

# Collision. Hip Hop and Event

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Abstract

This essay examines hip hop as an aesthetic practice capable of transcending the ideological fantasies of race and racism existing today. White supremacy and the hegemonic structure of the social order are too often considered inevitable and without viable alternatives. By confronting death as the wound caused by the continual reproduction of white supremacy in American society, Kendrick Lamar demonstrates a radical aesthetic rendering of Alain Badiou's theory of points and eventual subjectivity insofar as he focalizes the subject as agent of change, turning the listener toward the void of death beyond the limits of the social order and thus beyond the seeming inevitability of its reduplication. By understanding the sonorous and spatial features of Lamar's "These Walls," and the song's affinity with Bernini's use of space in *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, this essay takes hip hop as a spatio-aesthetic practice of liberation, highlighting the interface between the subject and the objective world and the role *jouissance* plays in modulating the social order. Aesthetically, hip hop is capable of producing a rupture in the social order analogous to Walter Benjamin's description of divine violence; although to an outsider this rupture might appear violent, to those engaged in the struggle, aesthetic praxis as a means of intervention contains an undeniable truth necessary for the continuation of anti-racist movements against the static truths governing subjectivity in the present.

Keywords

Alain Badiou  
Hip Hop  
Kendrick Lamar  
Liberation  
Space



The continuation of white supremacy through legalistic and extra-legalistic means and the incessant systematic violence perpetrated upon black Americans by the police and vigilantism, carve out the material substratum of everyday life for black American citizens. These hard realities of racism function as though inevitable in society, as though predestined to be reduplicated daily: unchanging, implacable, and unceasing. Such a cycle is what Walter Benjamin described as mythical violence—a lawmaking and law-preserving violence which sustains and reduplicates state power.<sup>1</sup> In response to this mythical cycle of death and violence, Kendrick Lamar's latest album *DAMN.* (2017) features a chorus of voices directly addressing the reduplication of this cycle, asking, “is it wickedness / is it weakness / you decide / are we going to live or die?”<sup>2</sup>

Lamar's opening gesture identifies the listener as the source of reduplication of mythical violence as the chorus of voices calls out, “you decide,” highlighting the interface between the call and the subject's position within the repetitive structure of the social order—or what Byoung-Chul Han calls “*the inferno of the same.*”<sup>3</sup> In this way, Lamar seeks salvation not through mechanisms within the social order like communicative reason or legal reform but rather through the wound that the social order itself generates. As in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882), “the spear, alone that made it shuts the wound”—only a gesture which turns the subject traumatically toward the wound of white supremacy has the potential to disrupt and transcend the social order, ideology, and hegemonic facts upheld by the fantasy of white supremacy.<sup>4</sup>

By focalizing the listener as subject and turning toward this wound, Lamar approaches Badiou's description of “the point”: the moment the subject confronts the transcendental world situation by being called toward the event.<sup>5</sup> For Badiou, the subject of the event encounters a choice in which only a binary “yes or no” is made available. Either the truth of the event is affirmed and the subject undertakes a truth-procedure to enact the truth of, in this case, freedom from the oppressive repetition of the racist social order; or the truth is disavowed, and the possibility of the truth is closed, sealed off, and the situation or social order is reduplicated.<sup>6</sup> “The point” is thus interventional, functioning as a hinge upon which the subject pivots toward freedom and event or resorts to the symbolic system and institutional logic which reproduces subjectivity in the present. By developing the question of life or death and questioning the seemingly inevitable unfolding of mythical violence and systematic white supremacy, Lamar transforms the listening subject into an agent of possibility, producing a cut in the repetitive structure

that outlines the social situation. The cut, like the Wagnerian wound, turns the subject toward the possibility of producing a new truth without resorting to utopian gestures of reconciliation; the wound continues to gape while the subject braves the trauma thereby produced.

