Inquiry Question: How does the music video for “DNA”, by Kendrick Lamar Duckworth represent the struggles of African American Men in the 21st century?

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth’s “DNA” music video holds a focus on the negative stereotypes that white people have regarding African American men. He explains this mainly in the beginning of the video; here, Kendrick uses his own life experiences to show the interrogator that he doesn’t know how he was brought up. Kendrick in this scene represents the struggle that Black men in America face with white people, and the law. Overall, the music video illuminates the fact that Black men, as a majority, have been brought up in a background that white people as a majority wouldn’t be able to empathize with.

Kendrick Lamar sets a focus on Black men in his music video for “DNA”. This focus creates a very serious, frustrated mood when capturing emotions of those Black men. To further emphasize the disparity in treatment of Black men compared to Black women, he continuously cut back and forth from the men, who looked very serious, to the women, who were having a fun time without a care in the world. The beginning scene of
the music video reinforces the idea of the negative stereotypes that come with being a Black man in the United States: Kendrick Lamar is handcuffed to a table and hooked up to a polygraph machine inside of an interrogation room. Don Cheadle is conducting the interrogation. Once the interrogation is about to start, Cheadle turns on the polygraph machine. Right away, the polygraph machine starts scribbling all over the place, implying Kendrick is lying, even though he hasn’t spoken yet, alluding to the idea that Black Men are assumed guilty in the eyes of the law and must prove themselves innocent. These specific circumstances brought up in the music video are implying that due to the upbringing of Black men, they tend to have a societal disadvantage.

These Black men that Kendrick is representing now have learned to live using double consciousness. The topic of double consciousness comes from Du Bois essay, “Of our Spiritual Strivings” where he explains his many frustrations that, despite civil rights being passed, Black Americans still were not getting the treatment that they were entitled to. As a result of the Black American struggle of the times, these same Black Americans faced double consciousness: “This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks in on amused contempt and pity.” (Du Bois 3) This means that as a result of the already tough times for Black Americans, they also dealt with the internal conflict of having to make decisions based on two factors: How other Black people would react to their actions, and the worrisome part, how white people would react to their actions. When tied into the plot of Kendrick Lamar’s “DNA” music video, Kendrick is showing that Black American Men are currently facing internal conflict on how to act because white people as a majority are not able to empathize with them.
The Music Video for “DNA” tells the viewer that white people have false stereotypes of African American Men probably because of misinformation of some sort. In Thomas King’s “You’re not the Indian I had in mind”, King, being of Cherokee descent himself, shares his life’s struggle overcoming false Indian stereotypes rooted from photographs with misguided depictions of “Authentic Indians.” Photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis is a prime example of someone who unintentionally created a false image of Indians: In the United States in the 1900s people were mesmerized with the thought of the “Authentic Indian”, a noble, heroic man, dressed in vibrant clothing, often with feathers. Curtis traveled the United States to find this ideal Indian to take photos of an to sell to Americans. Since Indians did not all look or act like Americans idolized, Curtis would bring along “Indian” clothing and other such props to create the ideal image. In doing this, Curtis inadvertently created a false image of Indians that Americans for decades would continue living by. Throughout King’s essay, he includes many examples of stories where he and his people were unfairly stereotyped and discriminated against. King does this because of his firm beliefs that stories are the only construct that allow for accurate perceptions of other ethnicities and races. Applying this message to the music video for “DNA”, Kendrick makes it very clear that the African American Male experience is very unique as he continues to mention it is “Inside my DNA.” Kendrick means that the Black male experience cannot be correlated to any other experience, including the Indian experience. Therefore, Kendrick believes that Black American Men face internal conflict on how to act and because other races will never be able to empathize with their upbringing.
Kendrick Lamar makes implications in his music video for “DNA” that Black men are “marked” and face unfair consequences as a result. In Deborah Tannen’s “Wears Jump Suit. Sensible Shoes. Uses Husband’s Last Name”, she gives the example that women in the workplace are “marked” based on a standard of what they are expected to wear. By the term marked in context, it means that there are certain standards, not always fair, that people hold women to, primarily based from women’s appearance. Tannen then elaborates on that example by giving the examples that women must make decisions that are marked, such as wearing makeup, whether they will wear attractive or comfortable shoes, etc. And unfortunately for women, Tannen explains that marking can have unintended assumptions presumed of women. An example from the article is in the situation that “a woman’s clothing is tight or revealing (in other words, sexy), it sends a message — an intended one of wanting to be attractive, but also a possibly unintended one of her availability.” (Tannen 2) Here we see just in the case of women, marking leads to these assumptions where issues could possibly arise.

To know the true impact that marking has on people, we must learn about cases where marking led to discrimination. Charles Wilson’s “Perceptions of African American Police Officers on Racial Profiling in Small Agencies”, reasons for racial profiling are broken down to completely understand the fundamental causes of profiling. Racial profiling is a type of marking, just geared towards race and is more often harmful to people of that race. According to Wilson factors that can cause racial profiling (or marking) of Black men are “Factors such as trait variability, group variability, in-group versus out-group membership, group entitativity, and cross-categorization” (Wilson 4). This marking of behavior has been recognized by many white police officers, leading to a
spike in the ill-advised arrests of Black American Men in the United States this decade. Colliding Tannen’s and Wilson’s respective ideas, it is clear that marking is capable of producing damaging results to people affected by this. Relating this back to how Kendrick frames his music video, he is saying that the marking of Black men in the United States is a factor causing increased incarceration rate for them.

Kendrick Lamar is implying that the cultural forces that contribute to racial inequality are present in American society, and especially law enforcement. Derrick Brooms article, “It’s Simply Because We’re Black Men” writes about the typical themes that are seen among the broad range of discrimination against African American people and relates it to the “Black experience”. Within the theme of murder of Black men, multiple African American college students were interviewed on the topic to corroborate the Black experience with insight of their thought to that theme. A twenty-one-year-old student, Jeff, explained that in his lifetime, he has only known a history that suggests that a high majority of murders on Black men stem from race. Jeff was not the only person that agreed with this, almost fifty percent of the participants believed something along the same lines of the point Jeff made. This takes us back to the point that perspective of this pressing issue is key.

Kendrick realizes that perspective is key to this sensitive topic of race. “Dotting the American Cultural Landscape with Black Meaning” written by Christopher Driscoll shows how Kendrick used his music and videos as a way of voicing his politics and societal frustrations. According to the essay, politics, often involving Black men and women, are very important to Kendrick Lamar. “DNA” is not the only instance of this: Many of the other songs on the same album “Damn.” And on his earlier album “To Pimp
a Butterfly” express the same kind of message showing his specific perspective of the problem. With this in mind, the perspective he shares proves that Kendrick is calling for change, but doesn’t necessarily expect much change to come because of the lack of perspective that white people have in the situation.

Throughout the music video, Kendrick Lamar continuously suggests that White Americans cannot empathize with Black American men. What we must ask ourselves is “why?”. It is because we need to take perspective. Black men in the United States are getting murdered and incarcerated at higher rates than ever seen before. To see your own culture being taken down one by one is something that White people in the United States haven’t experience and probably will never have to experience, which is why they will never truly be able to empathize. All in all, Kendrick’s words tell all that there is to be told in this situation. The one white person showed in the music video appears at the second half of the lyric “My DNA not for imitation. Your DNA an abomination”. Kendrick’s success through all of his struggles show that the black experience is hard to go through, but as he puts it, its inside his DNA.
Cited Sources


