OF W.E.B. DUBOIS & KENDRICK LAMAR: DISCOURSE AMONGST DISCORD—A NEW CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

By Stephen Pacheco

I got, I got, I got, I got—
Loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA
Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA
I got power, poison, pain and joy inside my DNA
I got hustle though, ambition, flow inside my DNA
I was born like this, since one like this, immaculate conception
I transform like this, perform like this, was Yeshua new weapon

KENDRICK LAMAR, "DNA"

As the pyrotechnics concluded and the dancing subsided on the stage of Madison Square Garden, the CBS broadcast of the 60th Annual Grammy awards panned back and forth between two diametrically opposed images. Kendrick Lamar—seen swaying back and forth uneasily, gripping the microphone and tensely surveying the audience with a look of solemnity and frustration painted on his face—seemed wholly out of place amongst a beaming crowd of applauding artists and fans, unburdened and seemingly imperceptive of the anguish and urgency of his message. For, in a space normally reserved for the innocuous performances of apolitical artists like Taylor Swift or Adele, Kendrick chose to use the platform not as a space for entertainment, but critique. It was less of a performance and more of an argument—a conflicted pronouncement on the precarious state of racial tensions and intolerance in America today, performed for an audience that blindly clapped and sung along with the same indifference that his lyrics served to confront. They consumed Kendrick instead of considering him, hearing the music and not seeing the man behind it. It was Du Bois' "double-consciousness" concept manifested, displaying Kendrick's distinct "two-ness"—"an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body"[1]— in a venue purporting to engender cohesion. Somehow, the urgency of Du Bois' 1903 pronouncement decrying an inability to unify his two identities (that "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"[2]) hasn't dissipated in the century since, as made clear by Lamar's stirring performance—one which transcended the taxonomy of the music genre and modernized DuBois' theory in the process. For just as DuBois' "double consciousness" postulation explained both the institutional and internalized injustices inherent in being a black person in America in 1903, I would argue that Lamar's 2018 Grammy's performance can be viewed as a new conceptual framework for understanding that same confliction present in the world today.

To begin, I will provide a brief survey of several different interpretations of Du Bois' "double consciousness" concept, as well as an argument from an opposing perspective. For in recent decades, scholars as diverse as Adolph Reed, Nahum Chandler, and Lewis Gordon have all presented powerful and unique arguments as to their own understanding of Du Boisian double-consciousness, but for the sake of this essay I will utilize Gordon's multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary definition for its flexibility, breadth, and cogency of message. In his work, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy,*[3] Gordon navigates double-consciousness from the perspective of four unique fields: (1) *psychologically*,[4] (2) *socially*,[5] (3) *epistemologically*,[6] and (4) *phenomenologically.*[7] In addition to these, I would like to contribute a fifth categorization: (5) how *culturally and commercially*, double-consciousness demonstrates how "blackness" as a form of cultural currency may be appropriated and consumed by the majority class, wholly divorced from the black bodies from which it originated and utilized freely and indiscriminately for capitalistic gain. Viewing Kendrick's Grammy's performance in light of

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[1] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 4.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Lewis R. Gordon, *Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy: An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78-79.
[4] "one's self-image is entirely a function of how one is seen by others….the black self becomes, from this interpretation, a white point of view; it is as seen through the eyes of whites"
[5] the "double standards of citizenship" persist, "where the black individual who is born in a white and even light-skinned, black-majority society discovers that he or she is not fully a citizen…by virtue of being racially designated black"
[6] "the prevailing view in most disciplines of human study is to treat white people as the standard or norm…in effect, whites become 'universal' and non-whites 'particular'"
[7] "consciousnesses that manifest themselves in double consciousness are…consciousness of how mainstream society sees itself…and consciousness of its contradictions."

these categorical distinctions, I believe that the three songs selected for his set each exemplify the modernization of one of these characteristics, operating as a rebuttal to the ideology of a post-racial society and refutation of the current political and social climate—demonstrating "DNA" as a *psychological* argument, "XXX" as *social*, and "King's Dead" as *cultural and commercial*.

However, not everyone would agree with the premise upon which the position of double-consciousness stands—that there remains an irreconcilable divide, a cultural chasm, between being black and being American, one that can't be bridged by any actions, aesthetic adjustments, or social advancements. For example, Trey Ellis, in his cultural manifesto, "The New Black Aesthetic," argues for the emergence of "a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, [who] can also navigate easily in the white world"[8]—a world in which "racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages… not saying racism doesn't exist…just saying it's not an excuse."[9] However, I (along with many other cultural critics, including professors Hua Hsu[10] and Habiba Ibrahim[11]) would argue that not only is Ellis' assertion optimistic,[12] short-sighted,[13] and uninformed at best—and privileged,[14] elitist,[15] and ahistorical[16] at worst—but that his most dangerous point attempts to repurpose and rebrand cultural appropriation and the consumption of artists' (like Kendrick's) "unmitigated blackness"[17] not only as inevitable, but as productive. Ellis argues that "the explosion of rap artists [demonstrates that] the world is not only now accustomed to black faces in the arts, but also hungers for us;"[18] yet, instead of articulating this privileged "hungering" as a degradative consequence of double-consciousness, he sees it as an indicator of progress. In reality, however, the unmitigated consumption of rap artists by a country concurrently spurning the rights and equality of the very people that create it is not only hypocritical, but toxic behavior that should be condemned and not praised.

