

“From Criticism to Political Activism: Hip Hop Music and the Black Lives Matter movement”



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Polk, Christopher. Kendrick Lamar performing on top of a decorated police car in front of the American flag. Digital image. *Rolling Stone*. Getty, 16 Dec. 2015. Web. 2 May 2018.

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates commentary on racism and stereotypes by three contemporary hip hop artists and their relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. It analyzes the lyrical and visual content of three case studies in relation to protest in a supposedly post-racial society. Hip hop is primarily known for its misogynistic lyrics and the glorification of drugs and violence, while the genre can offer highly critical pieces of music. This thesis will draw on theories by Tricia Rose, Murray Forman, Ian Peddie, W.J.T. Mitchell, Stuart Hall, Richard Dyer, Kitwana Bakari and bell hooks. The three case studies presented are "The Story of O.J." by Jay-Z from the album *4:44* (2017), "Black Skinhead" by Kanye West from the album *Yeezus* (2013) and "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar from the album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015). The focus will be on the following research question: How does hip hop fit in the Black Lives Matter-narrative and how do the personal perspectives of several key artists subvert racist contemporary stereotypes about African American men?

### Key Words:

Racism, stereotypes, popular culture, music, Black Lives Matter, protest, visual culture, hip hop, Jay-Z, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, African American.

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## Introduction

"Hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years," attorney and reporter Geraldo Rivera claimed in 2015 (Frydenlund). His reaction was a response to Kendrick Lamar's "Alright", a song known as the anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement (Henry). By now, hip hop has replaced rock as the most popular genre in America (Strachan). The genre has polarized audiences and academics. The focus is often on the misogynistic lyrics, excessive wealth, and the glorification of violence. Even Kanye West, one of the rappers this thesis will focus on, acknowledges that "generally rap is misogynistic" (Mokoena). While the critique on misogyny and violence is in many cases justified, there is not enough focus on the political aspect of hip hop. For years, hip hop has been critical of American society, and inspired many to take up protest against the racism, police brutality, and the overall disadvantage that African Americans suffer in U.S. society. In the age of the New Jim Crow (Alexander 1), and with the spark of the Black Lives Matter movement, I argue that hip hop is now more important than ever. With my thesis I want to prove that hip hop is more than the glorification of money, violence, and sex that the genre is known for. I argue that hip hop artists have produced songs of protest that have been highly influential among African Americans, as well as a mainstream audience. I will thus focus on the following research question: How does hip hop fit in the Black Lives Matter-narrative and how do the personal perspectives of several key artists subvert racist contemporary stereotypes about African American men? The primary focal point of this thesis will thus be on contemporary hip hop for which I have selected three key artists: Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar. All three artists come from entirely different backgrounds and represent different aspects of African American identity and culture. For Jay-Z, the focus will be on "The Story of O.J." from the album *4:44* (2017). For Kanye West, I have chosen the song "Black Skinhead" from the album *Yeezus* (2013), and for Kendrick Lamar I will look at "Alright" from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015).

### I.1 Defining hip hop

How can the genre 'hip hop' be defined and what are its characteristics? Even though the genre hip hop is sometimes seen as a modern evolution of musical styles that began during the 1990s with the rise of the N.W.A., the music and culture already started during the mid-1970s in the South Bronx (Abe 263). With the release of the song "Rapper's Delight" The Sugar Hill Gang launched the genre into the public sphere. The song was regarded as innovative for establishing a new culture (Price

13). Since then, hip hop has had a tremendous amount of influence both around the world (Abe 264) and in popular culture itself (Price 16). Abe argues that this is because of two factors:

"First, is the idea that while never recognized as such, Black culture in general has always been the avant-garde of American culture. Second, is the fact that it has always maintained a position between the poles of fear and entertainment in its relationship to the White mainstream." (264)

The influence of hip hop is not limited to music, but also to vocabulary, fashion, and a general mentality.

There are four characteristics attributed to hip hop. First, is rapping and MCing, which is perhaps the most recognizable. The second is DJing. This phenomenon seems to be in decline, although in more low key sets most rappers have a DJ in the back supporting them. The third characteristic is breakdancing, something very reminiscent of the 1980s. The dance style has since made its way for other forms such as 'twerking' and is very prone to trends. Finally, the fourth is graffiti, a form of art that is currently separated from hip hop (Abe 265). Each of these elements of hip hop culture present a form of self-expression and offers a highly personal performance (Price 21).

According to scholar Tricia Rose, "hip hop is in a terrible crisis" caused by the polarizing nature of the genre(1). At the center of the debate surrounding hip hop, the primary focus is on the "gangsta" element of the culture, which includes the glorification of violence, criminal activity, and misogyny (Rose 3). As hip hop continues to grow as both a genre and a culture, the debate whether hip hop is a positive or negative influence continues (Rose 3). Rose's research found that critics of hip hop often use the genre as proof that African Americans are culpable for their own circumstances, rather than acknowledging the larger structural influences that have afflicted black communities (Rose 9). On the opposite end of the spectrum, hip hop can be regarded as the voice for many young African Americans in the United States (Bakari 197). The music, as well as the culture, serves as an important force in the quest for identity. In addition, hip hop provides convincing accounts of the struggles presented in daily life for many African Americans and the genre is deeply rooted in political activism (Forman par. 2).

Contemporary hip hop does not resemble early or 'original' hip hop. I want to argue in my thesis that it has evolved into a political mouthpiece and cannot merely be reduced to the glorification of wealth, violence, and sex that it is often known for. While most of the academic discourse focus on the previous mentioned four aspects of hip hop, I believe that only two of those are relevant today. The culture of hip hop has been narrowed down to rapping only. DJing has

become more of a supporting act, and perhaps been replaced by producing songs. I have thus chosen to investigate songs released after 2010 to focus solely on music that has impacted the current generation. Hence this thesis will not delve deeper into the world of breakdancing, DJing and the art of graffiti. Instead, I will focus on the current relation between hip hop and racism, the Black Lives Matter-movement, and African American identity.

## I.2 The Black Lives Matter-movement and The New Jim Crow

The Black Lives Matter-movement started as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter (Rickford 35). The hashtag was created by activists Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tomati in 2013 and grew after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. The slogan garnered more publicity and support during the Ferguson uprisings against police brutality (Rickford 35). The movement is characteristically very different to older movements such as the Civil Rights Movement. The leadership departs from that model of the singular charismatic leader such as Martin Luther King. Instead, the movement does not have one particular leader. Black Lives Matter is a grassroots movement and contains elements of spontaneity and self-organization (Rickford 37). Since the movement has that element of spontaneity, it allows the movement to have many different interpretations. The movement is hard to define, yet all encompassing because of this fact.

In addition to the Black Lives matter-movement, Michelle Alexander argues that the mass incarceration of African Americans is the New Jim Crow (Alexander 11). She finds that “the popular narrative that emphasizes the death of slavery and Jim Crow and celebrates the nation’s ‘triumph over race’ with the election of Barack Obama, is dangerously misguided. The colorblind public consensus that prevails in America today—i.e., the widespread belief that race no longer matters—has blinded us to the realities of race in our society and facilitates the emergence of the new caste system” (Alexander 11). She argues that the criminal justice system is inherently racist, finding that it is “perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the way it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans” (Alexander 2). America cannot be considered a post-racial society. The old Jim Crow has been abolished, yet the same mentality has returned with a new form of rules, hence the New Jim Crow.

Since the Black Lives Matter-movement and the New Jim Crow can be regarded as a recent phenomenon, this thesis will focus on three central artists with songs released after 2013.

### I.3 Jay-Z, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar

I will focus on three hip hop artists from three different backgrounds who offer three different perspectives on the current racial situation in the United States. I will investigate the works of Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar. All artists have proven to be highly critical of "America" and offer their own distinct way of showcasing this in their songs. I find it crucial to be familiar with their socio-political and cultural background in order to better understand the songs and the way these artists showcase their music.

Jay-Z can be considered as "one of the greatest living rappers" (Rolling Stone) and built a career "based on combining nimble, braggadocios and largely autobiographical rhymes with adventurous production that incorporates everything from snatches of classic R&B to Broadway show tunes to eighties electropop" (Rolling Stone). The rapper was born in Brooklyn's Marcy housing projects, and has had a 'traditional' hip hop background. His father walked out on him and his mother and eventually Jay began to earn a living by selling crack (Rolling Stone). His priorities began to shift in the late nineties as he and two neighborhood friends formed Roc-A-Fella records. Jay released his debut album *Reasonable Doubt* (1996) that went on to become "one of hip-hop's foundational records" (Rolling Stone).

Jay-Z released many albums over years, incorporating many styles and types of music, most notably the chorus of the song "Hard Knock Life" from the musical *Annie*. It became his first radio hit in 1998. He also released a collaborative album with Linkin Park and married R&B singer Beyonce Knowles, with whom he frequently works together. Throughout the years he won 21 Grammy's and has been nominated for a total of 74 times (grammys.com).

Down at his core, Jay-Z is a businessman, which is reflected in the song I have chosen to focus on in my thesis where he reflects on the longevity of wealth and making smart investments. "The Song of O.J." from the 2017 album *4:44* projects several African American male stereotypes, offering a new perspective on race in a supposedly post-racial society. The videoclip for the song is animated to the style of early 1930s Disney cartoons and depict a highly racist style of animation.

The second artist I chose to focus on is Kanye West. Kanye West is perhaps best known for his controversial and contradicting image. "He's arrogant but self-deprecating, materialistic but religious, remarkably rude but also sensitive," and truly lives for his art (Serpick). Even though he has been part of many controversies, including the infamous interruption of country singer Taylor Swift's speech at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards and claiming that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" during a telethon (qtd. in Strachan), as a rapper he consistently has put out

critically acclaimed albums and became "the most important new pop start of the 2000s" (Serpick). Or as West boldly claims: "the biggest rockstar of all time" (Payne).

While born in Atlanta, Georgia, Kanye West spent most of his childhood in Chicago, Illinois. He lived in the South Shore suburb with his mother Donda after she divorced his father. West came into contact with the protest at an early age as his father, a photojournalist, was a member of the Black Panthers (Serpick). In contrast to the other two artists, West did not grow up in the so-called "hood". His mother was the chairwoman of Chicago State University's English department and while West attended college for a year, he dropped out to pursue a music career (which eventually inspired the title and theme for his first album *The College Dropout* (2004)) (Serpick).

Before making it as a rapper, West was known for producing hip hop records and broke through after producing some songs for Jay-Z. His signature style were sped-up vocal snippets of old R&B songs, leading to a high pitched version of a once classic song. A near-fatal car crash left his jaw wired shut, and led him to record the song "Through the Wire", where he literally rapped through the wire. This put him on the map, and generated a lot of buzz for his first album *The College Dropout* (Serpick).

Over the years West released multiple records, had several number one hits, won 21 Grammy's, and experimented with very different styles of music. With *808s & Heartbreak* (2008) West changed the hip hop genre forever. On the record, West hardly rapped, did not swear once, and created an album that leaned more towards the pop genre rather than hip hop. In an article by Pitchfork, Jayson Greene found that "Young Thug would not exist as we know him without this album". Other artists inspired by this particular album include Future, Dej Loaf, Lil Durk, Chief Keef, Soulja Boy, The Weeknd, and Drake" (Greene).

West's most experimental album to date is *Yeezus* (2013). Looking back at the album, it was even called "ahead of its time" (Baker). The reactions to the album were mixed, as "[West] dropped this subversive record that nearly abandons all of the conventions of hip hop" (Baker). With industrialized instruments and a very minimal production on most songs, West presented something that had never been done in the hip hop genre before. This thesis will focus on one of the songs off the record: "Black Skinhead" (stylized as BLKKK SKKKN HEAD).

The final artist I want to discuss is Kendrick Lamar, an artist called "the most talented rapper of his generation" by Rolling Stone (Eells). He rose to fame with his album *good kid, m.A.A. city* (2012), and especially the critically acclaimed *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015). Over the years, he

has spoken out against police brutality, and one of his songs became an anthem to the Black Lives Matter-movement. He is thus highly important to discuss in this thesis.

Lamar grew up in Compton, the same neighborhood from which N.W.A. originated. In 2012, Lamar got signed to Dr. Dre and Eminem's label Aftermath. His debut album was nominated for seven Grammy Awards. In 2015, Lamar released his second album *To Pimp A Butterfly*, which "broke a Spotify record—being streamed more than 9.6 million times—within a week of its release. U.S. President Barack Obama declared that the single "How Much a Dollar Cost" was his favorite song of 2015" (Bauer). In response, the album was nominated for 11 Grammy's.

As a teenager, he had several run ins with the LAPD, but it was the murder on Trayvon Martin that inspired him to write his song "The Blacker the Berry" which deals with racialized self-hatred. One of his most well known songs is "Alright", which had a huge impact on the Black Lives Matter-movement. During a protest in 2015 at Cleve State University, a crowd of protesters began to chant the chorus of the song (Henry). Journalists have even suggested that "Alright" can be considered the new Black National Anthem (Harris). My thesis will hence focus on this song by Kendrick Lamar.

This thesis will thus discuss three songs by three different artists who, while are alike, are still widely different. I will analyze Jay-Z, a rapper from New York who sees himself of as much as a businessman as well as a musician. Then we have Kanye West, who comes from a middle class family in Chicago and puts his art above anything else. Finally, there is Kendrick Lamar, a rapper from Compton who can be compared to N.W.A. yet is an artist in his own right. I expect that each artist will have their own approach to highlighting social protest in their music. In addition, I hope to find that they will be particularly influenced by their personal backgrounds. I want to argue that hip hop can vary widely within its own genre and it not merely limited to money, violence, and sex.

#### I.4 Theories and methodology

In order to answer my research question this thesis is divided in three separate parts. In the first chapter, I will begin with an overview of several theories by key scholars. These scholars include Tricia Rose, Murray Forman, Ian Peddie, W.J.T. Mitchell, Stuart Hall, Richard Dyer, Kitwana Bakari and bell hooks. These theories will help me form my argument later on in the thesis and will connect the three songs by Jay-Z, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar to a theoretical framework.

Stuart Hall has written extensively on the subject of representation in his book *Representation* which he links to culture. In turn, he links culture to language, which thus makes

language incredibly important to representation (Hall 1). Language can provide a general model of how culture and representation can work, which is related to my thesis as I will explore the lyrics of the three songs I have selected and investigate how they transcend stereotypes and relate to activism.

Richard Dyer is also critically acclaimed with his work on stereotyping in the book *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. He argues that the word "stereotype" has a negative connotations and can be regarded as a term of abuse (Dyer 11). He finds that the role of stereotypes is to make the visible invisible, for which he makes use of Walter Lippmann's definition of the word, which he in turn criticizes.

In the book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks argues that patriarchal masculinity currently drives and enforces black male stereotypes and in addition fuels the gangsta culture that is omnipresent in hip hop music and culture (18). She finds that male African Americans have been led to believe that money (and the excess of it) is the primary way to portray success (18). Whether that money is acquired legal or illegally is not of importance. hooks blames the mass media of this phenomenon as it constantly reinforces the patriarchal masculinity in its images (26). In the book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* she continues this argument, finding that little has changed in the way African Americans are represented in the mass media (1).

W.J.T. Mitchell finds that images and text are not only linked as a form of mixed media, but also related to politics in the form of power and representation. In his book *Figure Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, he presents the argument that media and politics are connected. This is of particular importance to this thesis, as all the songs I have chosen deal with issues such as political power and representation.

Hip hop is a polarizing genre. Some find it harmful to young African Americans, while others find it highly relevant (Rose 1). To showcase both side of the arguments, I will include Tricia Rose's book *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters*. In her book, Rose argues that five toxic conditions have led to hip hop's negative reputation. These conditions have enabled negative feedback. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some of the arguments as to why hip hop is relevant, are problematic as well. Rose does not shy away from criticizing both sides. Her book is thus a great introduction to the polarizing opinion surrounding hip hop from an academic perspective.

Kitwana Bakari notes that at the moment, hip hop does not have a concrete political agenda (178). In the book *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Black and the Crisis in African American Culture* she states that the hip hop political agenda has been characterized by individual

commentary. However, she also argues that hip hop has been able for young African Americans to connect to hip hop music and it is an important force in the quest for an identity (197).

