

Exploring Black Music As A Form Of Cultural Expression: A Textual Analysis On The Select Lyrics In Black Music

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Abstract

It is strongly believed by everyone that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Racism refers to not only particular ideologies and intentional, oppressive practices based on them but also to racializing discourses and practices by which racial hierarchies and essentialist, oppressive ideas of some people and cultures are produced and reproduced. In cultural studies, race is a socially constructed, discursive category (Taylor and Francis). The ill-treatment of Black people in the United States is among the most horrific and terrible treatments of a race in global history. In North America, Black music was a method for early slaves to express themselves and communicate while being forcefully transferred and restricted from participating in cultural activities. Black music encompasses not just sounds from the Black experience in the United States but also a worldwide Black experience that reaches from Africa to America. Black recording artists have always used music to expose the dangers of racism and police violence. Recent events like the police shootings of innocent Black people highlighted the perils of racial injustice and oppression. This has stoked their zeal for using music as a sounding board for change, keeping with the history of Black art reflecting the times.

This study tries to comprehend the motivation behind Black cultural expression to shed light on the idea of racism in lyrics written by Black composers in Black music. The songs are a perfect fit for audio research since it emphasises how Black music and culture are expressed via the use of the background scores in the songs.

(Keywords: Racism, ideologies, oppression, hierarchies, Black music, culture)

The purpose of Black music is to portray urban landscapes via amplified noises, societal issues, and cultural pride. It can be traced back to the days of slavery. While slaves were working in the fields, one could hear them singing songs to entertain themselves. They used these songs to tell their life stories. Levi R. Bryant defines music not as a language, but as a marked-based, problem-solving method such as mathematics (Ashby and Arved 4). Music provided an escape from the toils and responsibilities of enslavement. Slaves were prevented from using the drums as their masters felt that drums might be used

to carry signals to neighbouring estates. Despite this, they discovered a means to save their souls through the power of their instruments. Some, such as the banjo, were created by their hands, while others, such as the fiddle, were supplied by their masters. They sang not for joy or pleasure, but for the yearning to be free. Although their hands and feet were frequently tied, their souls remained free.

Despite the abolition of slavery, racial prejudice against Blacks persisted. They experienced impoverishment since they were immigrants and slaves. As a result, activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Harriet Tubman, and Desmond Tutu represented the whole Black community in their battle for civil rights. They tried to raise public awareness about how unfairly Black people were treated and demanded reform. This prompted numerous musicians, including James Brown, Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder, Sam Cooke, Nina Simone, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar, to speak out about racial inequality in society. Martin Luther King Jr. held music in the highest regard as a tool for social transformation. Music was a major part of the civil rights struggle. People marched to songs of liberation, and records like “A Change is Gonna Come” and “Blowin' in the Wind” by singers like Sam Cooke and Bob Dylan helped spread the message. King expressed the following about the significance of music in our lives in a piece he composed for the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival:

“God has wrought many things out of oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create, and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment and many different situations.”

Considering the persistence of severe racial prejudice in the United States, the focus of this research has been placed on Black music. The barbaric deaths of African Americans such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery are painful reminders of the extent to which racism has been prevailing in the United States. As a result, the researcher believes that it is an issue that should be revisited. The Black Lives Matter movement served as a wake-up call to the world to be more humane, but there has been little progress. It is necessary to explore Black music and Black culture to remind society of the sacrifices made by revolutionary activists to make the world a better place to live.

The researchers intend to analyze the aspect of racism because the novels of Toni Morrison had greatly influenced them and particularly the novel *The Bluest Eye*, and the character of Pecola Breedlove. Her story is an African-American female tragedy. The novel is a haunting story of a black girl, the scorned and rejected girl Pecola Breedlove, who longs to be beautiful and to be loved and who wants to have blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty. She strongly believes that such eyes alone would make her beautiful, acceptable, and

admirable. She has struggled to make friends since other children thought her skin colour is dark and strange and refused to play with her. As a result, her quest for blue eyes culminates in madness. Thus, the struggles of the Black community have made the researchers choose the topic.

Aims and Objectives

- To study the history of Black music.
- To examine the soundscapes as a reflection of Black culture and the discrimination faced by the Black community through Black music.
- To understand the utmost racial discrimination faced by Blacks from times immemorial.
- To examine the lyrics of Black music to have a thorough knowledge of the racism that permeates society.

