

Kendrick Lamar's Halftime Show: A Cultural Moment

Anonymous

Department of English, Anoka Ramsey Community College

ENGL 1121: College Writing and Critical Reading

Professor Chris McCarthy

March 10, 2025

On the biggest stage in the U.S., Kendrick Lamar shocked the world with his halftime performance at this year's Superbowl. In his performance he showed lots of important messages that the country had to hear. On the surface people took it as him centering his performance on his issues with Drake. Others had issues with the underlying meaning that the performance had and the symbolism it showed. A youtuber by the name of Jason Whitlock had similar thoughts. He says that that it was "The WORST Superbowl Halftime Show of All Time". He goes on to complain about all the different issues he believes that the halftime show has and makes some very controversial remarks. He believes that it was anti-American and that Kendrick was not popular enough to be performing. I disagree with mostly all of his takes and want to show people what his halftime show really meant. This is important to me because as a black man living in America, Kendrick's performance pushed the boundaries as to what a halftime show could be. That shows me, and lots of other people in the US, that we should stand up for what we believe in and make a change.

I want to begin by saying, Jason Whitlock is no stranger to controversial takes. His entire channel is made up with him talking about social issues and claims to "challenge groupthink mandated by elites" (Whitlock, 2025). Many of his controversial takes have to do with race and politics. In his video he claims that the halftime show was targeted towards young people. He states that that the performance was trying to "groom" young people by pushing a "subversive anti-American agenda" (Whitlock, 2025). Unlike Whitlock's argument that the performance was subversive or anti-American, the reality is that the halftime show did not exactly attack American values. Throughout Kendrick Lamars entire career as an artist, he

has been critical of systematic issues like racism and inequality. His halftime show was another case of that. It wasn't anti-American it was anti-racism. Whitlocks point that the show was trying to "groom" kids into being anti-American was him trying to dismiss the importance of talking about America's history and society.

During the halftime show, Samuel L. Jackson made an appearance as "Uncle Sam". He was the narrator of Kendricks performance and spoke throughout the whole thing. Whitlock criticizes Samuel L. Jackson for this. He argues once again, that it was part of an "anti-American agenda" (Whitlock, 2025). He believes that Jackson's performance as "Uncle Sam" was more than just for theatrics but it being a way to mock American values. He believes that Jackson playing "Uncle Sam" Was really him playing one of his more well-known roles as Stephen in Django Unchained. Stephen is a slave that takes orders from a master. Whitlock believes that Jacksons performance as Uncle Sam who is usually seen as a patriotic symbol, was a way to undermine American ideals.

All though I also believe that Jacksons role in the performance was reminiscent of his role as Stephen in Django, I believe it was for other reasons. He wasn't undermining American ideals but instead was mocking certain people expectations as to how a halftime show should look. After Kendricks performance of his song squabble up, Jackson said "Too loud, too reckless, too ghetto". Throughout the show, Jackson was making these little remarks about Kendrick. He was challenging him, but instead of stopping and listening to Jacksons remarks, he kept on performing.

Another thing Whitlock spoke about was Kendrick Lamar's music in general. Stating it to be "Angry" or "Ghetto" (Whitlock, 2025). Not only is this just blatantly racist, but this also seriously undermines the significance and depth of hip-hop as a genre and how much cultural relevance it has. "Hip-hop is more than just music; it's a voice for the voiceless, a powerful force for social change" (Khan, 2023). For a while, underprivileged communities have been using hip-hop as an expression to communicate what they go through. Their hardships, goals, and the reality they live in. Hip-hop has given a platform to people whose experiences have been put to the side constantly and been undervalued by the public eye. It shows problems like racism, poverty, inequality, and police brutality. These issues are a reality for people in these underprivileged communities. Calling Kendrick Lamar's music "angry". It disregards how in-depth he goes into the issues that people face.

