# Good Kids, Mad Cities: Kendrick Lamar and Finding Inner Resistance in Response to FergusonUSA

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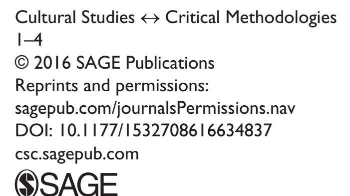

**Bettina L. Love**[1]

**Abstract**

The author draws from the works of Kevin Quashie and Kendrick Lamar to analyze the ways in which Black bodies in Hip Hop culture can represent resistance while being quiet, still, or building on existential consciousness from their interior. As many youth of color are good kids in mad cities, the article focuses on the question, "What does it mean for a generation of youth who are coming of age under the loud publicness of Hip Hop, racism, state violence, and domestic terrorism to know that resistance also can be found in the act of stillness?"

**Keywords**

hip hop, Kendrick Lamar, resistance, stillness, youth of color, racism, state violence

In the fall of 2012, a month after Jordan Davis was murdered, a month before Trayvon Martin was killed, and 2 years before Eric Garner's last breath was taken from him by a police officer in Staten Island, Kendrick Lamar released his second studio album, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. The album received rave reviews for its masterful sound production, as well as Lamar's incredible ability to contextualize the rough streets of Compton—his hometown—for mainstream audiences. Reminiscent of James Baldwin, Lamar uses rap music to paint an intense, beautifully blemished picture of his struggles to overcome, yet often succumbing to, peer pressure, misogyny, alcoholism, and violence. Lamar's vivid and truthful storytelling is not new to Hip Hop (i.e., KRS-One, Lauryn Hill, Nas, Tech N9ne, Rapsody, J. Cole, Jasiri X, Killer Mike, and Jean Grae). However, the timing of his album, its title, and the ways in which he marshals in narratives of resistance that indict a system for the creation of mad cities that penalize good kids, to me, establishes Lamar as a voice of the current Hip Hop community providing the soundtrack for young people in the fight for justice. As he states in his song, "m.A.A.d city": "Compton U.S.A. made me an angel on angel dust."

In his music, Lamar complicates the contemporary everyday narratives and realities of urban youth who endure the social, economic, physiological, and psychological trauma of coping with the racial injustices of "post-racial" America by indicting the system. Specifically, in *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, Lamar does not hide from his flaws, but instead confronts them by recognizing that many are the result of a system that was built and thrives on racism, exploitation, entangled hierarchies, and eviscerating Black leadership in already fragile communities of color. In short, Lamar seemingly acknowledges that no matter how *good* he is, the system is not set up for him to survive. Jeffery St. Clair (2005) has argued that the system has not failed; it is doing exactly what it is supposed to do in a nation built on racism, state violence, and domestic terrorism. Thus, for youth bombarded with the rhetoric of "post-racial" America, but who still face the backlash of the Civil Rights Movement, Lamar's words create an interesting informal educational space to learn, discuss, vent, heal, resist, and escape from the stress and fatigue of subtle and overt racial hostility toward Black and Brown bodies. In sum, Lamar contextualizes state domination and "systemic barbarism" (Giroux, 2014) in the titular phrase, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. The album depicts Lamar's awaking and the realization of his city's role as a co-conspirator in gang violence and drugs. Lamar explains to his listeners—especially those who look like him—why they may never fulfill their dreams, regardless of their abilities and will.

## FergusonUSA and Defending the Dream

Although Lamar's words may be dark, they still have the bite to do what Andreana Clay (2006) calls "mobilizing youth for social change in the post-civil rights era" (p. 105). His verses provided the inspiration for the 2014 Good Kids, Mad Cities campaign by the Dream Defenders, an organization devoted to