Murray Forman argues in his essay for the *American Studies Journal* called "Conscious Hip Hop, Change, and the Obama Era" that hip hop has a subgenre coined as 'conscious hip hop' in which rappers are intellectually engaging with social issues rather than resorting to the glorification of violence and the exploitation of women to sell their music (Forman par. 13). His definition of the term is highly relevant to my thesis as this is exactly what I want to prove: rap is an important aspect of the current Black LivesMatter-movement and is able to provide a political outlook on socio-political issues.

I will also make particular use of the book *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* edited by Ian Peddie. The book focuses on several aspects of popular music and social protest, ranging from rock and folk music, to hip hop and gothic music. Peddie's main argument is proving that social protest is not simply a battle between the youth and "the establishment" (16). He argues that social protest in the form of music is much more complex.

In the next part of my thesis, I will focus on the three artists and their songs. Each chapter will focus on an artist and one particular song that is connected to the Black Lives Matter movement. For each song, I will briefly discuss the context of the song; when and how it was released to the general public; and how it was received by the critics. Then I will focus on the following question: What do the lyrics and visuals that accompany the songs convey? For each song, I will thus investigate both the lyrics and the videoclip. For Jay-Z I have chosen "The Song of O.J." from the album *4:44* (2017); for Kanye West "Black Skinhead" from the album *Yeezus* (2013), and for Kendrick Lamar the song "Alright" from the album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015).

The final chapter will compare the three artists and their songs, noting what the key differences between them are and how they all attribute to the Black Lives Matter-movement in their own unique way. I will take into account the time in which they were written, the issues they address, and what visual methods the artists employ to convey their message. This will be done with the help of the theoretical framework discussed in the first chapter.

I will end my thesis with a conclusion, stating my final findings. As I have stated, I want to both prove that hip hop can be much more than the excessive display of wealth, violence and women, and the artists are highly important in the current Civil Rights narrative. I hope to inspire my readers to take the genre seriously. As Kanye West rapped in the song "Gorgeous": "Is hip hop just a euphemism for a new religion? / The soul music of the slaves that the youth is missing?" Hip hop is more than just music and is able to inspire the masses.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

In order to discuss the importance of hip hop in a supposedly post-racial society where the Black Lives Matter-movement has been at the forefront of political debates, I present several theories to answer my original research question: How does hip hop fit in the Black Lives Matter-narrative and how do the personal perspectives of several key artists subvert racist contemporary stereotypes about African American men? In this chapter I will cover several key theories to support my argument.

Firstly, I will focus on the concept of “Blackness” and race and representation. For this, I will use the theories of two key scholars: Richard Dyer and bell hooks. I will investigate their books *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* by Dyer and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* by hooks. These works focus on African American stereotypes and the negative connotation that stereotypes often bring.

For the second part of this chapter I will focus on theories on music and visual culture. For this, I will refer to the work of Stuart Hall’s *Representation*; Ian Peddie’s *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* and W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Figure Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Hip hop is an important genre in the realm of popular culture and it is thus worthy to investigate how the concepts of music, representation, visual cues and protest are linked within the songs chosen for this thesis.

Lastly, I will turn my focus to hip hop itself with the help of Tricia Rose’s *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters*; Kitwana Bakari’s *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Black and the Crisis in African American Culture*; and finally Murray Forman’s essay “Conscious Hip-Hop, Change, and the Obama Era”. These theoretical frameworks focus on contrasting opinions on hip hop and why it is of much importance to young African Americans.

In the end, I hope to present a wide spectrum of theories to further my research into hip hop and its political side.

### 1.1 Blackness, race and representation

The songs chosen as a case study in this thesis focus on racism and in particular stereotypes. The songs both explore and ironically use stereotypes to subvert those particular stereotypes. Before we

can turn to the case studies it is important to investigate exactly how stereotypes can be defined. It is also important to define representation, as it is equally important to my research.

Richard Dyer began to study stereotyping and its effects in his book *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. He states that race is only applied to non-white people and as long as race is not applied to white people, they/we will function as a human norm (Dyer 1). White people are people, and other ethnicities are categorized in races (Dyer 1). The position as a human is the most powerful position, as it comes with the ability to speak for humanity, while African Americans seemingly can only speak for their race (Dyer 2). This is closely related to social groups and the way those groups are treated in life by their cultural representation, which can lead to poverty, harassment, self-hate, and discrimination (Dyer 11). How social groups are seen can determine how they are treated and similarly how social groups treat others is based on their view on the *other*. This view stems directly from representation (Dyer 11).

The word "stereotype" mostly has a negative connotation and can be regarded as a term of abuse (Dyer 11). This comes from the fact that marginalized social groups such as African Americans, women, but also the LGBT-community, find themselves stereotyped not only in everyday speech, but also the media (Dyer 11). However, Walter Lippmann, who coined the term in 1956 found that there was a need for a term such as stereotyping and did not instantly link it as a term of abuse:

"A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy." (qtd. in Dyer 11)

In this quote we can recognize four central ideas behind 'stereotypes', namely his focus on stereotypes as an ordering process, a 'short cut', his referral to 'the world', and finally to express 'our values and beliefs' (Dyer 11).

The ordering process of stereotypes describes the way in which humans receive masses of complex and inchoate data from their daily lives and make sense of it through 'generalities, patternings, and 'typifications'' (Dyer 12). This is an inescapable process. In turn, people then use short cuts to condense a that mass of information and uses stereotypes to practically 'save time'.

This leads to a simplistic view of certain social groups, causing negative connotations. Dyer uses an example by T.E. Perkins, who found that the simplicity of stereotypes can be deceptive:

"to refer 'correctly' to someone as a 'dumb blonde,' and to understand what is meant by that, implies a great deal more than hair color and intelligence. It refers immediately to *her* sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure." (qtd. in Dyer 13)

What Lippmann's definition of stereotypes ignores is the struggle of power and the relation of power between different social groups. Since power is the decider of the dominant social group and the marginalized social group, this is too important to ignore.

When referring to the 'world', Lippman did not take into account fictional representations of social groups. Dyer finds that "whereas stereotypes are essentially defined [...] by their social function, types, at this level of generality, are primarily defined by their aesthetic function, namely, as a mode of characterization in fiction" (13). Fictional characters are constructed through what can be defined as, archetypes, typical, recognizable and defining traits. This can be positive, but also negative, and since media is consumed by the masses, lead to negative stereotypes.

Lippmann's final idea, that of 'our values and ideas', is criticized by Dyer, who argues that stereotypes do not simply 'suddenly' exist and stereotypes are definitely not the same for everyone (14). Stereotypes can be viewed differently by every individual member of society, and even though there is often one general stereotype, this is not something achieved by everyone exactly at the same time. Dyer finds that "for the most part it is *from* stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups. The consensus invoked by stereotypes is more apparent than real: rather, stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society" (14). Lippmann talks about 'our' values and ideas, but fails to mention who those values and ideas exactly belong to. It can thus be concluded that the role of stereotypes is "to make the visible invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate with is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit" (16).

bell hooks comments on African American stereotypes and black masculinity in her books *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* she argues that she has seen very little change in the way African Americans have been represented in the mass media (1). She finds that most images produced in the media of black people reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy (hooks 1). These images are not

necessarily constructed out of racist thought, but through internalized racism these images prescribe to a white supremacist way of thinking (hooks 1). According to hooks, this is a form of oppression, and there is "a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of black people" (hooks 2). hooks argues that it is necessary to transform images of blackness and the way these images are perceived before radical interventions to better African Americans' situation can be made (7). This can be achieved through mass media. She also finds that "changing representations of black men must be a collective task" (113).

In the book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* hooks further investigates the patriarchal masculinity that currently drives and enforces black male stereotypes. Her notion of the 'gangsta culture' that is recurrent in hip hop music is very striking and will later on in this thesis be subverted by three central artists, Jay-Z, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar. hooks finds that there has been a shift in class values that led young black males to believe that "money is the primary marker of individual success" (18). This idea solely focuses on the possession of money, and ignores the acquisition of money. Wealth equals status, whether earned legally or illegally. Black males who could express their wealth were ranked among the powerful and "it was this thinking that allowed hustlers in black communities to be seen just as hardworking as their Wall Street counterparts" (hooks 18).

She finds that both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X lived without excess money and focused on becoming men of integrity rather than wealth (hooks 20). However, this ideal is not achievable for many young African Americans who fail to have access to better jobs with living wages. Instead, "demoralized black males would could not gain the types of employment that would reaffirm their patriarchal manhood could then feel more comfortable with a system that values the acquisition of money as the standard of patriarchal male values" (hooks 20). hooks blames the representation of patriarchal masculinity in the mass media for this phenomenon, stating that "on mass media screens today [...] mainstream work is usually portrayed as irrelevant, money is god, and the outlaw guy who breaks the rules prevails" (hooks 26). While the general consensus that young black males are lured by the streets into violence and drugs, it is in fact the mass media who instills the idea of money is power from an early age. According to hooks, "mass media in patriarchal culture has already prepared [young African Americans] to seek themselves in the streets, to find their manhood in the streets, by the time they are six years old" (26). This is a white supremacist point of view as it teaches black males that the streets will be the only place of success

for them and it teaches them that the only the strongest will survive. hooks concludes that "gangsta culture is the essence of patriarchal masculinity" (26).

## 1.2 Theories on music, media and visual culture

Since this thesis revolves around music and the interpretation of lyrics and visual content, it is important to take a closer look at theoretical framework surrounding concepts of media, music and visual culture. This is crucial in order to make sense of the close readings presented in the following chapters, and finally during the discussion.

In the book *Representation*, Stuart Hall investigates the importance of representation and how it is linked to culture, language, and thus in turn, media. He then offers two approaches as a general model for culture and representation, the semiotic approach and the discursive approach. Especially his focus on language makes his theory particularly interesting for my thesis, as I will delve deeper in the meaning of the lyrics presented in "The Story of O.J.", "Black Skinhead" and "Alright".

What is the exact importance of representation? Hall links representation to culture. He finds that culture is about 'shared meanings' and language the way we produce and exchange meaning (1). Meaning can only be achieved through a common language, which means "language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings" (Hall 1).

Language is able to construct meaning, but how so? Language operates as a representational system. Signs and symbols are used to represent our concepts, ideas, and feelings to other people (Hall 1). Language can be regarded as a form of 'media' in the most basic form (Hall 1). The signs and symbols of language can range from sounds to written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, and objects (Hall 1). In song, language, in the form of lyrics, are equally important to the musical notes, making songs able to construct meaning just like a conversation between two people would. Signs and symbols are able to transmit and construct meaning (Hall 5). Symbols are "the vehicles or media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols, which stand for or represent the meanings we wish to communicate [...] Signs stand for or represent our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do" (Hall 5). Language is thus a signifying practice (Hall 5).

Culture is harder to define than language, as there is not one specific definition that embodies the entire meaning. There are several forms of culture, high, modern, and mass culture,

but in recent years, the "word 'culture' is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, nation, or social group" (Hall 2). The focus is thus more on an anthropological definition. In addition, culture is also often referred to as the shared values of a group or society. The genre of hip hop can be regarded as a form of culture, which is why it is important to define and explain the importance of the term. Hall argues that it is a culture that gives meaning to people, objects and events, as things by 'themselves' cannot give meaning to something (3). We thus "give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation that we bring to them" (Hall 3). In turn, meanings are given to people, objects, and events by how we represent them (Hall 3).

Language provides a general model of how culture and representation works, and this is done through the semiotic approach. This can be described as the story of signs and how they have a general role as vehicles of meaning in culture (Hall 6). Another approach is not necessarily concerned with the way language works, but it rather refers to the role of discourse in culture. Discourses can be described as "ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall 6). This is called the discursive approach. An important difference between the semiotic and discursive approach is that semiotics is concerned with the *how* of representation, whereas the discursive approach focuses around the *effects and consequences of representation* (Hall 6). It is a matter of poetics versus politics.

Music and protest have long been linked. Ranging from protests for the Vietnam war, to anti-police brutality songs of the past couple of years, artists have long been using their voice to make a statement. Ian Peddie explores contemporary popular music and its relationship to social protest in his book *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*. By selecting several different genres, Peddie wants to showcase that very relationship through different styles of music. These include, rock, metal, but also hip hop.

Music can affect a relationship (Peddie 16). Music and social protest have always had a complicated relationship. Music is able to provide a grounded experience of a lived experience. Music can thus be regarded as a discursive practice (Peddie 16). It can be argued that "music emerges as already grounded in the social, as an avenue of cultural contestation or social and political engagement" (Peddie 16). The main argument of Peddie's book is that he wants to prove that popular music and social protest songs cannot simply be reduced to "a narrative of running battle between disaffected youth and the establishment" (16). He wants to prove his argument by

selecting several essays on varying genres to make his case, noting that social protest runs much more deeper than an "Us vs. Them" mentality. Peddie uses Lahusen's definition of popular music, which states that:

"Popular music is a contested terrain, where different actors engage in defining the essence of popular music by favoring consumptive escapism or radical disruption and—since elements of escapism and involvement belong to one structural relation can be inverted—also by enhancing a radicalization of consumption and commercialization of rebellion" (qtd. Peddie 16)

Lahusen's definition tries to point out several things. First of all, popular music has an 'essence' (Peddie 17). This essence is highlighted by the dominant dichotomies of escapism/involvement and consumption/commercialized rebellion. These dichotomies are built upon the fact that popular music can be regarded inherently oppositional. Music can simply be used to escape the struggles of daily life, yet on the other hand it can also be deeply rooted in political involvement. Peddie then finds that music is too varied to assume that social protest and music are inherently linked (17). He finds that "we should conclude that if social protest is made up of collisions, then it is also formed by fissures and fractures, by the very kind of resulting ambiguities that makes the changing faces of popular music so vexing and so appealing" (17).

Deena Weinstein argues that there is strikingly little social protest music, which goes against popular belief (Peddie 18). She argues that popular music has become a big part of mainstream media and the media is part of "a large conservative conglomerate with ties to the Bush administration" (Peddie 19). Since such conglomerates hold a lot of power, protest songs tend to receive little airplay. Jerry Rodnitsky finds that protest music is cyclical since it is tied to political activism (Peddie 19). Many popular protest songs are tied to specific events, such as the Vietnam war, or the feminist movements. There are thus few social protest songs that are not linked to cyclical events in time. At the end of this thesis, I want to show that the three songs covered in the following chapters are closely related to the Black Lives Matter-movement, and can thus be regarded cyclical protest songs.

All in all Peddie proves how social protest can be embedded within popular music and how it has a complex relationship. It is present in many genres, including hip hop, which makes his book essential for my research.

Since this thesis focuses on music in both lyrical and visual form, it is important to realize how these two correspond. In his book *Figure Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that "it is written in the condition that the tensions between visual and verbal

representations ("Word and Image") are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture" (3). This theory is relevant to my thesis, as it argues that visual and verbal culture are always linked to politics, something that is also the case in the songs I will examine in the upcoming chapters. He thus finds that culture, and everything that is related to culture, such as issues of representation, are linked to images and words (3). This is in turn related to politics, as political power can be achieved through the use of media in any shape way or form.

"Word and Image" can be described as the distinction between types of representation (Mitchell 3). It is a simple means to divide, map, and organize the field of representation in the media. In addition, it can be used to describe a "basic cultural trope, replete with connotations that go beyond merely formal or structural differences" (Mitchell 3). "Words and Images" cannot simply be divided into separate categories such as books and television. Both media have overlapping characteristics, such as the fact that books incorporate images, and as a medium television uses images, sounds, and words all at once. While the two media are most definitely different, they are at the same time similar, which is important to remember. Additionally, the term can also be used to describe the difference between "mass and elite culture [and] between the professional, academic humanities and the 'public' humanities" (Mitchell 4).