Lamar employs a sophisticated braid of sonority and spatiality in his aesthetic practice. In “These Walls” from *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), Lamar uses the technique of panning—switching a sound on and off in stereophonic speakers so that the sound seems to move between the right and left sides of the audible space—in order to focalize the listener as subject of the space of the sonorous landscape created by the song. Anna Wise’s voice is heard early in the song—saying repeatedly, “if these walls could talk”—only to break apart and oscillate between the left and right speakers, emphasizing the way in which the sound surrounds the listener.<sup>7</sup> This presentation of the sound through oscillation momentarily disrupts the listening process, jarring the listener out of the music in a semi-Brechtian mode, and in turn offers a note of reconciliation when both sides of the stereo are restored in tandem with one another, giving way to the rhythm and tone that comprise the song’s pop/funk groove. Lamar raps in syncopation with the groove, deploying the metaphor of “these walls” as both vaginal walls and prison walls respectively, associating freedom with sexual enjoyment and confinement with sexual impotency.

This groove is interrupted two thirds into the song when the beat discontinues and the music shifts to a minor key accompanied by a wailing saxophone. This tonal and rhythmic shift is in turn followed by Lamar’s revelation of the trauma underpinning his hyper-sexualized lyrics, as he raps, “killed my homeboy and God spared your life / dumb criminal got indicted same night,” directly addressing the individual who murdered his childhood friend.<sup>8</sup> This revelation produces a cut in the music, exposing the listener to the traumatic underside motivating both the sonority and the lyrical content of the song, ostensibly reducing the pop/funk groove to a fetish-like projection deployed in order to conceal this traumatic episode from Lamar’s past. The opening up of this wound delivers the listener to the truth embedded in the song; the oscillation between freedom and confinement and between pleasure/pain, are suspended by Lamar’s revelation of the truth: the murder of Lamar’s friend. “If these walls could talk” thus acquires the meaning “if the truth could speak.”<sup>9</sup>

The combination of the panning technique and the withholding and exposing of the traumatic wound share a particular affinity with the Baroque sculptural technique of spatial inclusion. For instance, Bernini's famous *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647–1652) features a marble sculpture of a royal audience carved in high relief, which flanks both the left and right sides of the main stage upon which Teresa is portrayed being penetrated by arrows. These reliefs are composed of a handful of audience members all looking toward the scene unfolding before them as though the entire space spontaneously transforms into a theater. The spectator thus occupies the space of an audience member along with the flanking royal audience, included in the space as a witness to the divine scene unfolding before them. Lamar's panning technique performs a similar procedure; by stitching the listener sonorously *into* the work, as the pivotal point around which the scene unfolds, the listening subject becomes a presence in the work itself as though the material space opens up as a result of the listener's presence.<sup>10</sup>

Bernini and Lamar's works highlight a spatial antagonism, illuminating the often paradoxical relationship between the subject and the space they occupy; the subject enjoys the pop/funk sounds of "These Walls" and the grandeur of the divine light in *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* yet is wounded by Lamar's lyrical content; metaphors between vaginal walls and prison walls; murder, pain, and power; and the sublime violence of arrows penetrating Teresa's chest as her body lies limp. What is exposed through these works is therefore the complicated braid between the event as a point beyond immediacy and the subject's oscillating pain and pleasure thereof. Lamar and Bernini present the trauma of transcendence: they imply liberation through access to the point beyond immediacy; yet the freedom of this space is sutured to the trauma of breaking free from immediacy itself. The pleasure/pain binary (perhaps more poetically formulated as Eros/Arrows) introduces us to what Lacan calls *jouissance*: that which is beyond the pleasure principle. When Freud realized that the pursuit of pleasure was not alone in regulating the subject's psychic economy, he inspired Lacan's understanding of desire as an enjoyment which fundamentally exceeds the psychic economy. This excess is exposed as the subject's investment into the world in both Bernini's and Lamar's works—an excess which is fundamentally traumatic.