Literature Review

The term racial discrimination includes every form of differentiation in behaviour based on race. The form of racial discrimination is evident in the segregation of certain racial residences in the big cities of the West and the East. There has been a lot of research on racism, the Black community, and Black Music. But most of that research has focused on specific notions, with very few studies discussing this issue on a broader scale. In the journal “Music and Anti-Racism: Musicians’ Involvement in Anti-Racist Spaces”, the study's notion is that the linkages between music and (anti-) racism are more complicated and multifaceted than has been demonstrated in studies focused on the histories of certain music genres and their relationships to specific political movements. First, the agency of artists and the functions of music in what might be termed as “spaces for anti-racism” in Finnish society during the last several years, when racism and anti-racism have been regular issues of public debate, was investigated.

Second, anti-racist discourses and practices were detected in several contexts of Finnish popular music. The above study has suggested the need for further research on the potential of music in the fight against racism. The key drawback of the study is that it only examined Finnish music.

In the journal “An Analysis of Racism as Reflected in Bob Marley’s Songs: War and Buffalo Soldier”, the study emphasized to analyse of Bob Marley's songs ‘War’ and ‘Buffalo Soldier’ to learn about the social existence of African people as they deal with racial injustice. This study aimed to provide answers to two questions: What songs of Bob Marley's depict prejudices and how the battle for Black people's rights is represented in the lyrics? Marley stresses in his songs that a person's race is the main factor influencing their characteristics and abilities.

The main limitation of the study is that it only examined a small sample of songs by a single artist.

The thesis “From Bandannas to Berets: A Critical Analysis of Beyoncé’s “Formation” Music Video” demonstrated how Beyoncé confronts the sexist and racial mainstream worldview in the United States by using a critical/cultural studies viewpoint lens. The essay critically examined the lyrical and visual elements of “Formation,” challenging the messages about race and gender as well as the portrayal of Black women. The results showed that black women have power and domination in society because the songs' words

and imagery recycle stereotyped stereotypes of black women. This directly challenges white androcentric power. As mediated texts re-present everyday reality, the consequences of analysing the way Beyoncé conveys what and how it means to be a Black Woman in "Formation" enrich and explain the social, political, and economic realities of Black Women in the United States today. The only drawback of this research is that it draws only on Beyoncé’s song “Formation”.

Instead of concentrating on one geographic area, a set of songs by a single Black artist and single song, the current study examines Black music. By doing this, it also discusses the necessity of reviving the Black cultural traditions and practices that are being lost because of modernization.

Theoretical Framework

The primary method of research used for the study is qualitative research. The critical/cultural studies approach is a qualitative methodology that encompasses five significant concepts: culture, power, ideology, the dominant ideology, and hegemony (Barker, C 224). Because cultures are transformational and interact, struggle, and change with their environments, analysing a culture requires a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour. Therefore, this technique focuses on how we view the world, other people, and ourselves.

The social construction of culture involves shared meanings. Therefore, our culture is symbolically produced and reproduced through communication, which is fluid, ever-changing, and active (Fiske, J). Focusing on the idea of racism in Black music, the researcher hopes to gain a deeper knowledge of Black culture by employing textual analysis.

The idea of power is closely tied to culture and is another crucial aspect of critical/cultural studies. Privilege and oppression are revealed when the issue of power is examined, and a hierarchy of power is identified within a culture. This information sheds light on the historical and current social power structures of that culture. Not only does power have a direct impact on different cultures within a society, but it also has a direct impact on the prevailing ideology that individuals in that culture adhere to. As a result, the critical/cultural studies approach relies on power dynamics to express a culture's dominant ideology.

Critical/cultural scholars may better understand and investigate the effects of representations of race, gender, and class displayed in mediated communication by identifying, recognising, and comprehending these fundamental ideas and their relationships to one another. This research will examine numerous song lyrics from Black music in order to explain how racial prejudice against Blacks has been occurring. By analysing the background score in songs of various genres, the music genres that come under the heading of "Black music" will be explored in order to gain a deeper knowledge of Black culture. Finally, the influence of Black music on the political and social context in which it was created will be examined. Therefore, Black culture will be explored to urge people to be a little more empathetic and to remind them of the prejudice that the Black minority has been facing over the centuries.

Origin of the Black Music

This chapter unravels the birth of Black music with the beginning of slavery between the 10th-15th centuries. The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the forced migration of millions of Africans to the Americas, where they were later sold into slavery, cannot be separated from Black music. It began to represent urban settings through intensified sounds, societal issues, and musical expressions of cultural pride.

Spirituals are one of the earliest genres of Black music. According to a May 2012 PBS interview, they were religious folk songs, often rooted in biblical stories, woven together, sung, and passed along from one slave generation to another. They emphasized the tremendous suffering that African Americans who were held in slavery from the 17th century to the 1860s experienced; for many, freedom only changed the nature of slavery, not its continuation. The spirituals songcraft gave rise to several other derivative musical genres. One example is gospel music, which is performed to honour one's connection to Christ.

