, and Kendrick declines to dissolve the tension into a tidy lesson. That refusal is the achievement. "The Blacker the Berry" does not tell you what to conclude about race and violence and grief. It puts a divided mind on record and makes you hold both halves at once, the fury and the shame, the indictment of a country and the indictment of the self. The controversy erupted because plenty of listeners heard only one of the two voices. The song was always the argument between them.