Kendrick's music is far from being a straightforward way to express his displeasure. His songs often talk about very serious social and political issues, combining personal stories with more general issues in society. For example, in his song "Alright", Kendrick "talks about the music industry, police brutality and his own weaknesses" (London, 2023). As Amanda London (2023) says "institutionalized racism and police brutality may be prevalent in modern day America, yet Kendrick is hopeful. He tells his listener that if they rely on God, everything will be fine". Saying his music is just "ghetto" undermines the way Kendrick uses his music to try and get listeners to talk about the reality of the world around them. I can agree with what London said. I speak for lots of other young black men in the world when I say that Kendrick's music connects with me on a deeper level. He talks about real issues that are prevalent in today's

world and issues that people like me have gone through. He doesn't just make music, he makes art that touches the soul.

Whitlock doesn't believe that Kendrick was popular enough to perform at the Superbowl halftime show. Whitlock claims that popular pop stars like Michael Jackson and Justin Timberlake made their halftime shows more watchable and enjoyable to people all around the country. He says that they “have so many crossovers major songs” that “when they start to play them, the audience goes ‘oh, I remember that song’ and that they start screaming and clapping.” (Whitlock, 2025). This undermines how popular Kendrick truly is. He has won 22 Grammys, the most monthly listeners on Spotify of all time for a rapper, and he's won a Pulitzer Prize. According to Whitlock, these artists are easier to recognize and more available to a wider audience. And yes, he is right about the popularity of pop music, he doesn't recognize a major difference. Pop artists don't usually talk about the same social and political issues in their music that Kendrick Lamar does. Pop music usually talks about love and relationships, while Kendrick's work talks more about complex topics such as race, inequality, and systemic oppression.

Unlike pop singers, Whitlocks says that Kendrick Lamar's performance “was the most confusing, boring, deceptively angry thing we've ever seen.” He says that “90% of the audience has no idea what Kendrick Lamar is saying or doing” (Whitlock, 2025), basically saying that most of the audience wasn't able to understand Kendrick's music and the message behind it. Not only is he defaulting that white culture is the dominate culture, which is racist, but this also ignores the fact that Kendrick's performance showed lots of cultural symbolism, which some

people might not get right away. I think this was a good thing though. Kendrick took advantage of the Superbowl's massive audience to share important issues of racism and inequality.

Kendrick's performance had many messages in it that some may not understand. An example would be when he said, "The revolution is about to be televised; You picked the right time but the wrong guy." Like Cheyanne M. Daniels (2025) says "The line was in reference to Gil Scott-Heron's 1971 poem 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,' which argues that change does not come from corporations but individuals, and that the media will not showcase the violence of racism." When Lamar says, "You picked the right time but the wrong guy." Many people believe that he was talking about Donald Trump. "Lamar has been known to criticize the president, including in his songs 'The Heart Part 4' and 'XXX' "(Daniels, 2025).

In conclusion, I think Kendrick Lamar's halftime show was far from being a disaster. It was one of the most important performances we have had in a while. Jason Whitlock might think that Kendrick's music is "Ghetto" and "Angry", but I think his music talks about important and addresses problems in society such as racism and inequality. With this essay I wanted people to understand that sometimes it's more than just a performance for entertainment. It was a lesson and a message to the country. As a black man living in America, it meant a lot to me that people like him have the courage to stand in front of millions and try and make a change. I recommend people watch his halftime show again. Try to really pay attention and listen to what he says. Look at the performance and really take in the importance that it displays.

References

Khan, A. (n.d.). Why Is Hip-Hop Music Important (History, Facts, and Influence) *Musicfy*.

<https://musicfy.lol/blog/why-is-hip-hop-music-important>

Daniels, C. M. (2025, February 11). 6 hidden messages in Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl

Performance. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/blogs/in-the-know/5135981-kendrick-lamar-super-bowl-halftime-performance-serena-williams-drake-not-like-us/>

London, A. (2023, November 27). "alright" by Kendrick Lamar. *Song Meanings and Facts*.

<https://www.songmeaningsandfacts.com/alright-by-kendrick-lamar/>

Whitlock, J. (2025, February 10). Kendrick Lamar: The WORST Super Bowl Halftime Show of All

Time [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toeo0kJ7BFo>