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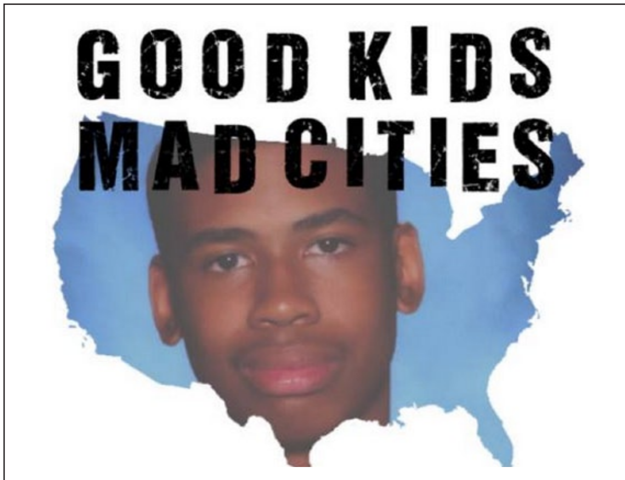


**Figure 1.** Image from the Dream Defenders campaign, Good Kids, Mad Cities.

developing young people as the "next generation of racial leaders to realize and exercise our [sic] independent collective power; building alternative systems and organizing to disrupt the structures that oppress communities" (dreamdefenders.org). One of the more heavily circulated images on the web from the Dream Defenders's campaign was Figure 1 depicting Jordan Davis, 17, who was shot unarmed for playing "loud" rap music at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida. Although Davis's killer is currently serving life in prison without the possibility of parole for firing his gun at Davis's friends in the back of the car, due to a mistrial, he was not convicted for killing Davis. The picture above shows an unsmiling Davis, staring unflinchingly at the observer with an air of cynicism for his surroundings, against a backdrop of the United States. This poignant image begs the question, "Did he ever have a chance?"

According to Henry Giroux (2003b), the answer is no:

> I wish to argue that as the state is hollowed out and shifts its emphasis away from providing for people's welfare, protecting the environment, and expanding the realm of public good, it relies more heavily on its militarizing functions and the criminal justice system as a model for how to manage and contain populations with a wide range of public spheres. (p. 59)

Giroux (2003a) later sharpened his analysis of the "war on youth" to acknowledge that, although all youth are under attack by the federal governments' domestic militarization and terrorism, youth of color face unbearably high levels of containment, brutalization, and punishment by police. bell hooks (1990) explained it best when she wrote, "the point of lynching historically was not to kill individuals but to let everybody know: This could happen to you." The murder of Mike Brown is a prime example of such "post-racial" lynching. After killing the 18-year-old on a Sunday afternoon, the Ferguson Police Department left his dead body in the street, for all to see, for 4½ hr. It is important to note that the street, Canfield Drive, is a two-way street which dead-ends at a massive apartment complex heavily populated by Black folks. With this action, the Ferguson Police Department sent a message to every person of color not only in Ferguson but also around the United States: Every city and town in the United States is Ferguson, Missouri. Another example is the very public, and videotaped, death of Eric Garner at the hands of the New York Police Department in Staten Island. These public lynchings are unfortunately not isolated events. In the wake of such tragedies, millions of people from around the world are standing in solidarity with the simple, but necessary proclamation: #BlackLivesMatter.