Mitchell finds that all media is regarded mixed media (5). It is impossible to have something that is purely visual or verbal. There is always overlap between the media, which is why Mitchell links words to images as they cannot be separated from each other. In *Figure Theory*, Mitchell's primary aim is not to describe the relation of the verbal and the visual, but the relation to issues of power, value, and human interest (5). He argues that:

"The 'differences' between images, and language are not merely formal matters: they are, in practice, linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing: between 'hearsay' and 'eyewitness' testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience. We might adopt Michel de Certeau's terminology and call the attempt to describe these differences a 'heterology of representation.'" (5)

In a society surrounded by figures and media, it is important to understand what figures do and how they relate to questions of power and representation, as the two are most often than not linked. As I will show in the close readings and the discussion, this is also the case with the three songs presented in this thesis.

### 1.3 Academic discourse on hip hop

As this thesis focuses solely on hip hop music, it is important to understand what hip hop is, where it came from, and why it is often regarded as a toxic influence (McWorther). I also want to show why it is currently one of the most important genres in contemporary music and is able to provide a lot of people who find themselves in similar situations, such as young male African Americans, with a voice. (Crooke).

Hip hop first arose in the late 1960s in 1970s in the Bronx, one of New York City's five boroughs and often called 'America's worst slum' and 'the epitome of urban failure' (Price 4). Hip hop was a burgeoning culture "driven by self-determination, a love for life, and a desire to have fun (Price 11). The song "Rapper's Delight" by Sugar Hill Gang propelled the genre into the public sphere, and the song was lauded as innovative for its new culture (Price 13). In 1980, Kurtis Blow earned the first certified gold record for a rap song with "The Breaks" (Price 13). Hip hop became more and more profitable and garnered the attention of major record labels. By the 1990s, hip hop had become a dominant genre in music, but also a force in popular culture (Price 16).

Hip hop culture consists of four foundational elements that define the culture. These are recognized as MCing (rapping), DJing, breakdancing, and the art of graffiti. Price found that "each element serves as a method of self-expression relying on individual creativity and highly personalized modes of performance" (21). The elements have advanced from urban metropolises and have roots in the inner cities that are connected to gangs and gang lifestyles. While these traditional foundational elements of hip hop have somewhat faded in the 21st century, they provide the basis of the hip hop culture

Tricia Rose focuses on the two sides of hip hop in her book *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters*. The two sides are important to explore, as they showcase two very conflicting perspectives on the genre. On the one hand, she discusses arguments made against hip hop, and on the other hand she focuses on the positive comments on the genre. She finds that the debate regarding hip hop's influence is mostly dominated by critics who fail to see the true message (or perhaps, reasoning) behind some of the songs. Rose starts her book with the statement that "hip hop is in a terrible crisis" (1). The genre has grown to become one of the most popular forms of music, while at the same time it has grown incredibly toxic. "The gangsta life and all its attendant violence, criminality, sexual 'deviance,' and misogyny have, over the last decade especially, stood at the heart of what appeared to be ever-increasing hip hop record sales," Rose finds (3). As a result, the general public who only get in touch with

mainstream songs, find hip hop to be very problematic. It is the expansion of the commercial space of hip hop that has led to the debate whether hip hop has a positive or negative influence.

Rose states that hip hop is much more than merely 'entertainment' and argues that "debates about hip hop stand in for discussion of significant social issues related to race, class, sexism, and black culture" (7). Critics of the genre find that if hip hop was banned, all bad behavior attributed to the genre, such as the glorification of violence and drugs, would decline (Rose 7). Crime would supposedly stop, and young African Americans would apparently go to school and do better. Rose calls this "hyper-behavioralism—an approach that overemphasizes individual action and underestimates the impact of institutionalized forms of racial and class discriminations—feeds the very systematic discrimination it pretends isn't a factor at all" (8). The debates surrounding hip hop have become an easy way out. Critics focus on sexism and violence as if it was a problem solely related to hip hop, while in reality it is just a means to criticize the bigger problem without ever addressing it by itself.

Another argument why hip hop is very important in the American society, is the fact that hip hop has replaced earlier genres such as blues, jazz, and R&B. "We have arrived at a landmark moment in modern culture when a solid segment (if not majority) of an entire generation of African-American youth understands itself as defined primarily by a musical, cultural form," Rose writes (8). Hip hop serves as an outlet for African Americans, as well as that it allows them to showcase their experiences and stories through a very mainstream form of music, reaching millions of people.

Hip hop is often used by critics as proof "of black people's culpability for their circumstances [that] undermines decades of solid and significant research on the larger structural forces that have plagued black urban communities" (Rose 9). These critics are taking lyrics out of their context and presenting them as proof of how all African Americans are criminals, rather than see the lyrics as African American experiences taken straight out of reality. They use hip hop for their own gain, to prove how "bad" African Americans are, instead of wondering how it can be that so many young African Americans have to resort to dealing drugs in order to make a living.

Rose mentions five key factors that have enabled hip hop's negative reputation. "Why did a sub style based on hustling, crime, sexual domination, and drug dealing become rap's cultural and economic calling card and thus the key icon for the hip hop generation?" Rose ponders (13). She lists the following five "toxic conditions" (13):

- New technologies and new music markets
- Massive corporate consolidation

- Expansion of illicit street economies
- America's post-civil rights appetite for racially stereotyped entertainment
- Violence and sexually explicit misogyny as 'valued' cultural products

Several factors have thus led to hip hop's negative reputation. Critics often find that hip hop causes violence; reflects black dysfunctional ghetto culture; hurt black people; is destroying America's values; and demeans women (Rose 25). On the other hand, the defendants argue that hip hop is showcasing the reality; is not responsible for sexism; that the depiction of women in rap music is based on reality; that hip hop artists are not role models; and that nobody talks about the positive elements that can be found in hip hop (Rose 26). While some defendants use equally bad arguments as the critics, I would like to focus particularly on the argument regarding positivity.

Hip hop has grown to an immense scale. Due to the popularity of the genre, in the book *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Black and the Crisis in African American Culture* Kitwana Bakari finds that America's black youth can find the faces and voices of fellow peers in music, on tv and online (197). Hip hop is an importance force in the quest for an identity for young African Americans. Hip hop is locally and commercially entranced in American society by the entrepreneurialism of aspiring rappers hoping to sell their mixtapes, as well as commercially through big sponsor deals with famous brands such as Nike. Bakari finds that:

“as the primary vehicle through which young Blacks have achieved a national voice and presence, rap music transmits the new Black youth to a national audience. And in the same way as the mainstream media establishes the parameters for national discussion for the nation at large, rap sets the tone for Black youth. As the national forum for Black youth concerns and often as the impetus for discussion around those issues, rap music has done more than any one entity to help our generation forge a distinct identity (201).

All in all, the genre is highly influential not only to young African Americans, but also the rest of the United States as the genre provides a lens into their world.

Russell A. Potter finds that postmodern hip hop has shied away from social protest in comparison to earlier hip hop records by artists such as Ice Cube and N.W.A., stating that "the dominant hip-hop artists of the first few years of the twenty-first century are tense but restrained, their lyrical forays recontained within the persistent metaphorical landscape of guns and sexual innuendo, and they boast familiar rhymes and familiar subjects" (qtd. in Peddie 65). I want to show that since the last couple of years, hip hop has taken a departure from this aesthetic and has reintroduced social protest in the genre. Where Potter states that the most vital dimension of hip hop

politics have been underground, I want to argue that it is now embedded in popular music hitting the airwaves every single day (Peddie 66).

Potter uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "rhizomatic" to describe the state of hip hop and its global popularity:

"There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, to that a book has no sequel nor the world as its objects nor one or several authors as its subject." (qtd. in Potter 73)

Potter replaced 'world' with 'recordings' to make his case. This is postmodern hip hop in action, and also thus why hip hop is highly important and relevant to investigate.

In the essay, "Conscious Hip-Hop, Change, and the Obama Era" for the *American Studies Journal* Murray Forman argues that hip hop provides "some of the most convincing articulations of its continuing resonance in American cultural politics" (par. 2). Even though the United States supposedly entered a 'post-racial society' after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, race remains a central debate. Forman offers the term 'conscious hip hop' which suggests that rappers intellectually engage with social issues, ranging from themes of racial injustice to class struggle (par. 13). Conscious rap is a subgenre that is connected to historic patterns of political protest and presents a force of social critique (Forman par.13). These hip hop artists are able to fill the voice for many youths who have grown disenfranchised with politicians and the limitations of established black leaders (Forman par. 18). Hip hop artists are not only more relatable to the youth, but also more in tune with the current social problems on a grassroots level. Many rappers have grown up with less than ideal circumstances with many of them resorting to gangs and violence to make a living before breaking through in the music business. Forman finds that "the resultant differences in social demands and political approaches contribute to a sharp-edged generational dissonance and, in many instances, hip hop's conscious MCs clearly and consistently articulate community concerns, positioning them in the vanguard of social activism" (par. 18). A clear example of this outside of music can be recognized as the moment when Kanye West went off script during a telethon broadcast of the Concert for Hurricane Relief and claimed that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (qtd. in Forman par. 19).

In 2008 many hip hop artists began to support Barack Obama during his campaign for presidency (Forman par. 24). While it was not the first time hip hop artists rallied behind a presidential candidate, Obama was different. Due to his ethnicity, but also his age, Obama was

"generally accepted as a member of the hip-hop generation, having grown and matured in a world with hip hop" (Forman par. 24). Obama became a part of the hip hop community. His "suave and confident image, along with the campaign slogans 'hope' and 'change,' was rapidly disseminated in and through hip hop apparatus" (Forman par. 27). In addition, his voice and utterances were sampled and incorporated in hip hop recordings (Forman par. 28). While conscious hip hop has always been present in the genre, Obama sparked a resurgence of the subgenre. Forman closes his essay with the statement that hip hop is constantly evolving, "transforming within the context of global/local dynamics and within a framework of indomitable spirit and hope" (par. 39).

In 2000, during the presidential campaign, Russell Simmons announced he was attempting to link hip hop and the mainstream political process to highlight issues such as racial profiling, and police brutality" (Bakari 175). He found that "the hip hop community needs to mobilize, move as an army, and make their voice heard" (qtd. in Bakari 175). Almost twenty years later, the issues he highlighted are still at the front of the political debate.

Bakari finds that hip hop does not have a concrete political agenda (178). The agenda has been characterized by individual commentary. However, she is able to identify seven main issues that run across the comments made and that seem to be a central theme: education, employment and workers rights, reparations, economic infrastructure in urban communities, youth poverty and disease, anti-youth legislation, and foreign policy (Bakari 178).

With the help of the previous theories I want to prove that hip hop is an important vehicle in the Black Lives Matter movement. In the age of the New Jim Crow, hip hop is crucial to investigate as it is not only a dominant form of music, but also a form of social protest. I want to showcase this with individual songs and artists, starting with Jay-Z in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: Jay-Z and "The Story of O.J."

In this chapter I will thoroughly analyze both the lyrical as well as the visual content that accompanies Jay-Z's "The Song of O.J.". First, I will provide some context and background information as to the release of the song. Then, I will analyze the lyrics of the song, focusing on its meaning before doing the same for the animated music video. I will end this chapter with a short summary of the close readings presented.

### 2.1 Context and background

"The Story of O.J." comes from Jay-Z's thirteenth studio album which was released in 2017. The album *4:44* received general acclaim from critics, with some calling it "a highly personal work" (McCormick). Pitchfork referred to the album as a "historical artefact" and found that "every angle he creates is informed by blackness" (Pearce). While the song was not released as a single, Jay-Z released a music video for the song on his music streaming platform TIDAL. The song charted the Billboard Hot 100 and peaked at number 23 (Trust). The song was nominated for three Grammy awards in 2017 which included Record of the Year, Best Rap Song, and Best Music Video (Grammy).

The song is written by Jay-Z, Dion Wilson, Nina Simone, Gene Redd and Jimmy Crosby. Nina Simone's writing credit comes from the sample used in the song. Producers Jay-Z and No I.D. incorporated Simone's "Four Women" which is a song that centers around four female African-American archetypes. Simone was an American singer, notable for her civil rights activism. She performed during Martin Luther King's march from Selma to Montgomery and in addition befriended important figures such as Malcolm X, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes (Lynskey). Music journalist Salamishah Tillet found that for him personally, Nina Simone sounded like his American Dream, and that "Simone's mix of headiness and haunt, lyrical boldness and political bombast makes her the hero of our hip-hop generation. We look to her as our muse; we listen to her because we want to know what freedom sounds like" (Tillet). The choice of sample is not coincidental, as Simone's four female archetypes get reworked into male African-American archetypes in "The Story of O.J.", as I will show later in this chapter. In addition, Gene Redd and Jimmy Crosby's writing credit comes from their songs "Kool Back Again" and "Kool is Back" that are reworked into "The Story of O.J." as samples.

Commenting on his own song, Jay-Z states that "'The Story of O.J.'" is really a song about we as a culture, having a plan, how we're gonna push this forward. We all make money, and then we all lose money, as artists especially. But how, when you have some type of success, to transform that into something bigger" (Mastrogiannis). This central idea becomes more apparent in the lyrics of the song where he stresses the importance of gaining and maintaining wealth and doing something good with it in contrast to the reckless spending that hip hop seems to be known for.

The music video is directed by Mark Romanek, who previously directed video clips for artists such as Johnny Cash, Nine Inch Nails, Madonna, and Beyoncé. Romanek had never been involved with an animated project, and approached The Mill to create the videoclip (Ducker). The Mill is a visual effects and content creation studio, that brought Jay-Z's vision of a music video in the style of 1930s and 40s racist cartoons to life. The Mill combined old animation techniques such as hand-painted backgrounds and cell animations with modern digital animation techniques (Ducker). This resulted in a Disney-like cartoon which is a clear reference to racist Disney cartoons such as *Cannibal Capers* (1930), and *Trader Mickey* (1932) (Schreiber).

In September 2017, Jay-Z dedicated the song at one of his concerts to Colin Kaepernick, an American football player, and Dick Gregory, a comedian and civil rights activist who passed away earlier that year (Mullan). Jay-Z dedication ties the song to the Black Lives Matters movement. Kaepernick garnered headlines in 2016, as the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers refused to stand for the national anthem, a move that has been repeated many times since by various athletes. Jay-Z stated that "[he was] not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder" (qtd. in Wyche).

"The Story of O.J." can be described as "a mighty polemic about modern black identity" (McCormick). The song is highly relevant to the Black Lives Matters-movement. The lyrics provides sharp commentary on American society and identity and at the same time the music video is highly confronting and perhaps disturbing, since the animations are very familiar to many who have grown up with watching Walt Disney cartoons and films.

## 2.2 Lyrics

The lyrics of "The Story of O.J." tackle three main themes: racism, African American identity, and legacy. All the three themes are tied and could not exist without the other. Jay-Z opens the song with

a sample by Nina Simone. Her song "Four Women" is chopped up, distorted, and reduced to merely a few words: "Skin is, skin, is / Skin black, my skin is black / My, black, my skin is yellow" (1-3). The opening lyrics manages to encompass all three themes. African American identity is mainly defined by the color of their skin, which is then related to racism and in turn related to legacy. How can an African American build a sustainable legacy through all this hardship?

The chorus plays with Nina Simone's four archetypes. Her songs focuses on four characters, all African American archetypes, or even stereotypes, while Jay-Z takes on eight in total. Simone focused on four central characters: Aunt Sarah (representation of African-American enslavement); Safronia (a woman of mixed race); Sweet Thing (a prostitute); and Peaches (a woman embittered by years of oppression). Jay-Z focuses on the following archetypes: "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga / Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field, nigga / Still nigga, still nigga" (4-6). Jay-Z presents his eight archetypes that all relate to African American identity. In the end, he concludes that whatever archetype an African American belongs to, they are "still niggas". Whether they were rich, poor, light or dark skinned, their identity always boils down to one thing: they are still seen as black and black only. In addition, the connotations associated with the archetypes are always negative. The chorus also takes reference to Malcolm X's speech at Michigan State University in 1963 where he stated that there are "During slavery you had two Negroes. You had the house Negro and the field Negro" (X). Jay-Z expands on the types of African Americans, but focuses on the same idea as Malcolm X.