Mario Gooden's claim that "liberation is a spatial praxis" summarizes this intersection between architectural space, freedom, and *jouissance* as the staging ground for the subjective desire for transcendence beyond the limitations of the social.<sup>11</sup> Lamar's subject navigates through discourse

and social and spatial relations by identifying a point beyond immediacy, opening up new vectors of possibility for intervention, alteration, and modulation of the social order. This intersection could be thought in terms of Badiou's understanding of subjective choice and spatiality: "the points of the transcendental of a world define a topological space ... [which] amounts to saying: where there's a choice, there's a place," Badiou writes.<sup>12</sup> For both Gooden and Badiou, the subject is the agent of space, the topological operator which participates transcendently or architecturally in spatial praxes toward a redefinition of space as such. When Badiou states that "the point ... localizes the action of that truth to which an event has given the chance to appear in the world," he is suggesting that the subject arriving at the truth as the possibility for freedom domesticates it through embodied practices or "truth-procedures."<sup>13</sup> This act of domestication eliminates the distance between subject and object through material means: truth-procedures (art, science, politics, and love) function as interventional praxes which unfold the possibility of freedom for the subject. Gooden's notion of spatial practice as liberation can be considered a truth-procedure unfolded spatio-aesthetically toward the emancipation of black subjectivity under hegemonic whiteness and white supremacy congealed as spatial and social relations which define the prevailing social situation.

For Badiou, "[a]n event is an *interval* rather than a term," which means that the opening up of the space beyond the immediate social order (the rule of law, spontaneous ideology, facts which outline the current situation) turns the subject toward divine violence, which Walter Benjamin described as "the sign and seal but never the means" of intervention.<sup>14</sup> The event is thus a sign or name of the void which spatializes possibility as a formulaic interface between subject and world, staging the desire for freedom against oppression. The choice exists as the site where the subject is focalized and turned toward "the point" as the possibility of intervention, functioning as "a topological operator—a corporeal localization with regard to the transcendental—which simultaneously spaces out and conjoins the subjective (a truth-procedure) and the objective (the multiplicities that appear in a world)."<sup>15</sup> Simply put, it is at this juncture that the subjective act makes contact with the objective world, and the possibility for intervention is either acknowledged and undertaken as a process or turned away from and forgotten altogether. In Badiou's words, "there is a 'point' when, through an operation that involves a subject and a body, the totality of the world is at stake in a game of heads or tails."<sup>16</sup> The point marks the fulcrum whereupon the subject opts for either divine violence (the possibility of something new) or mythical violence (reduplication of the same).

In Lamar's music, the "totality of the world" is at stake between life and death; the listening subject is positioned as the focal point of the choice between the unfolding of a new space beyond the confines of white supremacy; life will either continue its mythical cycle of racism, or the acknowledgement of negativity through the wound can suspend the cycle and engender new possibilities through spatial and social relations. Although it will "always remain doubtful whether there has been an event or not, except to those who intervene, who decide its belonging to a situation," those turned toward the traumatic wound opened up through Lamar's aesthetic praxis are offered the chance to embody the truth of freedom voiced through hip hop as a medium and vehicle for change.<sup>17</sup>

Slavoj Žižek observes—apropos of Badiou's notion of event and Benjamin's divine violence: "the same act that, to an external observer, is merely an outburst of violence can be divine for those engaged in it—there is no big Other guaranteeing its divine nature; the risk of reading and assuming it as divine is fully the subject's own."<sup>18</sup> For Žižek, events like the protests and uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri following the murder of Michael Brown are acts of divine violence; although to external observers like Fox News or centrist liberals these events may appear violent, for those participating within they function as interventional spatial praxes beyond the mythical guarantee of the social order, which is held in place via police and vigilante violence and ideology. Although Lamar's lyrics imply the risk of trauma, pain, or even death; the truth beyond the social order, beyond the spontaneous conformity to social rule, and *beyond the pleasure principle* highlights the desire to transcend the limits of social space via the excess which cannot be sublimated adequately into the social order. Especially for black subjects in America, whose very bodily existence bars them from stabilizing a purchase in the racist texture of white supremacy, interventional praxes such as Lamar's, which focalizes the listening subject as the agent of spatial and transcendental change, are crucial ethico-aesthetic components accompanying the continuation of anti-racist movements.