Having addressed the history and criticism of double-consciousness, I will now begin an analysis of the individual songs from his performance, starting with the biting and conflicted verbal sparring of "DNA." As stated previously, "DNA" represents a modernized version of the *psychological* argument of Du Boisian double-consciousness, wherein—despite what Du Bois referred to as the desire "to merge his double self into a better and truer self"[19]—black people are so stifled by systemic oppression at both the internal and institutional level that they lack the basic human freedom of pure self-reflexivity, the ability to see themselves through a uniquely black lens. Instead, they are relegated to the psychological processing of life from the "eyes of whites."[20] Kendrick's verses verbalize this perceptive incompatibility, lyrically debating his duality over a correspondingly

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[8] Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo: Published by the Johns Hopkins University Press*, no. 38 (Winter 1989): 235.
[9] Ibid., 240.
[10] Hua Hsu, "No Compromises," The New Yorker, October 2, 2017.
[11] Habiba Ibrahim, "'It's a Kind of Destiny:' The Cultural Mulatto in 'The New Black Aesthetic' and Sarah Phillips," *Saint Joseph's University Review* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 21-28.
[12] "This would be a generation of 'cultural mulattos'…a kind of hopeful, flexible, and self-empowered embodiment of W. E. B. DuBois's 'double consciousness.' If only it were so simple" (Hsu).
[13] The essay makes an offhanded attempt to suture a complicated trajectory of blackness fraught with intraracial tensions and large-scale struggles with a postmodern perspective that decides not to take history too seriously" (Ibrahim, 23).
[14] "Though even [the parents of members of the New Black Aesthetic] themselves might not have arrived at the promised land completely freed from a slave mentality, they thoroughly shielded us from its vestiges" (Ellis, 236).
[15] "'It's going to be a real challenge for people in our little group to make sure that our movement isn't a little elitist, avant-garde thing'…however, at least for now, that is exactly what it is" (Ellis, 240).
[16] "In fact, most of the big-name rappers are middle-class black kids" (Ellis, 240).
[17] Hsu, "No Compromises."
[18] Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 237.
[19] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 4.
[20] Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy,* 78.

discordant beat, as warring ideals of blackness[21] (the characteristics he perceives to constitute his DNA as well as the ideals that the white lens propagates) compete with one another for authority.[22] Over the course of his verse, Kendrick, according to music critic Brian Josephs in a piece for *SPIN Magazine*, "pivots for a subversive take on Du Bois' double consciousness, wildly staring at the nation's accusatory lens: 'Sex money murder, our DNA!'…Here, racism isn't inhumane; it's blasphemous."[23] Unlike Ellis, who sees racism as an inevitable impediment capable of being navigated around, Kendrick—like Du Bois before him—sees it as a damnable schism between his own self-perception and that of the nation he lives in. He maintains Du Bois' psychological confliction of self, reaffirming the burden of the white point-of-view, but updates the lens to reflect the current stereotypes of the modern era. His "DNA" may be conflicted, tormented by a racially-motivated cognitive dissonance, but he will not accept the accusatory lens under which society views him. Instead, he will write his own narrative.

Additionally, Kendrick's live rendition of "XXX" revealed and reviled that "double standard of citizenship"[24]—the question of "why being black [is] treated as antipathetic to being an American"[25] that Du Bois originally asked with the evocative, "How does it feel do be a problem?"[26] The track breaks from convention both formally and lyrically, demonstrating Kendrick's desire to assert that although there is a double standard of citizenship in which the black man "is not treated as or taken seriously as a citizen,"[27] he will not accept but will actively fight these injustices using his platform. For although historically "rap music is explicitly oppositional, [but] also housed in a structure designed to bypass the limitations of an oppositional stance…[as] rhythm is the vehicle of this transcendence,"[28] "XXX" purposefully spurns any formal semblance of that rhythm, coherence, or sense of comfort in order to magnify and mirror its opposition sonically: the beat is warped and somewhat grating, at times chaotic, immediate, and panicked while elsewhere distant and laidback. Lyrically, the performance is bookended with two verses by U2 lamenting what America is[29] versus what it could be,[30] crafting a potent argument against the consistent, unified "we" America often prefers to be portrayed as. For, Kendrick recognizes, just as Du Bois originally expressed in the aftermath of the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling, that citizenship still does not apply equally to all people. It is a *privilege* and not the "right" it often masquerades as. "XXX" therefore, through form and content, acts as a rebellion and a vengeful[31] admonition of that hypocrisy, offering a revamped Du Boisan social critique situated in double-consciousness.