This theme continues with the next lyric, where Jay-Z raps "O.J. like, "I'm not Black, I'm O.J."... okay" (12). While it has never been factually proven, O.J. Simpson infamously once was believed to have said: "I'm not black, I'm O.J." (Hawkins). With this statement, Simpson tries to transcend race. He is not black, he is an athlete. Simpson has never denied or ignored his race, stating that "I'm a black guy, always been a black guy, never been nothing but a black guy" (Hawkins). His statement almost mimics Jay-Z's chorus. In the documentary *O.J.: Made in America* (2016), journalist Robert Lipsyte recalls telling O.J. how bad he must have felt when a woman in a restaurant stated "Look, there's O.J. sitting with all those niggers" (qtd. in Strachan). Simpson, on the other hand, was surprisingly happy with the statement, finding that "it was great. Don't you understand? She knew that I wasn't black. She saw me as O.J." (qtd. in Strachan). Simpson tried to establish his identity by erasing his heritage, and Jay-Z scrutinizes this move by replying with an unimpressed "okay". It becomes increasingly apparent through his lyrics that Jay-Z wants his identity to be more than 'just' being black, while at the same time retaining his African

American heritage. In a Footnote video special released on his streaming service TIDAL, Jay-Z explains that:

"We tend to, as black people—‘cause we nave had anything, which is understandable—we get to a place and we just think we separate ourself from the culture [...] Like Tiger Woods will get to a space and think, ‘I’m above the culture,’ you know, and that same person, when he’s playing golf and playing great, you’re protected, and when you’re not, they’re gonna put pictures of you drunk driving and, like embarrass you, and the world will eat you up and spit you out." (Footnotes for "The Story of O.J.")

The case of Tiger Woods, who was publicly scrutinized after he had an extramarital affair, can be related to O.J. Simpson, whose race never seemed important until he was accused of murdering Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman (Hawkins). It proves that transcending race is impossible: one misstep and the star athlete is back to being black, including all the negative connotations.

While Jay-Z’s song is called “The Song of O.J.”, this particular lyric the only time O.J. Simpson is mentioned. Simpson’s struggle for his identity returns again and again throughout the song. This is not necessarily his story alone, but of many young African Americans, torn between two separate identities. While Simpson’s life is not comparable to that of many African Americans, their struggle down at the root remains the same. "The Story of O.J." is the story of them all.

Jay-Z opens the first verse with a reference to house and field slaves, playing on both the interpersonal competition between the two ‘positions’ as well as once again using Malcolm X’s ‘two negroes’:

"House nigga, don’t fuck with me  
I’m a field nigga, go shine cutlery  
Go play the quarters where the butlers be  
I’m a play the corners where the hustlers be" (13-16)

Jay-Z elaborates on X’s speech by confirming that house slaves often grew fond of their masters, and thus kept slavery in existence. X stated that "when the field Negroes got too much out of line, [the House slaves] held them back in check. He put ‘em back on the plantation. The house Negro could afford to do that because he lived better than the field Negro" (X). At the end of the speech, Malcolm X identifies himself as a field negro, and Jay-Z shares this identity. He challenges the house slaves. While they are cleaning cutlery and serving their masters, the field slaves are hustling, a term often associated closely with hip hop (Charnas). Jay-Z’s poor upbringing is what links him to a field slave. He also had to hustle to stay afloat.

The next four lyrics comments on inner city problems in the present tense. Jay-Z reflects on the ghetto neighborhoods and instructs the current youth (or perhaps, peers who are less successful than he is as an entrepreneur) to stop gang violence.

"I told him, "Please don't die over the neighborhood  
That your mama rentin'  
Take your drug money and buy the neighborhood  
That's how you rinse it" (17-20)

He orders them to take the money they earned by dealing drugs to buy the houses their parents are living in. On a feature for DJ Khaled's song "I Got the Keys", Jay-Z raps "'Til you own your own you can't be free" (24). Jay-Z stresses the importance of ownership in relation to freedom. A neighborhood can only flourish and prosper once the gangs put down their weapons and stop dealing drugs. The final lyric is also a play on laundering drug money. Jay-Z hopes this will clean up the neighborhood.

Jay-Z expresses his regret in his previous purchases in the next lyrics. "I bought every V12 engine / Wish I could take it back to the beginnin'" (21-22). V12 engines are generally found in expensive sport cars such as Ferraris and Lamborghinis. While these cars once were a sign of wealth and accomplishment, Jay-Z wishes he could go back to the start and invest in real estate or art that would increase (rather than decrease) in value.

This continues in the next lyrics, where he states that he could have bought real estate in Dumbo (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) in Brooklyn, New York.

"I coulda bought a place in Dumbo before it was Dumbo  
For like 2 million  
That same building today is worth 25 million  
Guess how I'm feeling'? Dumbo" (23-26)

In recent years, many of New York's neighborhoods have been gentrified, hiking up the property prices and forcing out mainly African American residents (Yee). Jay-Z could not only made back his investment tenfold, but also help combat the gentrification by purchasing the property as a black man. The final lyric which references *Dumbo*, a 1940 Disney movie that featured a racial stereotyped African American imagined as a crow who was literally called Jim Crow.

He then again addresses the hip hop listeners who have grown accustomed to the reckless spending that hip hop has been known for by stating: "You wanna know what's more important than throwin' away money at a strip club? Credit / You ever wonder why Jewish people own all the property in America? This how they did it" (33-34). He explains that credit and the longevity of

wealth is more important than reckless spending. He also continues to compare two marginalized groups, finding that Jews used their money more wisely. This lyric garnered controversy, with critics such as the Anti-Defamation League stating that the lyrics are anti-semitic and perpetuates stereotypes about the Jewish community (Sblendorio). Jay-Z responded to the criticism finding that:

"As the Jewish community, if you don't have a problem with the exaggerations of the guy eating watermelon and all the things that was happening [in the song's music video]), if you don't have a problem with that, and that's the only line you pick out, then you are being a hypocrite. [...] I can't address that in a real way. I got to leave that where it is." (qtd. in Sblendorio)

He realizes not literally everything is owned by Jews in America, and understands that it is a stereotype, and both the lyrics as well as the videoclip of "The Story of O.J." are packed with stereotypes, black, as well as white.

Jay-Z once again reaffirms that financial freedom is more important than spending money in the next lyric: "Financial freedom my only hope / Fuck livin' rich and dying' broke" (35-36). This relates to the previous lyrics mentioned. The second part is a play on the cliché quote about living rich and dying poor. While the quote is often used to indicate making the most of your life, Jay-Z finds that being financially independent, and the longevity of wealth is more important.

He portrays his hustling strategy by dealing in art. Fellow rapper Drake once called out Jay-Z on this notion, finding that "[Jay] can't drop bars these days without at least four art references" (qtd. in Tardio). In "The Song of O.J.", Jay raps about buying art and waiting for the value to increase, like he should have done with the properties in Dumbo:

"I bought some artwork for one million  
Two years later, that shit worth two million  
Few years later, that shit worth eight million  
I can't wait to give this shit to my children" (37-40)

He ends by stating that he hopes to give the money earned by dealing art to his children, again reaffirming the notion of financial freedom being the only way for African Americans to break free, as well as the importance of investing rather than spending to better the world.

The next lyric refers to Jay-Z's streaming company TIDAL, which has been noted to be "a disaster" financially (Stern). The service provides high fidelity and lossless audio and presents exclusive content such as Rihanna's album *Anti* (2016) and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016). He refers to the price for a subscription per month, by rapping: "Y' all think it's bougie, I'm like, it's fine / But I'm tryin' to give you a million dollars worth of game for \$9.99" (41-42). He then references to

his own line in a 2010 G.O.O.D Music collaboration called "Clique" on the following line, rapping that "I turned that 2 tot a 4, 4 to an 8 / I turned my life into a nice first week release date" (43-44). The line refers to the fact that both Jay-Z, as well as his wife Beyoncé, are able to sell exceptionally well during the first week of album sales.

During the final part of the second verse, Jay-Z calls out other rappers, finding they are concerned with the wrong things. He also puts himself above them while at the same time educate his fellow rappers that they are not spending their money wisely.

"Y'all out here still takin' advances, huh?

Me and my niggas talkin' real chances, uh

Y'all on the 'Gram holdin' money to your ear

There's a disconnect, we don't call that money over here, yeah" (45-48)

Jay-Z criticizes the rappers who are taking loans from him, while he is making strategic, yet risky, business offers. The final bombshell Jay-Z drops is when he blasts those very same rappers who then take pictures of themselves holding a stack of money to their ear like a telephone. Those photos are typically posted to on the social media platform Instagram. He discredits their authenticity.

All in all, the three central themes in "The Story of O.J." racism, African American identity, and legacy are overtly present. Jay-Z hopes that his fellow peers will spend their money wisely and invest in the future. He stresses that African Americans cannot be free without being financially independent. The theme of racism becomes increasingly present in the video clips, where Jay-Z visualizes the eight stereotypes he presented in "The Story of O.J."

### 2.3 Music video

The music video for "The Story of O.J." starts with opening credits. The first few seconds of the video immediately determine the aesthetics and concept for the remaining song. The aspect ratio is 4:3, a size which is hardly used anymore and is know mostly connected to older Hollywood Figures. The opening credits read "Rocnation presents", which refers to Jay-Z's own entertainment company which he founded in 2008. The title of the music video is displayed in old lettering floating above a cotton field. The quality of the video is purposely made to look like it has an layer of noise and dust.

We are then introduced to the character of Jaybo (0:13). This is done in a very similar style Walt Disney used for its animated cartoons during the 1930s to highlight the main character in the

animation as can be seen in Fig. 1. The character of Jaybo is a tweak on the Sambo, known from *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. The children's book was published in 1899 and features the story of a South Indian boy. The illustrations in the book were particularly controversial, as they depict Sambo in a racialized and stereotypical manner. Sambo's skin tone is jet black, his lips red and his hair is done in tiny braids. Historically, the name and term Sambo was used to describe a person of mixed race and particularly those of black or Indian descent. Now, the term is considered a racial slur to denote a black person (Oxford Dictionary). Jay-Z uses this character to his own advances, not only by highlighting the racial nature of the illustration, but also turning the term Sambo to his own hand.

The character of Jaybo, just like the other characters in "The Story of O.J." are illustrated in a similar racial fashion as Sambo. Even though the video is animated in black and white (perhaps a deliberate choice to further highlight the Us vs. Them mentality; a literal Black vs. White) it is obvious that the skin colors of the characters are black. Their mouths are accentuated in similar fashion as to Universal's animated short *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1941). The animated short has been widely criticized as being inherently racist.

As the song starts with the sample of Nina Simone, the music video opens with a depiction of the singer singing behind a piano in a burlesque club (0:24). All the black characters in the videoclip are illustrated in as a caricature. During her show, a black burlesque dancer comes out to entertain the crowd (0:31). Her body is exaggeratedly voluptuous, her lips are thick, and she is not wearing anything except for underwear and nipple tassels. She is one of the few women in the video clip. Another woman in the music video is a mother. Her weight is also exaggerated and has the look of a typical African American mother, scrubbing away (1:35). While the two women in the video do not correspond with Nina Simone's four archetypes of women, Jay-Z offers only two archetypes: that of the Madonna and the whore.

The urban city is depicted as negative in the music video. Jaybo is next seen walking across the Brooklyn Bridge which is covered in trash (0:41). He is riding the bus, sitting in the colored section (1:08). The neighborhood through which he walks in a bad state, with crooked apartment buildings that are showing signs of decay. Black men in the form of angels are rising above the neighborhood, a bullet wound in their side to depict gang violence in the inner city (1:30). In one of the final scenes Jaybo is flying like Dumbo over the neighborhood, giving away his money to the children on the streets (3:56). As Jaybo raps that financial freedom is his only hope, he is walking up a ladder made out of dollar bills (2:42). The neighborhood cannot be improved and rinsed unless

there is someone to invest. Jay-Z is that person, using his money to buy hope for the neighborhood and the kids a future.

In a following segment, we see him eating from a watermelon (0:51). This scene is eerily similar to a scene from *Scrub me Mama with a Boogie Beat* and highlights the watermelon stereotype that seems to follow African Americans for years. The likeness between Universal's animated short and the music video can be seen in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. The stereotype began after the Civil War, when black people made the fruit a symbol of their freedom by not only growing and eating the fruit, but also by selling it (Black). The Southern whites responded by "making the fruit a symbol of black people's perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence. This racist trope then exploded in American popular culture, becoming so pervasive that its historical origin became obscure" (Black). Jaybo not only eagerly eats the watermelon, but then continues to spit out the seeds in a playful manner, confirming that the connotations Southern whites made for the fruit are still present today (1:10). Another character that is taken from early Tom & Jerry cartoons, is the small child playing the drums on the rhythm of the music. The child is playing a make shift drum with bones, while also wearing a bone in his hair as a form of decoration. He is wearing nothing more than a loin cloth (1:58).

The chorus that lists eight African American stereotypes is emphasized in the music video by showing illustrations of each said caricature. During the first chorus, these caricatures are displayed above O.J. Simpson on an American football field (1:02). During another chorus, Jaybo is walking through various landmarks, which includes the Eiffel Tower and the pyramids in Egypt. Wherever he goes as a black man around the world, Jaybo is "still a nigga" (3:23). During the final chorus, the eight caricatures are shown once again. The caricatures are literal illustrations of their stereotypes ranging from minstrels, cannibal natives, warlords, and sharecroppers, as can be seen in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 (3:39).

The video is full of slave imagery, from the ships, to an auction, to lynching. Jay-Z continues his disdain of house slaves in his video as he portrays them looking stern and proud in front of a plantation home with a Confederate flag flying high above (1:20). In a later scene, Jaybo is walking through a slave ship, emerging out on the balcony as it then turns out that the ship is a luxury yacht. The sailors are white and salute him (3:10). African American intelligence is also put on blast, with Jaybo's psychiatrist drawing naked women on his notepad while Jaybo is listing his problems (1:52).

The Ku Klux Klan are first introduced by a burning cross. The cross is placed upon a hill, (perhaps a nod to John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill") overlooking the field slaves picking cotton

(2:14). The cotton is then shipped to a cotton mill, where the cotton is transformed into Klan members (2:18). The very same cotton the slaves are picking is used to oppress them. In addition, Jaybo's characters pulls off his white hood while stating "Still nigga". Even though he is a Klans member, underneath the white clothes he is still black and nothing is able to change that fact (2:27).

The music video depicts three black athletes in a stadium after winning a gold medal. One of them is Jaybo, but the other two are Olympic athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who famously raised their fists in support of Black Power at the 1968 Olympics (3:27). This ties the music video to the Black Lives Matter-movement, where athletes are similarly protesting the American flag and national anthem.

In the final scene of the music video, Jaybo is using a space shuttle to fly away from earth. As he disappears, so do the countries on the globe. Slowly the continents disappear, leaving behind a bare, and white, globe (4:08).

"The Story of O.J." is able to highlight racism and the importance of financial freedom through an innovative music video. He walks through America's racist past, while rapping about its present. Creative director of the music video Lisha Tan finds, "It's as if our lead is looking back in time and commenting on those issues in retrospect" (Price). The lyrics and the visuals complement each other, and builds upon the sample used by Nina Simone. Instead of presenting four female African American archetypes, Jay-Z presents us with eight male stereotypes. In the end, he concludes, that whether a "rich nigga, poor nigga" his skin is still black and he is still perceived as nothing more than black. Jay-Z argues that financial freedom is the key to success and independence.

### Chapter 3: Kanye West and "Black Skinhead"

In the third chapter I will focus on Kanye West and his song "Black Skinhead", which was originally stylized as "BLKKK SKKKN HEAD", from his sixth album *Yeezus* which was released in 2013. As with the previous chapter, I will first describe the context in which the song was released and give a few facts about the album *Yeezus* itself, which explains the why the song sounds sonically abrasive and radically different. Then I will start to analyze the lyrics, before finally critically engage with the music video. I will finish the chapter with a short overview of crucial points discussed in the close readings. For the sake of this thesis, I will refer to the song as "Black Skinhead" and not the stylized name.

#### 3.1 Context and background

In 2013, Kanye West released his sixth studio album *Yeezus*. The album is a great departure of the musical style he exhibited on his previous album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010) which was called West's "most lavish record" by Time Magazine (Browne) and compared to a "Picasso-like" painting by the Los Angeles Times (Powers). *Yeezus* can be regarded the complete opposite with experimental rap beats, leading more to an alternative style of hip hop than West had ever done before. The orchestras from *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* are gone and replaced by a sonically abrasive piece of work. The record can be described as minimalistic and uses mostly electronic instruments.