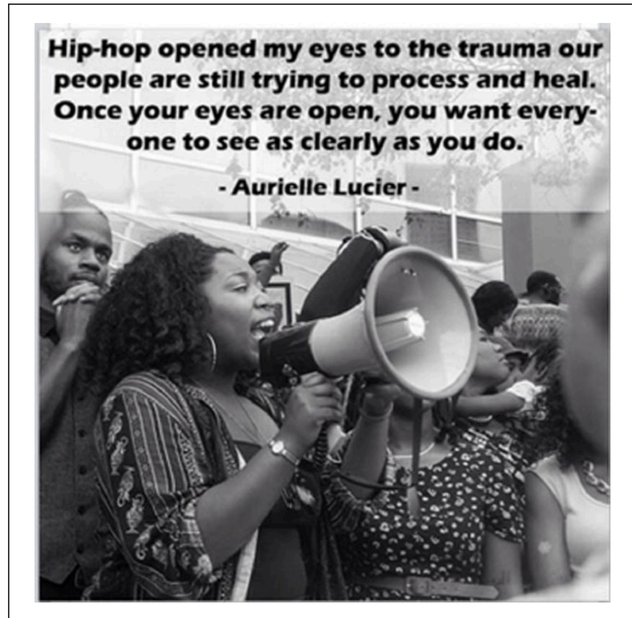


**Figure 2.** Spoken word poet and activist Aurielle Lucier.

Currently, youth are at the forefront of fighting against "blue on Black" brutality and general violence inflicted on Black and Brown bodies. Figure 2 is of spoken word poet and activist Aurielle Lucier, the 20-year-old leader of the movement for social justice in Atlanta, Georgia. Her organization, It's Bigger Than You, has conducted large scale die-ins and protests, some involving nearly 5,000 people, that shut down traffic on one of Atlanta's busy highways. Her quote in the photo, which describes how Hip Hop taught her about Black trauma, is indicative of the power of Hip Hop to aid in the development of youth activist political consciousness (Clay, 2006, 2012).

Scholar Mark Anthony Neal (1998) framed Black popular culture, particularly music, as an African American cultural product that was a central and pivotal element of the Civil Rights Movement. Neal writes that the music that emerged from the struggles of the movement became "the ideal artistic medium to foreground the largest mass social movement to emerge from the

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African-American experience" (p. 29). Hip Hop, a dominant African American cultural product, is also committed to the tradition of Black popular culture, as evidenced by its centering the struggles of Black life in the music, which is ultimately meant for mass consumption. Thus, the music is filled with social commentary that exposes and critiques critical issues affecting people of color within a regional, national, and global context. The political possibilities created by that function of Hip Hop have energized the generation of youth who not only listen to Hip Hop but have their identity formations, ideas of self-efficacy, resistance to socialization, and schemata of social and political issues informed by the culture of Hip Hop (Love, 2013, 2015,).

Former *Source* magazine editor, Bakari Kitwana (2002), predicted youth's current state in his book, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*:

> Due to the nature of the America we've grown up in, we've developed a different sense of urgency rooted in what we've lost in a mere generation—what some critics have deemed the reversal of civil rights gains, such as welfare reform and the decline of affirmative action—as well as in new attacks targeting . . . youth like police brutality, anti-youth legislation, and the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of hip-hop generationers. (p. 149)

Hip Hop music and culture allows many of the youth focused on social justice, especially those I work with in Atlanta, GA, like Lucier, to "locate their experience and create community and identity" (Clay, 2006, p. 109). By drawing on the oral expressive art form of rap, the Dream Defenders uses provocative images to educate youth and acts in concert with artists like Lamar to usher in a new form of resistance deeply embedded within Hip Hop culture. Thus, I want to draw from the work of Kevin Quashie (2012), *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, to analyze the ways in which Black bodies in Hip Hop culture can represent resistance while being quiet, still, or building on existential consciousness from their interior. Furthermore, I intend to examine what it means for a generation of youth coming of age under the loud publicness of Hip Hop, witnessing trauma, and taking to the streets to protest injustice to know that, like the eyes of Davis in Figure 1 and the words of Lamar, resistance also can be found in the act of stillness.

## Be Still: Resistance and the Inner Self

While growing up in Rochester, NY, my cousins and I would often visit my grandmother where, in our play, we would run amok in and around her house on hot summer days. When we inevitably got out of hand, I remember my grandmother yelling at the top of her lungs, "you children be still!" My grandmother grew up on a plantation in rural South Carolina. At an early age she married my grandfather, and they moved to Rochester for work. Although my grandmother never learned to read or write anything beyond her own name, she was a very proud woman filled with wisdom. In raising us, both my grandmother and my mother reprimanded their children using the African American oral tradition of speaking in idioms, such as "Don't rob Peter to pay Paul"; "Loose lips, sink ships"; and "If you'll lie you'll steal, and if you'll steal you'll kill." As a kid receiving such reprimands, I could not tell whether I was in trouble or in the midst of a poetry slam, but I knew not to do it again.