Black Americans created the musical style known as "rhythm and blues," or "R&B," in the 1940s. It developed alongside rock 'n' roll and draws influences from gospel, jazz, folk, and traditional blues music. Compared to the 1950s and 1960s, the modern R&B scene has undergone significant change, yet it still ranks among the most widely-listened-to subgenres of American music.

The late 19th and early 20th century saw the development of Jazz music in the African-American neighbourhoods of New Orleans, Louisiana. Ragtime and blues served as its foundations. Swing and blue notes, intricate chords, call-and-response singing, polyrhythms, and improvisation are its distinguishing features.

Blues is secular folk music created in the early 20th century. It is characterized by expressive "microtonal" pitch inflections, a three-line textual stanza of the form AAB, and a 12-measure form. Blues artists communicate their emotions through lyrical rather than narrative blues songs; they do not narrate stories. As it has been demonstrated, the chapter discusses the history of black music, some of its subgenres, and the rationale for its evolution.

Contextualizing the Racist Elements in Lyrics

This chapter analyses the lyrics of songs chosen from Black music that talk about police brutality, racism, and discrimination against blacks. The first song of choice is “This is America” by Childish Gambino. The main theme is about firearms and violence in America and how Americans cope with them and consume them as entertainment on one hand and as a topic of the national discussion on the other. Stephon Clark, who was killed by Sacramento police in 2018 because they believed he was wielding a gun when, in fact, he was holding a phone, may be linked to phrases like “celly” and “tool” in the song. Other similar references to instances of racial prejudice against Blacks is seen throughout the song.

The chapter also examines the lyrics to H.E.R.’s song “I Can't Breathe.” This song was specifically created in response to the demonstrations that have engulfed America since George Floyd was killed. And just before he passed away, he was heard saying, “I can't breathe.” The song also serves as a metaphor for the institutionalized prejudice that African Americans endure.

The song “Black Parade” by Beyonce supports Black activism and acts as a celebration of Black culture. The singer honoured her African roots by making references to the "Ankh," an ancient Egyptian sign, and "Oshun," a Nigerian Yoruba deity of femininity, love, sexuality, and fertility. The word “picket sign” refers to the protests that rose due to the inhuman killing of George Floyd. Picket fences are often related to middle-class, white, suburban communities, which have traditionally excluded Black people for far too long. Its inclusion in the song's lyrics implies that she is dedicated to tearing down the white supremacist institutions that have long permitted systematic racism and discrimination to exist. Beyonce also sings an ode to Black hair in the song.

To underline the idea of racism the Black community encounters daily, the chapter decodes the lyrics of select songs by Black musicians, including Childish Gambino, Beyonce, H.E.R., and others.

Analyzing the Soundscapes in Black Music

To investigate the soundscapes and comprehend the motivation behind their use, this chapter examines the sounds in a few songs of Black music. A soundscape is a mélange of musical and non-musical sounds. It involves the use of sounds to produce a mood or atmosphere in a play or film. The purpose of soundscapes is to enhance the visuals and create a natural effect in an artificial setting.

John Legend's "Preach" addresses a multitude of unsettling societal concerns affecting America, including senseless violence, police brutality, and mass immigration, as shown in the music video. The production is gloomy from the start, which establishes the mood. The deep, nuanced vocals of John Legend give this song the distinction it deserves, regardless of how fantastic the atmosphere, music, and feel are. Additionally, John receives assistance in the form of backup vocals, which highlights his strong lead during the pre-chorus and chorus positions. The chorus is completely "amped-up" and is loud and catchy reflecting the overwhelming feeling the protagonist in the story has. Beyoncé's "Formation" is an ode to Black women around the world. "Formation" is an intricate and meticulous work of art that illuminates the dark past of Black Americans in the United States, while also conveying the hope for a brighter and just future for younger generations. A powerful bass rhythm and rubbery synthesizers make up the song's minimalistic beat, which eventually gives way to a marching band- and military-inspired horn-infused stomp. This created an atmosphere of suspense for the audience. The vocalist used a variety of delivery techniques throughout the song; the introduction is spoken in a gruff, muttered voice that changes as the song goes on to a half-rapped, half-sung rhythm. This was done to grab the attention of the audience at particular wordings of the song. Similarly, the soundscapes in other songs of Black music will be analysed in this chapter.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of lyrics and soundscapes in select songs of Black music, Black culture and the racial discrimination faced by the Black community will be studied. A better understanding of Black culture will be made possible by the use of a cultural studies method that considers important concepts like culture, power, ideology, dominant ideology, and hegemony into account. Due to the urgent need for

it created by the alarming levels of violence against Black people in the present, the researcher will be able to reexamine the concept of racism.

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