*Yeezus* can be described as an anti-Kanye West album. The inspiration for it came from a concrete Le Corbusier lamp (Caramanica). The lamp in question mirrors West's album perfectly; it's minimalist and industrial. This inspiration also sets West apart against other hip hop artists. Where Jay-Z is focused on business and the longevity of wealth, and using art as an investment, West is looking to art as an inspiration for his own work.

In a review, critic Greg Kot for the Chicago Tribune called *Yeezus* "hostile, abrasive and intentionally off-putting". In addition to being minimalist, the album does not seem to attempt to create beautiful symphonic sounds. West purposely incorporated glitches into his music, such as the sound of a CD skipping or perhaps a corrupted MP3 (Raymer). Autotune is used to the point where the vocals sound distorted and incomprehensible.

"Black Skinhead" was produced by Daft Punk and West himself. The duo worked with the rapper before on previous albums. The song can be described as an industrial hip hop song, due to

the electronic production. The song was released as a first single of the album, but never managed to peak above spot 69 on the Billboard Hot 100.

The song is closely related to the punk movement, both in the title, the abrasive music, and the lyrics. "Black Skinhead" refers to the British subculture that arose during the 1970s. West sees himself as an African American version of a skinhead and uses the punk movement as an inspiration for the song. The punk movement has been noted for its dissatisfaction with social situations, which relates perfectly to West's song and his dissatisfaction of racism. On the other hand, the title can also be a play on white nationalist skinheads, and an ironic play on white nationalist ideology.

The song has notably been used in popular culture many times since its release. "Black Skinhead" served as a background song in film trailers for *Atomic Blonde* (2017), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) and *Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising* (2016). In addition, the song was featured heavily in the tv series *Underground* (2016), film *Suicide Squad* (2016) and in commercials for Toyota and sports events. It is very interesting to note that such a politically charged song, both lyrically and sonically, is used so often for mostly commercial reasons as it completely ignores the anti-establishment message of the song.

Music critic Carl Wilson summed up the song as "an enigma right from the title with a driving 'rock and roll' beat and an attitude that can be summed up in one line: 'Fuck every question you askin'" (slate.com). Where Jay-Z's "The Story of O.J." was fairly straight forward in its message, "Black Skinhead" is much more abstract and thus highly interesting to investigate.

### 3.2 Lyrics

"Black Skinhead" can be described as a racially-fueled riot anthem. West both tackles racial injustice as personal injustice in his song, using many metaphors and imagery to make his point. In addition, West is particularly anti-establishment. Besides lyrics, he uses a lot of non-descript vocals to make his point, which I will cover later in this chapter. West's lyrics are not as straight forward as Jay-Z's lyrics in "The Song of O.J.", which will leave for multiple interpretations.

The song begins with a humming voice, heavily distorted to form the basis of the melody for the song. This is combined with a form of heavy breathing in combination with heavy drums, immediately indicating the almost tribal feel of the song, connecting it to blackness right from the beginning. West begins to rap in the first verse, opening with: "For my theme song (black)" (1). As stated before, "Black Skinhead" can be considered a riot anthem or more specifically, an anthem for African Americans, as confirmed by the background vocal chanting "Black". The lyric is also a

connection to one of West's earlier songs "Power", where he states "Screams from the haters, got a nice ring to it / I guess every superhero needs his theme music" (3-4). This reaffirms "Black Skinhead" is indeed some sort of an anthem for West's haters, who those haters are is still up for debate.

Next, he raps "My leather black jeans on" (2), which can refer either to *Yeezus* rock and roll style, or it can be seen as a play of words where he means to say "My leather black *genes* on", referring of course towards his own race. In the following lyric, "My by-any-means on (3)" West refers to Malcolm X and the speech he made during the founding rally of the Afro-American Unity in 1964, where he vowed to bring the right to be respected as a human being in society and the right to be free *by any means necessary* (X). West continues his riot anthem by exclaiming: "Pardon, I'm getting my scream on" (4).

Then, he brings the focus to racial inequality by giving his own relationship with reality star Kim Kardashian as an example. In addition, he finds that as a wealthy black man he does not simply cross a line to a post-racial society. Even black man on the top of the world are discriminated:

"Enter the kingdom

But watch who you bring home

They see a black man with a white woman

At the top floor they gone come to kill King Kong" (5-8)

As a successful musician, West has entered 'the Kingdom'. The kingdom of the wealthy? The kingdom of whites? It is a combination of both. In these lyrics, West tackles interracial dating. He has been scrutinized for dating Kim Kardashian, a white woman. He then connects himself to King Kong, who famously stood above the top floor of the Empire State Building. West is now also at the top floor in regards of success, yet as a black man it is still not accepted to date a wealthy white woman.

West further plays on the King Kong reference, by stating: "Middle America packed in / Came to see me in my black skin" (9-10). This serves both as a way to describe people coming to see him as King Kong as if he were an animal in the zoo, as to the audience who come to see him for his concerts. In my opinion, he is then mostly referring to the white audiences who come to see his shows, but then also criticize him after for his behavioral antics. He also refers to slavery with a play on words. 'Middle passage' was a stage of the triangular trade where millions of Africans were 'packed in' and brought to America as slaves.

By this point, West is getting angrier in his lyrics. "Number one question they're askin' / Fuck every question you askin'" (11-12). West notoriously does not do much press and hates to be

asked questions by the paparazzi. This is where the song shifts into the anthem against all of the so-called haters, both of him personally as well as white people in general. He finds that many people hate on him because he is a black man and is too opinionated:

“If I don’t get ran out by Catholics  
 Here come some conservative Baptists  
 Claiming I’m overreactin’  
 Like them black kids in Chiraq bitch” (13-16)

West often receives critique from Catholics for using the name of Jesus, as well as portraying himself as a God. The album title *Yeezus* is play of his own nickname, Yeezy and Jesus. On the album, he has a track called "I Am A God" where West suggests through playful lyrics that he is a God. In a radio interview with Zane Lowe for the BBC West related his perhaps ‘God-complex’ to classism:

“We got this new thing called classism. It’s racism’s cousin. This is what we do to hold people back. This is what we do. And we got this other thing that’s been working for a long time when you don’t have to be racist anymore. It’s called self-hate. It works on itself. It’s like real estate of racism. Where just like that, when someone comes up and says something like ‘I am a god,’ everybody says ‘Who does he think he is?’ I just told you who I thought I was. A god. I just told you. That’s who I think I am. Would it have been better if I had a song that said ‘I am a gangster’ or if I had a song that said ‘I am a pimp’. All of those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me, right? But to say you are a god, especially when you got shipped over to the country that you’re in and your last name is a slave owner’s. How could you say that? How could you have that mentality? (West qtd. in Wickman).

West relates self-hate to racism, finding that simply because he is black his statements are ill-received by the general public. West raps that people find that he is overreacting, similarly like the children in Chicago are overreacting, referring to the many gun deaths in the city. In 2017, there were 650 murders and 2,785 shooting incidents in Chicago (Park). What West is trying to convey is a sense of helplessness. Whatever the position, African Americans are constantly downplayed and not taken seriously. In addition, he finds that he is not allowed to express himself in a way that white people can and is often condemned for his own beliefs.

The chorus of "Black Skinhead" leads up to the explosive bridge of the song. Here, West is hyping himself up, rapping:

“Four in the mornin’, and I’m zonin’  
 They say I’m possessed, it’s an omen

I keep it 300, like the Romans  
 300 bitches, where the Trojans?  
 Baby we livin' in the moment  
 I've been a menace for the longest  
 But I ain't finished, I'm devoted  
 And you know it, and you know it" (17-24)

He precludes his mood by stating it is the middle of the night and he is completely 'in the zone', so far as much as to say he is possessed. He then makes (an incorrect) reference to the film *300* (2006), which depicted a battle between the Spartans and the Trojans. He then continues to set the mood for the rest of the song, stating that he is devoted to making art and if that comes with an unpredictable and perhaps bad image, so be it.

That leads us to the bridge, where West is at the height of the song:  
 "So follow me up cause this shit 'bout to go (down)  
 I'm doing 500, I'm outta control (now)  
 But there's nowhere to go (now)  
 And there's no way to slow (down)  
 If I knew what I knew in the past  
 I would've been blacked out on your ass" (25-30)

He then ends with the same distorted humming as used previously in the song, ending his rant very abruptly. The bridge continues with the same mood as the chorus. It is almost a war cry, which refers back to the *300* reference he made during the chorus. He is rapping to hype up his fellow men, getting them ready for battle.

In the second verse, West raps about the archetypal cartoons of African Americans that Jay-Z similarly used in his video for "The Story of O.J.":

"Stop all that coon shit  
 Early morning cartoon shit  
 This is that goon shit  
 Fuck up your whole afternoon shit" (31-34)

The word coon has been pejoratively used to refer to African Americans as a racial slur.

West continues to lift himself up, rapping "I'm aware I'm a wolf / Soon as the moon hit" (35-36). This is also a play on words, as 'aware I'm a wolf' can be heard as 'werewolf' when spoken fast. As stated before, the song "Black Skinhead" has notably been used in the trailer for *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), which accidentally coincides with the lyrics. West knows he is the best

musician in pop music: "I'm aware I'm a king / Back out the tomb bitch / Black out the room, bitch" (37-39).

On the next few bars, the rallying cry for battle becomes increasingly apparent. This is when "Black Skinhead" fully reveals itself for the riot anthem it was promised to be. It makes sense for the song to do so, considering all the references made to punk music and the link between punk and protest:

"Stop all that coon shit  
These niggas ain't doin' shit  
Them niggas ain't doin' shit  
Come on homie what happened  
You niggas ain't breathin', you gaspin'  
These niggas ain't ready for action  
Ready-ready for action" (40-46)

West is calling out all his peers and fellow African Americans to rise up. He finds that they have been lackluster in their protest and have lost their ambition to rise up and become better. He knows that he has made it himself and is a king (and perhaps a god) of music. His peers, on the other hand, are falling behind.

He rounds off his rallying anthem by stating his frustration by simply repeating the word "God" 11 times during the outro. While this at first glance can simply be seen as yet another reference of West calling himself a god, it can also be read as a repeated frustration towards both racism, and the lack of response from his peers to protest.

### 3.3 Music video

West released the music video for "Black Skinhead" on July 21, 2013 after the video was leaked to the Internet a few weeks before. The video was directed by photographer Nick Knight. Knight released a photography book that documented the subculture of the British East End skinheads which may also be a coincidence, since Knight worked with West on several projects before (Harris). The "Black Skinhead" music video is much more abstract than "The Story of O.J.", leaving room for many interpretations.

The video was highly innovative due to its interactive nature. Viewers could control the speed of the video, allowing them to take screenshots which they could then subsequently post on social media. When interacting with the video, the cursor morphed into a middle finger. In a press

release accompanying the video clip, West explained that “image captures can be synched, posted and shared across all online and mobile social platforms for a unique secondary experience of the traditional music video” (qtd. in Battan). West uses this interactive feature for the music video to transcend traditional boundaries, creating it especially for online use, which correlates with the fact that *Yeezus* was West’s final album to be released on CD. West’s next project *The Life of Pablo* (2016) was released solely online on streaming platforms.

The music video opens with a shot of Black Ku Klux Klan members (0:05). Visually, it seems to be a negative colored version of white Ku Klux Klan members since the colours are inverted. The background is stark white, highlighting the contrast between black and white as can be seen in Fig. 6. Only the eyes of the Klan members can be seen which appear to be closed, only to open seconds later as Doberman Pinchers slowly begin to appear on screen. It is as if the Klan members are transformed into three aggressive dogs (0:10).

Next, the screen is filled with the muscular backs of several black men (0:17). As the drums of the song kick in, a close up of one of the men is seen as he makes his appearance in the form of a CGI animation. He appears to be hyper-muscular. In addition, his face is blacked out and hollow. He then begins to dance and jump on the rhythm of the beat (0:38).

The moment the first verse begins, the figure is transformed into West himself. He is animated in a similar CGI-style (0:58). His face is not hollow, but is hardly distinguishable from the black background. One thing in clear focus is his diamond necklace. As the song progresses, West’s face becomes increasingly visible, revealing a diamond grill in addition to his necklace.

Background images in the video clip correspond with the lyrics of the song, projecting very brief shots of King Kong and the same Doberman Pinchers as seen before. The CGI-version of West begins to slowly evolve throughout the song, as the animation appears to glitch, resulting into abstract and geometrical shapes (1:42). It seems as if West’s skin is breaking up into tall spikes, and once again his face completely disappears and becomes unrecognizable. West does not look remotely human anymore, which is shown in Fig. 7.

In the final stages of the music video, West seemingly loses all of his jewellery and clothes, revealing a naked version of himself covered in tribal tattoos and scars along his back as seen in Fig. 8 (3:05). This seems an obvious nod to slavery. Then, morphs back into his old self, before the music changes and he again is naked. It is as if he is going back to his roots. Perhaps this is his way of saying that underneath all of the success, he will always be regarded as black (and African) only. On the other hand, it could also be a tribute to his heritage. The video ends with West (including) jewellery with his arms wide open as the camera slowly zooms in (see Fig. 9).

The video does not have a storyline, and offers the viewer a set of visuals to accompany the music. This correlates with the interactive feature of the video. Every single shot is worthy of a screenshot and is aesthetically pleasing.

“Black Skinhead” can be described as an anti-establishment song that tries to rally fellow African Americans to rise to action. West raps about his own experiences with racism and stereotypes, finding that even as a successful musician, he is still not privileged in the same way successful white people would be. The abstract music video accompanies the sometimes abstract lyrics and abrasive music. Down at its core, “Black Skinhead” is a protest song. West finds that the solution to end racism and stereotypes is to action and start fighting for freedom.

## Chapter 4: Kendrick Lamar and "Alright"

In the fourth and final chapter I will analyze Kendrick Lamar's song "Alright". Firstly, as usual, I will give some background details and contextual references to the song. Secondly, I will take a critical look at the lyrics, before thirdly looking at the music video accompanying the song. I will end chapter 4 with a short summary of the findings presented in this chapter.

### 4.1 Context and background

Kendrick Lamar released his third studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly* in 2015. The album focuses on several central themes: racial inequality, African American culture, and institutional discrimination. The album was originally planned to be named 'To Pimp a Caterpillar'. The title would be an homage to Tupac, since the title has his name hidden within. In an interview Lamar revealed that he changed caterpillar to butterfly when an online blog caught onto the abbreviation before the release of the album, spoiling the hidden message. He stated that:

"Me changing it to butterfly, I just really wanted to show the brightness of life and the word 'pimp' has so much aggression, and that represents several things. For me, it represents using my celebrity for good. Another reason is, not being pimped by the industry through my celebrity." (qtd. in Stutz)

Lamar uses bad stereotypes to his own advantage with *To Pimp a Butterfly*. He also expresses a similar sentiment as Jay-Z: using their wealth and power as a celebrity to do something good.

The album earned Lamar eleven Grammy nominations, setting a new record for most nominations for a rapper in a single night (Kennedy). Critics lauded the album finding it weaved "together free jazz, Parliament-Funkadelic era funk, spoken word, slam poetry and live instrumentation and lyrics that looked inward and outward at issues like fame and depression, politics, race, class and beyond" (Kennedy). *To Pimp a Butterfly* topped the list of 'Best Album of 2015' 51 times, including those by Rolling Stone, Billboard, Pitchfork, Complex, and Vice (Dietz).

The song "Alright" served as a fourth single and was released on June 30, 2015. It was produced by Pharrell Williams and written by Lamar himself, with additional writing credits by Mark Spears and Williams. "Alright" opens with lines from the book *The Color Purple* (1982), stating "Alls my life, I has to fight" which continues to be the running theme throughout the song. On "Alright", Lamar "channels the struggles of modern black experience in America while also recognizing hundreds of years of struggle that led to this point" (Gilbert). The song received four

nominations at the 58th Grammy Awards for Song of the Year, Best Music Video, Best Rap Performance and Best Rap Song, winning two awards (grammy.com).