Although I carry with me the wisdom of all these sayings, the one phrase that has stuck with me the most throughout the years is "be still." Although I heard it frequently throughout my childhood and teenage years, I never fully understood that saying until I was much older. Although in the most literal sense my grandmother was asking that we sit down, she was also telling us to stop, listen, observe, and learn to heal the pain we experienced as inner city kids growing up in crime-filled streets, with parents succumbing to the terrors of drug and alcohol abuse. *Be still* was also a way for us to resist the temptation of street life, drugs, alcohol, and violence, and to learn by observing the mistakes of our parents and peers. In short, she was telling us to protect our inner sanctity in stillness. To find our inner voices politically rooted in social issues, and to understand where our ambitions, vulnerabilities, and fears rested, before entering the public space of urban Black life filled with the broken dreams of racial progress and racism (Quashie, 2012). As the matriarch of our family, my grandmother was no pushover, but she knew the limitations of our existence set by our Black skin.

Returning to Lamar's music, many of his rhymes explore the idea that an act of resistance can occur simply by focusing on one's interior self. In that way, Lamar is asking his listeners to *be still*, to rethink the significance of the inner self in an expressive, defiant art form like Hip Hop. Quashie (2012) contends that, "In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty" (p. 6). In his song "I," Lamar proclaims to the world that he loves himself, no matter if the ghetto is filled with guns and picket signs. Thus, Lamar acknowledges that protest (i.e., picket signs) is a part of Black culture. Similarly, Quashie writes, "That public expressiveness and resistance are definitive of Black culture is an effect of the role the public sphere has played in making, marking, and policing racial difference" (p. 11). Both Quashie and Lamar conceptualize that, "there is a strong existential struggle of living with the confines of racial identity" (p. 24) and one's wellness depends on self-reflection and questioning human existence. The existential consciousness present in Lamar's lyrics is an inner resistance central to the wellness of our youth on the frontlines of human rights.

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However, the common narrative remains focused on the outer, the public display of Black bodies. As a result, for Black and Brown people, so much of their lives are shaped by the ways they publicly resist racism with their bodies (i.e., die-ins, rallies, marches, and walkouts). Of that perception, Quashie (2012) writes,

> The result is that black culture is celebrated for the exemplary ways it employs doubleness as well for its capacity to manipulate social opinion and challenge racism. This is the politics of representation, where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of human individuality of the person who is black. As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness. The determination to see blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist—it comes from the language of racial superiority and is a practice intended to dehumanize black people. (p. 4)

As the current generation of young people have been told for so long that racism no longer exists, folks born during the first wave of the Hip Hop generation (i.e., between 1965 and 1984) must be concerned about the inner spirits of our youth as they fight for justice. The collective reality of all Black and Brown folks in FergusonUSA demands a public response for Black survival, but we cannot forget that Black survival is also dependent on the quality of our inner lives. As youth hashtag their pain and take to the streets, they need to know that they are resisting by simply living. Quashie (2012) writes, "Oneness asserts the right of a human being to be just that—a human being—and this assertion privileges the inner life . . . The abundance of oneness authorizes a kind of racial freedom" (p. 120). That same sentiment is reflected in Lamar's poetic language, particularly in the song "I," in which he resists the notion that his dark skin is inferior, ugly, or shuns the need for love and empathy: "How many times our potential was anonymous? How many times the city making me promises? So I promise this, And I love myself." Resistance for many people of color is simply waking up in the morning and saying, "I love myself." That phrase recognizes the humanity of being Black. In that same way, when I was young, my elders would say, "Baby, all I got to do is be Black and die." They were right and they were resisting.

Staying alive in FergusonUSA, and defending the dream of justice, sadly, will always be the job of Black culture. At this moment in time, Hip Hop will be the soundtrack for youth as they use their bodies, skin tone, and physiognomy to commit to the publicness of protest, but if these good kids in mad cities do not love themselves and balance what is public and intimate, they will be constantly, restlessly resisting forever.

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