Finally, Kendrick's performance of the concluding verse of "King's Dead" from the *Black Panther* soundtrack acts as a final rebuttal to the idea of his "blackness" as a cultural currency capable of being cultivated and consumed by white audiences for capitalistic gain. Kendrick recognizes both

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[21] "Tell me when destruction gonna be my fate / Gonna be your fate, gonna be our faith / Peace to the world, let it rotate / Sex, money, murder — our DNA"
[22] "My DNA not for imitation / Your DNA an abomination"
[23] Brian Josephs, "Review: On DAMN., Kendrick Lamar Is Not Your Prophet," *SPIN Magazine*, April 17, 2017.
[24] Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy,* 78.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2.
[27] Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy,* 78.
[28] Gregory Stephens, "Rap Music's Double-Voiced Discourse: A Crossroads for Interracial Communication," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (July 1991): 79.
[29] "America, God bless you if it's good to you /America, please take my hand / Can you help me underst—"
[30] "It's not a place / This country is to me a sound / Of drum and bass / It's not a place / This country is to me a thought / That offers grace / For every welcome that is sought"
[31] "Ain't no Black Power when your baby killed by a coward / I can't even keep the peace, don't you fuck with one of ours / It be murder in the street, it be bodies in the hour"

the irony and reach of his platform, as an artist whose music—"blanketed in darkness, largely uninterested in feelings of joyful catharsis"[32]—condemns, yet is "prized by [the very] establishment that he would prefer to destroy."[33] His verse, couched in irony and performed on CBS in the most coveted time slot for an imperceptive audience of unconscious admirers, explicitly echoes Du Bois' affirmation that he "wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world,"[34] listing a litany of his attributes that can not be consumed, appropriated, or negotiated for by any means.[35] His blackness is very much on display, but he reasserts that it is not for sale. Here, Kendrick is at his most scathing and unapologetic, displaying the cracks created by his double-consciousness in hopes to confirm and then combat them—acting as both the martyr and messiah, at once "a critic and a prophet"[36]—fully embodying a modernized extension of Du Boisian thought.

Overall, if provided more space, I would have the opportunity to expand my argument beyond an articulation of just the sonic and linguistic aspects of Kendrick's performance,[37] but am confident that an analysis of the lyrics alone provided more than enough evidence and justification to support my argument. For Kendrick's words—although often mistaken for being "just music" or "simply entertainment" by undiscerning audiences—are as stirring, evocative, and eloquent as that of any writer or academic, and represent a modernized continuation of the revolutionary ideals of W.E.B. Du Bois. Transcending the taxonomy of music and serving as a necessary and urgent critique of the current cultural landscape, Kendrick's ideas are revolutionary in form, but reiterative and reminiscent of Du Bois in nature, effectively carrying the torch of "unmitigated blackness"[38] that shone as brightly in 1903 as it does today, while imbuing his lasting words with the reinvigorated life necessary for affecting the next generation.

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[32] Hua Hsu, "No Compromises."
[33] Ibid.
[34] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 4.
[35] "Burn integrity, burn your pedigree, burn your feelings, burn your culture / burn your moral, burn your family, burn your tribe / Burn your land, burn your children, burn your wives / Who am I? / Not your father, not your brother / Not your reason, not your future / Not your comfort, not your reverence, not your glory / Not your heaven, not your angel, not your spirit / Not your message, not your freedom / Not your people, not your neighbor / Not your baby, not your equal / Not the title y'all want me under /All hail King Killmonger"
[36] Hua Hsu, "No Compromises."
[37] Focusing on the aesthetics of the set design (i.e., raging flames reminiscent of the damnation reigned down upon Job in the Bible), the paratextual elements ("This is a satire by Kendrick Lamar"), the guest performers ("Hi. I'm Dave Chappelle. And I just wanted to remind the audience that the only thing more frightening than watching a black man be honest in America is being an honest black man in America. Sorry for the interruption. Please continue."), the symbolic wardrobe and movements of backup dancers (each dressed in depersonalizing red clothing, acting as metaphors for different attributes of the black experience in America), the medium on which it was displayed (the Grammy Awards on CBS, an awards show historically chastised for its lack of inclusivity, diversity, and open-mindedness), and the recent cultural reception the performance received—just to name a few.
[38] Hua Hsu, "No Compromises."

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