The song has been noted as a “the anthem of a generation” and “the anthem of a modern civil rights movement”(Gilbert). Pitchfork named "Alright" the best song of 2015, finding that the song works as a soundtrack of a movement due to “its holistic sentiment as a siren against innumerable injustices” (Schnipper). During a protest in Chicago against a rally for the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, the crowd began to sing “We gon’ be alright!” in unison when the rally was cancelled (Gilbert). The song was used again in 2015 by a Black Lives Matter assembly (Gilbert).

A performance of "Alright" at the BET Awards sparked a controversial debate regarding the song on FOX News, where contributor Geraldo Rivera stated that:

“This is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years. This is exactly the wrong message. And then to conflate what happened in the church in Charleston, South Carolina with the tragic incidents involving excessive use of force by cops is to equate that racist killer with these cops. It’s so wrong. It’s so counterproductive. It gives exactly the wrong message.” (qtd. in Williams)

Responding to Rivera, Lamar wondered “How can you take a song that’s about hope and turn it into hatred?” (qtd. in Williams). He went on to explain that hip-hop as a genre is not the problem of the current situation, but rather reality is the problem (Williams). Hip hop is not glorifying violence (or at least, Lamar’s songs are not) and are a reflection of society, whether that be positive or negative.

Out of the three songs chosen in this thesis, "Alright" fits the Black Lives Movement perfectly. The song has become synonymous to the movement, making it unmissable for this thesis.

## 4.2 Lyrics

The lyrics for "Alright" highlights a moment of hope for African American amidst the current political and racial tensions in the United States, especially focusing on police brutality and racism. The song is perhaps the most straightforward in referring to the Black Lives Matter movement in comparison to “The Song of O.J.” and "Black Skinhead".

Kendrick Lamar begins "Alright" with the following spoken intro:

“Alls my life I has to fight, nigga

Alls my life I...

Hard times like, “God!”

Bad trips like, “Yeah!”  
 Nazareth, I’m fucked up  
 Homie, you fucked up  
 But if God got us, then we gon’ be alright” (1-7)

This introduction immediately sets the tone for the rest of the song. Lamar states that during his entire lifetime he always had to fight. This is a clear reference to Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* where the main character finds herself saying the exact same words. It is also an indication that since the publishing of the novel more than 35 years ago the United States is not in a post-racial society. In addition, Lamar highlights the (personal) importance of religion, stating that everything will be alright as long as God is watching over him (and his peers).

This message of hope is repeated throughout the hook, which is sung by Pharrell Williams who also produced the song. The hook remains the same throughout the entire song, and repeats ‘We gon’ be alright’ as if it is a constant reminder:

“Nigga, we gon’ be alright  
 Nigga, we gon’ be alright  
 We gon’ be alright  
 Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon’ be alright  
 Nigga, we gon’ be alright  
 Huh? We gon’ be alright  
 Nigga, we gon’ be alright  
 Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon’ be alright” (8-15)

The song does not have a definable chorus and the hook is easily repeatable and catchy. This is the part often chanted by crowds in relation to the Black Lives Movement.

In the first verse reflects on Lamar’s personal situation, finding that “Uh, and when I wake up / I recognize you’re look at me for the pay cut” (16-17). Lamar realizes the music industry is only looking to him for economic purposes. While Lamar writes uplifting, critical and personal records, the industry is solely there for his profit. This could also be a reference to a 2016 research by Nielsen that concluded that “Black Millennials are 11.5 million strong and leading a viral vanguard that is driving African-Americans’ innovative use of mobile technology and closing the digital divide” (“Nielsen 2016 Report: Black Millennials Close the Digital Divide”). Young African Americans appear to be a vital consumer market and Lamar finds that brands and businesses are only looking towards African Americans as a means to make profit.

He then raps “But homicide be looking at you from the face down / Was MAC-11 even boom with the bass down?” (18-19). While young African Americans are a highly profitable market of consumers, they are also often the victims of homicide. In this case, it is unclear whether Lamar is referring to black-on-black crime, or police brutality, but perhaps it is a reference to both. In 2016, the total Black homicide victims were 7,881 people, which was 1,305 more than the number of white victims, which is worrying considering that African Americans are only 13 percent of the United States’ population (Mac Donald). A MAC-11 is a semi-automatic hand gun that can be silenced with a sound-suppressor. While the line is a literal reference to a gun, it is also a reference to black suppression and how police brutality and institutionalized racism is silenced.

In the next bars, Lamar reflects on his personal life: “Schemin’, and let me tell you ‘bout my life / Painkillers only put me in the twilight / Where pretty pussy and Benjamin is the highlight” (20-22). The painkillers he used merely sedated him and brought him to a place where women and money (referring to Benjamin Franklin on the \$100 bill) are welcoming him. In the following lines, he continues by apologizing to his mother for giving in to these vices:

“Now tell my momma I love here, but this is what I like, Lord knows  
 Twenty of ‘em in my Chevy, tell ‘em all to come and get me  
 Reaping everything I sow, so my karma comin’ heavy  
 No preliminary hearings on my record  
 I’m a motherfucking gangster in silence for the record  
 Tell the world I know it’s too late  
 Boys and girls, I think I gone cray  
 Drown inside my vices all day  
 Won’t you please believe when I say” (23-31)

Lamar realizes it is too late to change the past and he has to accept his previous actions and bad decisions. Again, this section of the first verse focuses on his personal life rather than a bigger movement such as the Black Lives Matter-movement.

During the pre-hook, these themes of racism and discrimination return again. It leads up to Pharrell William’s hook and works as a prelude.

“Wouldn’t you know  
 We been hurt, been down before  
 Nigga, when our pride was low  
 Lookin’ at the world like ‘Where do we go?’” (32-35)

In these lyrics, Lamar refers to African Americans specifically, finding that they have been undermined and racially discriminated before. This is in relation to slavery, but also the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. He continues by rapping:

“Nigga, and we hate po-po  
 Wanna kill us dead in the street of sho’  
 Nigga, I’m at the preacher’s door  
 My knees gettin’ weak, and my gun might blow  
 But we gon’ be alright” (36-40)

Here, Lamar references police brutality by referring to the colloquial term ‘po-po’. In the first half of 2017, American police shot and killed 492 people, of which 26% were African American males (Sullivan). This is a disproportionately large number. Lamar is not the first rapper to express his distaste for the police. Almost 30 years before Lamar released "Alright", the rap group N.W.A. infamously released their song "Fuck tha Police", expressing similar sentiments. It was also this exact lyric that sparked Fox’s Rivera’s comment that hip hop has done more to damage young African Americans than racism (Williams).

During the pre-hook, Lamar also continues the theme of religion, finding himself at the preacher’s door asking for forgiveness for his sins. However, he has spent so much time praying that he is getting impatient. His gun might literally blow, but it also an allegory for taking action. He ends the pre-hook that even though the United States throws many hardships at African Americans, they are going to be alright.

After Pharrell Williams’ hook, Lamar turns to the second verse. “What you want: a house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar?” (49-50). Here, Lamar refers to Gen. Williams T. Sherman’s Special Field Order 15 which offered forty acres of land to African American slaves who had been freed after the Civil War (McCammon). This order was more commonly known as “40 acres and a mule” (McCammon). After President Lincoln’s assassination, President Johnson reversed the order, giving back the land to the former Confederate owners (McCammon). Lamar cleverly intertwines slavery within modern day objects, concluding that after all this time America is not a post-racial society.

He continues by rapping “Anything, see my name is Lucy, I’m your dog / Motherfucker, you can live at the mall” (51-52). Lucy is short for Lucifer, also referred to as the devil. In the play *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the devil takes on the form of a dog. In an indirect way, Lamar describes white people as the devil, trying to deceive him. He then calls out consumer culture and connects this to the devil, trying to lure him in with consumerism. “I can see the evil, I

can tell it, I know it's illegal / I don't think about it, I deposit every other zero" (53-54). Under the influence of the devil, Lamar can see good and evil, or perhaps, legal and illegal. Another way of interpreting this is that he sees the world in two extremes: black and white, which ties this lyric to race and police brutality. Yet, Lamar acknowledges his own personal greed, finding he has fallen for consumerism after all. "Thinking of my partner, put the candy, paint it on the Regal" (55). Here Lamar refers to a Buick Regal with candy paint, continuing on the path of consumerism. "Digging in my pocket, ain't a profit big enough to feed you" (56). Nothing can satisfy his greed and materialism. This central theme revolving around the devil, or Lucy, who tries to get him to act on his vices continues during the remainder of the second verse:

"Every day my logic get another dollar just to keep you  
 In the presence of your Chico  
 I don't talk about, be about it, every day I sequel  
 If I got it then you know you got it, Heaven, I can reach you  
 Pet dog, pet dog, pet dog, my dog, that's all  
 Pick back and chat, I trap the back for y'all  
 I rap, I black on track so rest assured  
 My rights, my wrongs; I write 'til I'm right with God" (57-63)

Lamar wants to keep Lucy, the devil, around for she brings him wealth. If he gets enough, he can reach heaven through consumerism. He sees the devil as his pet dog and no longer as an evil force from outside. However, in the end he releases that materialism is a vice and he changes his path. He starts to rap and continues to write until God forgives him for his sins. This is where the second verse ends, resulting in a much more religious and personal verse than the first.

The song continues with the pre-hook and hook before reaching the outro of the song. Here, the religious and personal theme:

"I keep my head up high  
 I cross my heart and hope to die  
 Lovin' me is complicated  
 Too afraid, a lot of changes  
 I'm alright, and you're a favorite  
 Dark nights in my prayers" (81-86)

This outro continues where the hook of the song 'u' ended. He admits that it is hard to love someone like him. His sudden fame results in a lot of change, of which he is afraid. Yet in the end

he concludes that despite everything he wants to fight. Everything is going to be alright, the central theme to the entire song.

This is not where the song "Alright" ends. Lamar finalizes the song with a spoken poem that continues on the second verse:

“I remembered you was conflicted  
Misusing your influence, sometimes I did the same  
Abusing my power, full of resentment  
Resentment that turned into a deep depression  
Found myself screamin’ in the hotel room  
I didn’t wanna self-destruct  
The evils of Lucy was all around me  
So I went runnin’ for answers” (84-94)

It is not entirely clear whether Lamar is referring to the devil inside him, or white people as the devil. Considering the personal yet political theme of the song, both interpretations are possible. This makes "Alright" a great song to investigate. Due to the duality in the song, listeners are able to project their own interpretations of the lyrics onto the song, using it to relate to it personal, or as a political anthem.

### 4.3 Music video

The music video for "Alright" was released on June 30, 2015. The video was shot on several locations in San Francisco and Los Angeles and is directed by Colin Tilley who directed many music videos for hip hop artists such as Rihanna, Chance the Rapper and Lil Wayne. Similarly to "The Story of O.J." and "Black Skinhead", the video was shot in black and white, portraying the lives of young African Americans in California through a series of different shots.

The video opens with black and white shots from Los Angeles, showcasing the lower-class lifestyle through industry and poor neighborhoods. Next, Lamar is heard screaming (which is not part of the original song) with visuals so it seems he is speeding along a tunnel (0:15). Then, he is reading a poem, part of which can be found in the original "Alright" song. The section he recites is new and originally belongs to his song "Mortal Man". However, it holds a lot of resemblance to the original outro from "Alright". The words are as follows:

“I remember you was conflicted  
Misusing your influence

Sometimes I did the same  
 Abusing my power, full of resentment  
 Resentment that turned into a deep depression  
 Found myself screaming in the hotel room  
 Lucifer was all around me  
 So I kept running  
 Until I found my safe haven  
 I was trying to convince myself the stripes I got  
 Making myself realize what my foundation was  
 By while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war in the city  
 I was entering a new one  
 A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination” ("Alright")

The visuals throughout the poem slowly begin to change. The quiet inner city life is disturbed by police presence (0:49). Buildings become more dilapidated and rioting occurs. Then, generic rap music begins to play. Lucifer (previously mentioned to in the song as Lucy) is possessing the young black men, enticing them into the world of fast money, violence and women (1:20). The same blacks are getting arrested, and right before the opening titles appears, a police man shoots another man off screen (1:43).

The next shot is of Lamar riding in a car with several of his friends, fellow rappers ScHoolboy Q, Ab-Soul and Jay Rock (1:58). He introduces new lyrics to the song accompanied by a new instrumental track:

“Ay on my momma nigga  
 I’mma be the greatest to ever do this shit  
 On my momma doe like  
 On the dead homies  
 Aye Sounwave turn this shit up nigga  
 Turn this shit up! Sounwave, turn this shit up nigga  
 Tell me who the bitch nigga hatin’ on me?  
 Jumping on my dick, but this dick ain’t free  
 ‘To Pimp a Butterfly’ another classic CD  
 Ghetto lullaby for every one-day MC  
 Nigga, now R.I.P.  
 My diligence is only meant to write your eulogy” ("Alright")

While Lamar presents his new verse the shot continues to focus on the car. Lamar and his fellow rappers are listening to the song, bobbing their head along on the beat. At the same time they are drinking alcohol out of paper brown bags. But then the camera begins to zoom out and reveals that the car is not driving along the road but it was rather an optical illusion. The car is being carried by four police men which can be seen in Fig. 10 (2:34). They are literally riding on the backs of police officers.

When the song "Alright" begins the music video loses its narrative and mostly focuses on distinct shots and scene to convey a larger meaning. These shots include Lamar and a younger boy driving in an American muscle car, throwing money out of the window (2:45); Lamar floating above the streets of Los Angeles almost like a guardian angel or superhero as can be seen in Fig. 11 (4:25); black men dancing on top of a police vehicle (3:02); Lamar rapping amidst a group of his peers (3:18); and traditional hip hop dancers are breakdancing in front of 1990s stereos (3:40). Amidst these scenes, several general shots depicting inner city life are added to the mix.

The ending of the music video is most notable. Lamar floats and lands on top of a traffic light overlooking the skyline of Los Angeles (5:40). He is followed there by a police vehicle. A white cop gets out of the car with a gun, but instead of using his weapon, he aims his two fingers at Lamar and 'pulls the trigger' (5:52). This is shown in Fig. 12. Just a wave of his fingers was enough to bring a black man down. A bullet goes through Lamar's torso, blood spluttering from his back, and he falls backwards, ending with the same poem the video began with (6:22). But Lamar is not angry or crying as he falls. When his body hits the ground, he begins to smile (as can be seen in Fig. 13). After everything: he is going to be alright (6:38).

According to the director of the video, the point was to show "the state of everything that's going on the world right now. It's also showing how one man can basically spread positivity through all of the madness that's going on and how everything is gonna be alright" (qtd. in Tardio). The rest of the individual shots evolved around this central idea. The inclusion of the hip hop dancers was a decision made to further reaffirm the positive note of the video clip, finding it is an act of celebration (Tardio).

In conclusion, Lamar presents the concept that everything will always be alright through very simple yet striking imagery. The black and white details add onto the divide between white and black people and while the video touches on difficult subjects, it manages to end on a positive note. The combination of visuals and lyrics makes the video highly inspiring.

All in all, Kendrick Lamar presents a song which is able to provide a sharp commentary on police brutality and racial injustice, while at the same time rapping about a hopeful future. In the end, everything will be alright. Another central theme of “Alright” is religion and how it is able to serve a role of support during these turbulent times for African Americans. The videoclip accompanies Lamar’s hopeful outlook, once again proving that the belief in God will help anyone get through anything.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The previous three chapters gave an analysis of three songs by three different artists. In this final chapter, the songs "The Song of O.J." by Jay-Z, "Black Skinhead" by Kanye West and "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar will be compared and contrasted before being linked to the Black Lives Matter-movement. I will argue why the songs are important in their own right with the help of the theories used in the first chapter to support my case.

As I have shown in the previous three chapters, the three songs are vastly different when taking the lyrics and visuals in consideration. Their differences stem from the personal backgrounds of the three artists, as personal history drives the varying approaches and solutions to the same struggle. The three artists all grew up in different cities, as well as in different personal surroundings. Jay-Z grew up in the projects in Brooklyn, New York. He was raised solely by his mother after his father abandoned his family. His lyrics focus mostly on being a business man and how wealth can set the black man free. Kanye West was born in Atlanta, Georgia, but raised in Chicago, Illinois. His mother was the Chair of the English Department at Chicago State University, while his father served as the first black photojournalist at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. West's work reflects the importance of art before anything else, often sacrificing money for the creation of art. Finally, Lamar was born in Compton, California. His father was a member of the street gang Gangster Disciples and his family had ties to the infamous gang the Bloods. We thus have three artists, Jay-Z being a traditional East Coast rapper, Kendrick Lamar being a West Coast rapper who grew up similarly to the N.W.A., and Kanye West who, unlike many rappers, had a middle class upbringing.