## Notes

- 1 In his formulation of divine violence, Benjamin writes that police violence, which he considers mythical in structure, “is lawmaking, for its characteristic function is not the promulgation of laws but the assertion of legal claims for any decree, and law-preserving, because it is at the disposal of these ends.” Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 186-187.
- 2 Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, *BLOOD.*, Kendrick Lamar, Aftermath/Interscope, B0026716-02, CD, 2017. Although J.Cole’s album *4 Your Eyez Only* predates Lamar’s by a few months, lyrics from his introductory song *For Whom The Bell Tolls* ought to be read as the subjective response to the question posed by Lamar’s opening song, “the bells getting loud, ain’t nowhere to hide / got nowhere to go, put away my pride / tired of feeling low even when I’m high / ain’t no way to live, do I wanna die? / I don’t know, I don’t know!” Jermaine Lamarr Cole, *4 Your Eyez Only*, J.Cole, Roc Nation/Interscope, B002600-02, CD, 2016.
- 3 Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 1, Han’s emphasis.
- 4 Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, trans. Alfred Forman (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1899), 70, <https://archive.org/details/parsifalinenglis00wagnuoft>. Hans-Jurgen Syberberg’s *Parsifal* does just this by staging a literal gaping wound — a detachable partial object separate from Amfortas’s actual body. Although the wound is never healed, the direct address of the gaping, bloody wound alludes to a non-utopian understanding of salvation possible only through the wound itself, and not via its closure. “Dritter Aufzug,” *Parsifal*, directed by Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, (Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1999), DVD. Just as Adorno sought to save Wagner from those who regarded him as “the apostle of renewal,” so too we ought to resist the urge to interpret Lamar as offering a reconciliatory or redemptive alternative to the wound of white supremacy. Theodor Adorno, *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928-1962*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Chicago: Seagull Press, 2009), 78.

5 Badiou elaborates the subject of his theory of points as “the form of a body whose organs treat a worldly situation ‘point by point.’” “A point,” for Badiou, “is a transcendental testing-ground for the appearing of a truth.” The truth unfolds via the subject’s arrival at a point and fidelity to the event (truth-procedure). Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 399.

6 For Badiou, “[e]ach multiple of the world is ... correlated to a ‘yes’ or a ‘no,’” thus the structure of the event is always a gamble. *Ibid.*, 400.

7 Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, *These Walls*. Kendrick Lamar. Aftermath/Interscope B0022958-02. 2015. CD.

8 *Ibid.*

9 This formulation closely resembles Lacan’s infamous phrase, “I, truth, speak.” For Lacan, “there is no metalanguage,” and therefore “no language [is] able to say the truth about truth.” Rather, it is the truth itself that speaks through the unconscious. For Lamar, it is not so much the shift in the language of the music (the shift into a minor key for instance) which signals the truth, but rather the unconscious trauma which articulates myself through the shift in the song’s mood directly to the listener. At the beginning and end of multiple songs on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar recounts a primal scene—a panic attack that he suffered while in a hotel room. These interstitial ‘skits’ function as the truth of the unconscious speaking. See Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 855-858.

10 The sexual content of the works is important as well, as both artists demonstrate the link between sexuality and divinity (sexuality as the sphere of the spiritual) and the paradoxical relation between pleasure and pain. St. Teresa is penetrated violently by arrows, her mouth opened slightly as though in the throes of pleasure; and the ambiguous voice which opens “These Walls,” sounding at first like a muted trumpet, slowly comes into sonorous focus as a female voice either moaning in pleasure or groaning in pain.

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- 11 Mario Gooden, *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity* (New York: Columbia, 2016), 21.
- 12 Badiou, *Logics*, 401. Elsewhere, Badiou quotes Rimbaud, “I have found the place and the formula,” which, according to Badiou, articulates the subject’s orientation to truth as both a site and a matheme. Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, *There’s No Such Thing As a Sexual Relationship*, trans. Susan Spitzer and Kenneth Reinhard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 45.
- 13 Badiou, *Logics*, 401.
- 14 Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 206; Benjamin, *Reflections*, 300.
- 15 Badiou, *Logics*, 399.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 400.
- 17 Badiou, *Being*, 207.
- 18 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, (London: Profile, 2009), 200.

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