I want to look at the songs with the use of language and media, a subject on which Stuart Hall focused extensively. Language is able to construct media and is in turn closely linked to a representational system (Hall 1). Language works closely with symbols and signs. Symbols are vehicles that represent the meanings the sender wishes to communicate (Hall 5). Signs focus on the way the receivers are able to decode the symbols and interpret their meaning (Hall 5). Thus, both language and visual media are important means of conveying meaning. Stuart Hall also argues that representation is closely linked to media (1). The issue of representation and creating a dialogue as well as a narrative is omnipresent in the music videos in this thesis. W.J.T. Mitchell argued that "words and images" (in this case, lyrics and visuals) are inseparable for the struggles presents in political culture (3). In addition, issues of representation are closely related to the same concept of

"words and images" (3). The dynamic between the lyrics and the visuals in the music videos allow for highly political songs.

### 5.1 Lyrical differences

The lyrical content of the three songs are very different, yet at the core share similar themes and concepts. This can mostly be attributed to the personal background and upbringing of the artists. While all three songs focus on racism in general, the approach of the lyrics are vastly different, which provides three varying accounts of racism in a supposedly post-racial society.

"The Story of O.J." focuses on the acquisition of wealth and the longevity of wealth. Jay-Z raps "Take your drug money and buy the neighborhood / That's how you rinse it" (18-19) before stating he wishes he had invested in property instead of sports cars when he was younger, suggesting property are better investments. In the song, he also criticizes young African Americans throwing away their money in strip clubs, finding credit to be more important than reckless spending, something that is often promoted on hip hop records. This central idea of the longevity of wealth and using it as a way of freedom becomes very apparent in the second verse, where Jay-Z raps "Financial freedom my only hope / Fuck livin' rich and dyin' broke" (36-37). According to Jay-Z, the solution to end racism (or try to move past racism) is to establish oneself in business, striving for financial freedom and build generational wealth. This is a shift in mentality that bell hooks described as thinking that "money is the primary marker of individual success" (hooks 18). While Jay-Z still stresses that wealth is important, the focus is on survival, rather than individual success. He uses his money for charity, good will, personal freedom, rather than personal success. He does not flaunt it, he *uses* it for something good.

On "Black Skinhead", Kanye West uses his lyrics to carry anti-establishment thoughts. He does this by reversing "the white supremacist attitudes traditionally associated with the term 'skinhead'. Instead, West is a black man, rapping and screaming into a microphone—spewing *his* perspective unapologetically" (Bailey 225). West's song can be regarded as a battle song, a rallying cry for action. While the lyrics are much more abstract than Jay-Z or Lamar's song, the buoyant music and perhaps aggressive lyrics call out fellow peers who are, according to West, not doing anything to help overcome racism: "Come on homie what happened / You niggas ain't breathin', you gaspin' / These niggas ain't ready for action (51-53). West's both abstract music and lyrics are a reflection of his artistic background, especially considering he created the song to sound anti-hip-hop, conforming the anti-establishment notion of the song, creating an almost Dadaist sound.

"Alright" by Kendrick Lamar focuses on something else entirely. Where Jay-Z highlights financial freedom and West almost creates a call for arms, Lamar hopes to find strength in religion as he actively searches for God and forgiveness in his song, stating "Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door / My Knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow / But we gon' be alright" (38-40). In the end, he puts his trust in God, hoping that everything will be okay in the end. Lamar raps this almost literally, "But if God got us, then we gon' be alright" (7). In addition, Lamar mentions the devil (mentioned to as Lucy) repeatedly throughout the song, trying to entice him with drugs and money. Lamar puts his faith in God to steer him in the right direction, thus providing us with another solution to perhaps surviving America.

The three songs hence have different underlying messages, however, one central theme conveyed in all the songs is racism, and especially, stereotypes. Richard Dyer found that stereotypes mostly has a negative connotation and can be regarded as a term of abuse (11). By using stereotypes in a music video, these artists are able to subvert stereotypes and use them to their own advantage. This is especially important, since stereotypes are closely connected to power (Dyer 13). In turn, these artists are using negative stereotypes to shed light on racial inequalities. Jay-Z lists eight African American male stereotypes in "The Song of O.J.": "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga / Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga" (4-5). He then concludes that despite the stereotypes, despite being rich or being poor, he is "still nigga" (6). What Jay-Z thus tries to argue is that despite all the success in the world, African Americans are still reduced to nothing more than "niggas". While stating that financial freedom is African Americans' only hope, he finds that in the end, racism prevails and the only way to overcome is, is to invest and create better living spaces and opportunities for minority groups.

Kanye West portrays a similar notion of racism in "Black Skinhead". In the verse first, he offers the perspective of a successful and wealth black man, finding that:

"Enter the kingdom

But watch who you bring home

They see a black man with a white woman

At the top floor they gone come to kill King Kong" (5-8)

Just like Jay-Z, West finds that despite his success and his ability to stay at the penthouse, he is still seen as an outsider, a monster, perhaps, who has no place in dating a white woman. His song references slave narratives and Malcolm X, and he comments on the continuous murders that are present in Chicago (referring to it as Chiraq, a combination of Chicago and Iraq). While Jay-Z gives very specific accounts of stereotyping, West comments on racism much more globally.

Kendrick Lamar focuses on a different kind of racism. His perspective is that of the average man living in poor neighborhoods such as Compton. He disregards the wealthy perspectives that Jay-Z and Kanye West bring. He highlights the inner-city problems such as gang violence and more importantly, being seduced by the "gangsta lifestyle" bell hooks describes (26). He is the only artist of the three to comment on police brutality in his lyrics: "Nigga, and we hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'" (35-36). What Lamar offers in terms of stereotypes is the fact that he acknowledges that the idea of the 'gangster' in the projects is a real figure who is struggling in day to day life. While he recognizes that this stereotype is perhaps true, he does not true to glorify the figure, but instead, offers that a religious surrender could bring peace and perhaps an end to the struggle.

All in all, by using stereotypes and creating African American visuals *by* African Americans, Jay-Z, West, and Lamar are steering away from a white supremacist way of thinking. As stated by bell hooks, the media is dominated by internalized racist images created by white people (1). She argues that it is necessary for African Americans to alter the representation on blackness by creating their own visuals (7). By using stereotypes, or by acknowledging the stereotypes are real but not necessary *negative*, Jay-Z, West, and Lamar are creating and shaping their own black narrative without the influence of internalized racism.

## 5.2 Visual differences

The lyrics of the songs are supported by a set of visuals in the form of music videos. Visually, the three songs could not have been more different. The aesthetics of the video clips again reflect the personal history and upbringing of the three artists, similarly to the lyrics. One striking characteristics that is present in all three videoclips is that they are shot and animated in black and white. While it can be said that black and white aesthetics can serve as a way to portray the divide between black and white people, the function differs in all three music videos.

W.J.T. Mitchell argues that all forms of media can be regarded mixed media (5). This is especially true in the case of Jay-Z, as well as Kanye West's music video. While the lyrics both support and influence the visuals, the fact that the videos are animated adds another form of media. Jay-Z's "The Story of O.J." is an animated videoclip in the style of a 1930s cartoon by the likes of Universal and Walt Disney. The characters in his music video are racially stylized and offer a sharp commentary on stereotypes. The function of black and white in this case is perhaps more historical (in addition to the literal meaning of the divide between blacks and whites). Many earlier films that

came out throughout the beginning of the 20th century were shot and animated in black and white. It creates a sense of authenticity that brings his animated music video to life.

While Kanye West's "Black Skinhead" is also animated, the two music videos look vastly different. West relies on a form of CGI and distorted images to create his characters and they are mostly unrecognizable throughout the video. In his case, black and white is used as a contrast and is in addition to being aesthetically pleasing, used to highlight the gap between African Americans and whites. He also uses the colors as a way to invert familiar images. He turns a representation of three Klu Klux Klan members into three *black* Klu Klux Klan members, similarly as the title of the song suggests a "Black Skinhead" rather than a white skinhead.

Kendrick Lamar is the only artist in this thesis with a live action music video shot in and around Los Angeles. Black and white is often used to emphasize a bleak outlook. However, I feel this narrative does not fit Lamar's music video for "Alright", considering the uplifting message of the song. Instead, the use of black and white can again be used to highlight the divide between blacks and whites, or similarly to Kanye West used aesthetically.

Another comparison between all the music videos is the use of abstract imagery. Jay-Z uses cartoon figures that transform throughout the video; West does something similar and distorts himself into glitched out CGI versions of himself; and Lamar finds himself being shot down by a cop who uses an imaginary gun. Strikingly, both Jay-Z and Lamar use a particular shot of themselves (or their characters) flying over the neighborhoods like a form of guardian angel, a protector.

W.J.T. Mitchell argues that visuals and verbal representations are "inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture" (3). These three songs prove that the combination of the lyrics (words) and the music video (images) make for a highly compelling political commentary. The visuals reinforce the lyrics, and vice versa.

### 5.3 The songs in relation to the Black Lives Matter-movement

Music can be seen as a form of entertainment, but music is also able to provide a grounded experience of a lived experience (Peddie 16). When musicians from disadvantaged political situations share their insights, this can lead to highly critical political pieces of music. However, since protest music is nearly always cyclical, most of these songs are related to specific moments in time (Peddie 19). The three songs in this thesis were specifically chosen because they are closely related to the Black Lives Matter-movement and recently released. The hip hop genre has been no stranger to protest songs throughout the last couple of decades, but by choosing three songs that are

released post-2010 I have decided to specifically focus on the songs in relation to the Black Lives Matter-movement.

The song most obviously connected to the Black Lives Matter-movement is "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar. According to music journalist Jamilah King, the song has "helped bring hip-hop back to its political roots. And in the pantheon of contemporary black music of struggle, it's helped animate some of the day's most stringent activism" (King). The song has been hailed as a protest anthem, and has been used numerous times by protesting crowds in the form of chants (King). The lyrics of the song make it undoubtedly accessible to the Black Lives Matter-movement, with the most obvious lyric being that of "Nigga, and we hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'" (35-36). Artist Anderson Paak found that the song is one of the biggest records in the world (O'Connor). He noted that the song's success was down to the lyrics, finding that "You might not have heard it on the radio all day, but you're seeing it in the streets, you're seeing it on the news, and you're seeing it in communities, and people felt it" (qtd. in O'Connor). Kendrick Lamar realized "Alright" had become an anthem for Black Lives Matter when he heard crowds in various places sing the lyrics:

"When I'd go in certain parts of the world, and they were singing it in the streets. When it's outside of the concerts, then you know it's a little bit more deep-rooted than just a song. It's more than just a piece of a record. It's something that people live by—your words." (qtd. in Coscarelli)

He notes that the song was a record of hope and feeling (Coscarelli).

Kanye West's "Black Skinhead" is not as obviously connected to the movement as "Alright", but the song can almost be considered call for arms. Rolling Stone stated that "Next time someone says America is post-race, play 'em this, and watch their head explode" ("100 Best Songs of 2013"). West uses fiery beats and lyrics, the drums that kick off the songs almost mimicking the sound of a battle drum. While his song does not openly reference instances such as police brutality, the song does actively highlight racism, stereotypes, and can thus be more considered as an anti-establishment aggressive battle cry.

Like West's song, Jay-Z "The Story of O.J." does not openly reference the Black Lives Matter-movement or key elements associated with the grassroots movement. The way it subverts stereotypes and argues for financial freedom above anything else makes it however very notable. Especially the music video uses stereotypes to highlight common practices of racism in contemporary society by highlighting that African Americans males are reduced to being "black", regardless of their personal success.

All in all, while not all the songs openly reference the Black Lives Matter-movement, the songs offer an interesting perspective on modern day racism in the form of stereotypes by subverting them. Jay-Z does this by illustrating the stereotypes quite literally in his music video; West by inverting white racist figures; and Lamar by spinning the well-known story of the Compton gangster towards a more positive story, thus creating a positive stereotype out of one known to be negative. Even though the Black Lives Matter-movement is most known for its protests against police brutality, these three songs prove that racism is still alive and well in what is supposed to be a post-racial society. These songs offer narratives that are important to consider for the movement. All three artists offer their own solutions with freedom as an end goal. Jay-Z states financial freedom; Kanye West calls for participation in combatting racism; and Kendrick Lamar suggests to look to God. Representation in music is important. By subverting stereotypes African Americans are able to provide their own 'stereotypes' in music and thus popular culture. This can be considered a form of protest in the search for identity, but also to combat racism.

While hip hop is supposedly in a "terrible crisis" (Rose 1), these three songs prove that hip hop can steer away from the toxicity it is associated with. The songs combat "hyper-behaviorialism" and open up the conversation into racism and representation, all while fitting into a broader framework that is the Black Lives Matter-movement. Considering hip hop is immensely popular among African Americans as well as the broader public sphere (Bakari 201) Jay-Z, West, and Lamar contribute grounded accounts of not only familiar racial struggles, but also provide a means of solution to the forefront. While Russell A. Potter found that hip hop has steered away from political and social protest in the form of music, these three artists prove that protest has once again become part of the genre. While these songs are not directly involved in politics like President Barack Obama was once part of the hip hop community (Forman par. 27), these songs can be considered more of a grassroots type of protest meant to be shared through social media as fits perfectly with the Black Lives Matter-movement that began with a simple hashtag. Bakari finds that hip hop does not have a clear political agenda (178). This remains true. As proven in my thesis, three separate artists provide three separate accounts of similar problems. They have their own ways to express their disdain, and this allows for varying means to showcase both societal and political problems that deserve to be criticized. In addition it is a means for African Americans to create their own narrative that is in turn then presented to a wide audience through radio, television and most importantly the internet to not only their peers, but the entire United States.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In the digital age where grassroots movements can be started on social networking sites such as Twitter, lyrical and visual contents of songs are more easily shared than ever. Hip hop artists like Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar have the ability to share important political messages through hip hop. They provide sharp commentaries in their own way in their lyrics, but also in the music videos accompanying the songs. Issues such as police brutality, race, and stereotyping are all highlighted in their music, proving that hip hop can provide more depth than rapping about sex and violence.

### 6.1 Summary

This thesis began with pondering the following research question: How does hip hop fit in the Black Lives Matter-narrative and how do the personal perspectives of several key artists subvert racist contemporary stereotypes about African American men? This research question was supported by three case studies of post-2010 hip hop songs by three separate artists. These were Jay-Z's "The Song of O.J.", Kanye West's "Black Skinhead", and Kendrick Lamar's "Alright".

My argument is supported by several key theoreticians. These included theories of blackness, race and representation by Richard Dyer and bell hooks; theories on music and visual culture by Stuart Hall, Ian Peddie, and W.J.T. Mitchell; and finally theories on hip hop by Tricia Rose, Kitwana Bakari, and Russell A. Potter. These theories proved that stereotyping is omnipresent in contemporary American society, and that language, culture, and music provide a foundation for protest songs and commentary.

Then, in the following chapters, the focus shifted to the case studies, where both the lyrical and visual content of the three songs mentioned were investigated through a close reading and finally contrasted in a final discussion chapter. While the overarching theme of racism and stereotyping were present in all three songs, several key differences could be found between them. Jay-Z focuses on financial freedom and the longevity of wealth; Kanye West focus is on creating a call for arms; and Kendrick Lamar looks towards God for help and delivers an uplifting message despite all the hardships. While not overtly mentioning the Black Lives Matter-movement, the three songs fit the grassroots movement perfectly. They provide grounded experience of African American struggles that can be shared all over the world through the internet.

### 6.2 Conclusion

Protest music is omnipresent in hip hop culture. The genre has the reputation of being overly misogynistic and that it glorifies violence, drugs, and money. That idea can be considered a stereotype on its own. Hip hop can be much more than merely that oversimplifying stereotype. As with many genres, hip hop offers many different types of music, as is proven by the three artists Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar. Lyrically, sonically, and visually, the three songs ("The Story of O.J.", "Black Skinhead", and "Alright") sound very different and nothing alike, all while belonging to the same genre.

All three artists thus present their perspective on racial freedom and stereotypes in their own different ways. These can all be viewed as contemporary protest songs, that fit the narrative of the Black Lives Matter-movement, a grassroots movements that focuses on racial equality besides police brutality. These differences in the music by the three artists are caused by their interpersonal lives and upbringing. This is the key to the different perspectives and it shows that racism can happen at the lower class (Kendrick Lamar), middle class (Kanye West), and eventually when the rapper turned businessman made it to the top, also at the upper class (Jay-Z).

The research questions going into this thesis was: How does hip hop fit in the Black Lives Matter-narrative and how do the personal perspectives of several key artists subvert racist contemporary stereotypes about African American men? Through their personal backgrounds, these artists are able to subvert racist contemporary stereotypes and offer a protest song that fits the digital age and grassroots movement of the Black Lives Matter-movement. I argue that hip hop is much more than the problematic lyrics the genre is known for. These artists provide sharp commentaries and grounded experiences on important matters such as racism. By using ironically using stereotypes, subverting them, or spinning the stereotypes towards something more positive, these artists contribute to the debate about racial inequality. Both the lyrics and visuals of these songs strengthen the message these three artists are trying to convey. Through the use of social media and the availability of the songs over the internet, their messages are now more accessible than ever.

### 6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

There were several limitations that I encountered during the research of this thesis. Due to the range of my thesis, there were several key elements that I could not fit in any of the chapters. The first being the amount of songs used as case studies. All three artists have other songs worthy of investigation. In addition, there are many other artists that I have not mentioned at all. In the case of

Jay-Z, it would be highly interesting to investigate songs from his early career, including the 2004 song "99 Problems" where he raps about racial profiling by the police force. Kanye West's first album *The College Dropout* (2004) highlights themes of education, which is a subject scarcely tackled in hip hop culture and Kendrick Lamar often celebrates being black in his music, which would be interesting to relate to stereotypes.

Many other hip hop artists are likely as important as Jay-Z, West, and Lamar, but could not be included in this thesis. Artists such as Drake, Ty Dolla \$ign, J. Cole, Migos, 21 Savage, Travis Scott, Childish Gambino and Khalid would all be fit to be used as a case study. In addition, it would be compelling to research the topic of racism and stereotypes from a female perspective with artists such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, but perhaps also female rappers of an earlier generation such as Missy Elliott and Eve. It would furthermore be engaging to tackle the topic from a white perspective. Recently, more and more white hip hop artists have emerged such as Post Malone, G-Eazy, Iggy Azalea and of course Eminem. At the BET awards in 2017, Eminem freestyled a rap he called "The Storm", where he criticized U.S. president Donald Trump. He stated that "Any fan of mine who's a supporter of his / I'm drawing in the sand a line, you're either for or against" (qtd. in Armstrong, 64-65). As a rapper with predominantly white fans, it would be engaging to research what the effect of criticism on Trump can have on their personal opinions. How far does hip hop's influence reach?

Another limitation I encountered during my research is the lack of modern hip hop theories. Many of the academic texts I found were primarily focused on hip hop as it became known during the 90s and early 00s. In my opinion, hip hop today has grown and varies from hip hop that was released decades ago. The same can be said for any genre of music, and why would hip hop be any different? It would thus perhaps be worthwhile to research contemporary hip hop in general, in addition to focusing on several separate case studies.

All in all, regardless of my limitations, I argued that hip hop has evolved from rapping about sex, drugs, and violence, to a political mouthpiece. During the ongoing Black Lives Matter-movement, the three songs "The Song of O.J.", "Black Skinhead", and "Alright" have all contributed in their own unique way, providing various new insights and perspectives to themes as racism, stereotypes, religiosity, and freedom.

## Appendix

The appendix features a collection of screenshots from music video's by Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar.



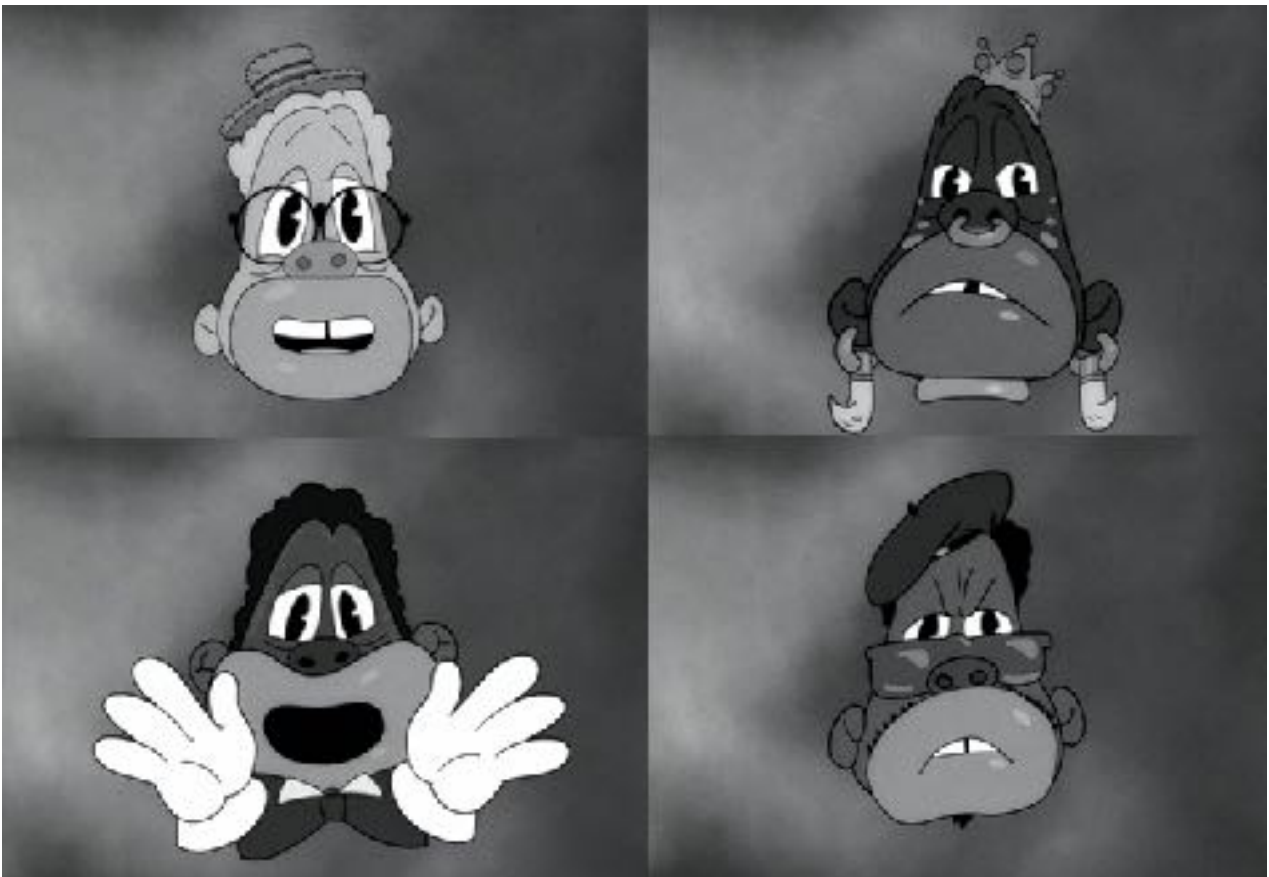
**Figure 1.** The introduction of Jaybo in "The Story of O.J.". Screenshot 0:15 (*The Story of O.J.*, Dir. Romanek, Mark)



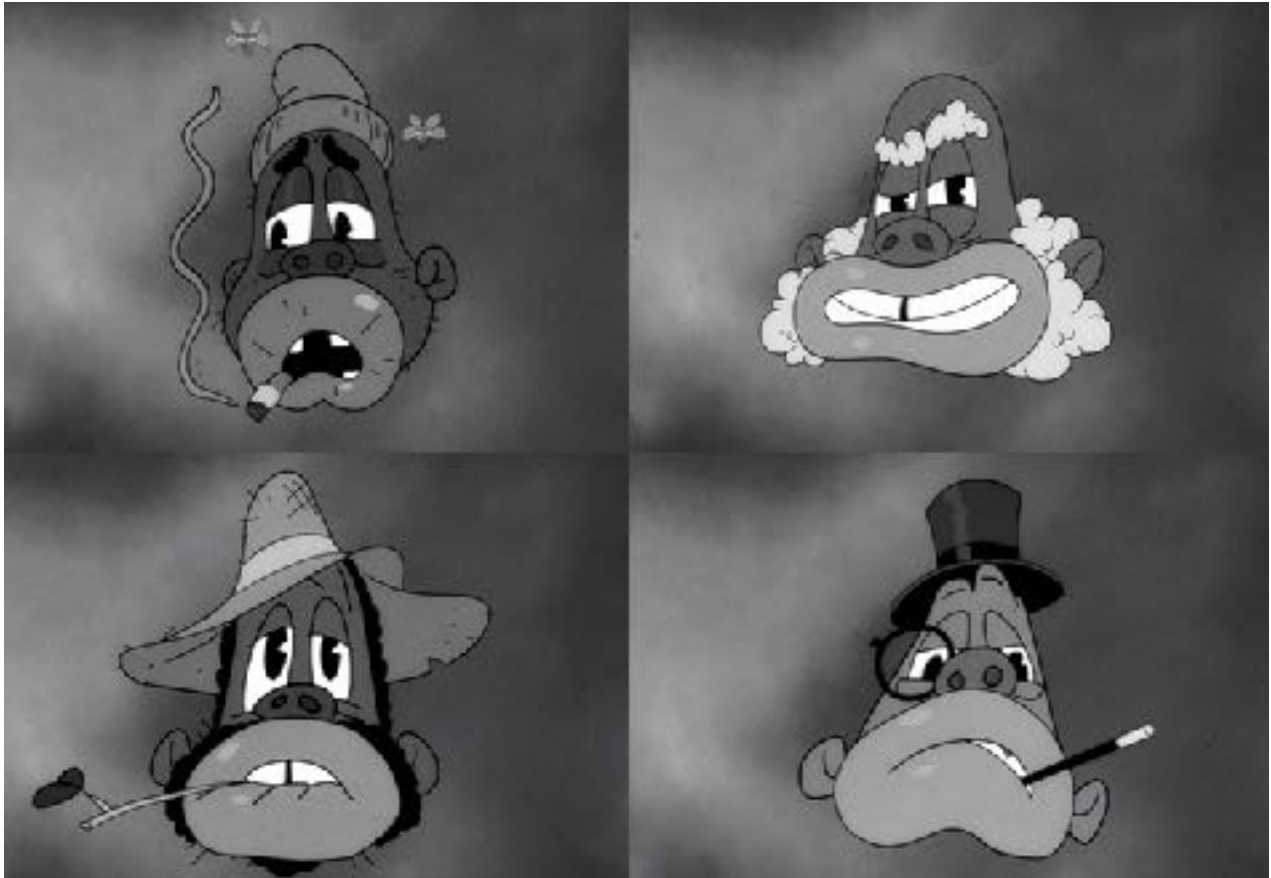
**Figure 2.** A racist and stereotypical representation of an African American as presented in an animation short by Universal. 3:29 (*Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat.*, Dir. Lantz, Walter)



**Figure 3.** Jaybo eating a watermelon in "The Story of O.J.". Screenshot 0:57 (*The Story of O.J.*, Dir. Romanek, Mark)



**Figure 4.** Four of the African American male stereotypes in "The Story of O.J.". Screenshot 3:39 (*The Story of O.J.*, Dir. Romanek, Mark)



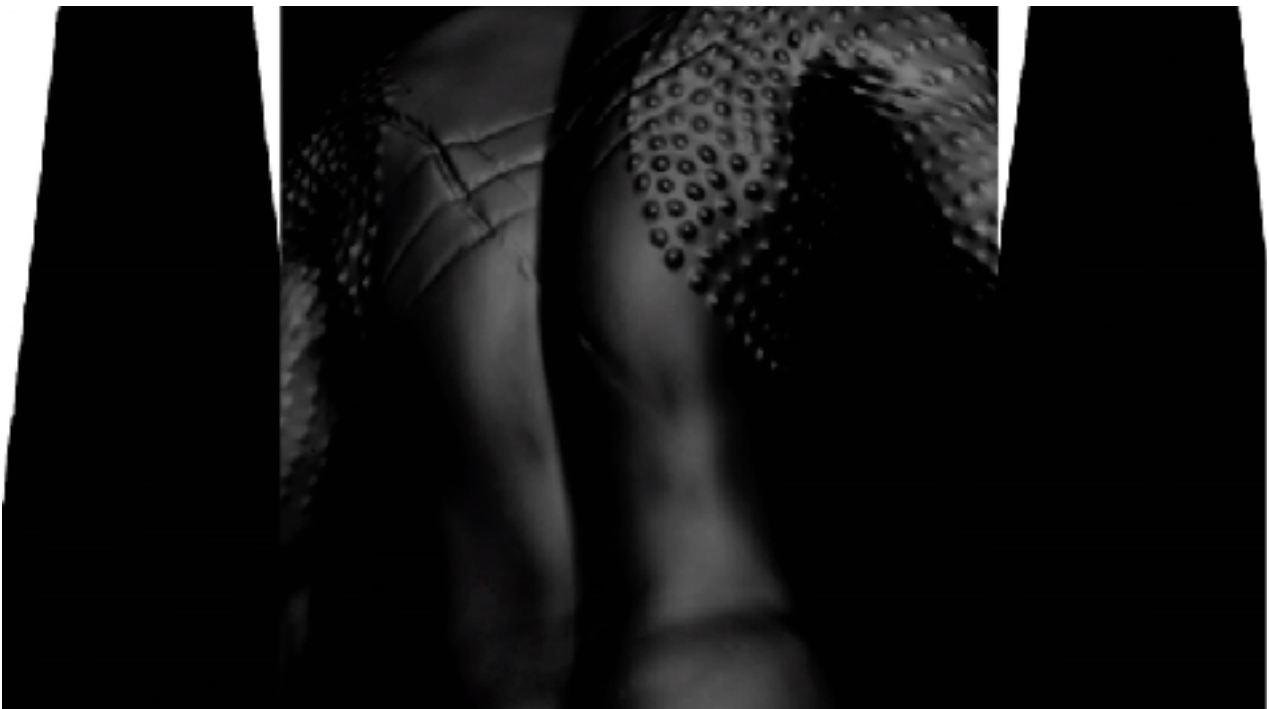
**Figure 5.** Four of the African American male stereotypes in "The Story of O.J.". Screenshot 3:39 (*The Story of O.J.*, Dir. Romanek, Mark)



**Figure 6.** Klu Klux Klan imagery in "Black Skinhead". Screenshot 3:39 (*Black Skinhead*, Dir. Knight, Nick)



**Figure 7.** A CGI version of Kanye West in "Black Skinhead". Screenshot 3:39 (*Black Skinhead*, Dir. Knight, Nick)



**Figure 8.** Kanye West's scarred back and tribal-like tattoos in "Black Skinhead". Screenshot 3:06 (*Black Skinhead*, Dir. Knight, Nick)



**Figure 9.** Kanye West at the end of the "Black Skinhead" music video. Screenshot 3:32 (*Black Skinhead*, Dir. Knight, Nick)



**Figure 10.** Kendrick Lamar riding in a car that is being carried by police men in "Alright". Screenshot 2:35 (*Alright*, Dir. Tilley, Colin)



**Figure 11.** Kendrick Lamar floating over the streets Los Angeles as some sort of guardian or superhero in "Alright". Screenshot 4:20 (*Alright*, Dir. Tilley, Colin)



**Figure 12.** A cop shooting down Kendrick Lamar using only his fingers in "Alright". Screenshot 5:57 (*Alright*, Dir. Tilley, Colin)



**Figure 13.** Kendrick Lamar smiling after being shot down in "Alright". Screenshot 6:40 (*Alright*, Dir. Tilley, Colin)

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