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5 October 2023

Alternative Commentary on Loneliness as Represented in Hip-Hop

Smooth, studio strings supplement rich, choir-like vocal chants as snappy percussion knocks on the melodic core. Each line delivers an emotional revelation or personal confession. Kendrick Lamar is not like other rappers. At least, that seems to be the takeaway from his latest album *Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers*, which sets its sights on Kendrick's own mental health. Lamar could've delivered an album focusing on any common hip-hop theme: struggle and success, culture and counterculture, oppression, relationships, etc. But instead he presents a rollercoaster of an account of mental health from trauma to therapy to solitude. This latter theme, captured in the final track "Mirror," is not often represented in mainstream hip-hop. However, 5 years earlier, Tyler, The Creator approached this theme of solitude with a similar rollercoaster of humor, depression, and self-jabs on "911 / Mr. Lonely". While this track is not as candid or mature as Kendrick's, a deeper analysis of it yields commentary on the same issues. "911 / Mr. Lonely" and "Mirror" both bring fresh perspectives on solitude and mental health to hip-hop. While both songs agree that honest introspection is necessary to heal, the latter suggests that our current relationships can become unhealthy while the former reveals how our yearning for connection can become obsessive.

In this essay I will seek to analyze "911 / Mr. Lonely" by Tyler, The Creator and "Mirror" by Kendrick Lamar independently, contextualizing them and honing in on their different approaches to loneliness. Then, I will explore the contrasts between the tracks and attempt to present an alternative analysis of "911 / Mr. Lonely" that contributes to the social commentary of "Mirror." When both of these tracks are understood thoroughly, I will conclude by summarizing their messages in a broader context.

The song "911 / Mr. Lonely" by Tyler, The Creator is a complete and expressive examination of loneliness. This track is divided into two parts but functions as a single song unified in theme. The first

part is an open cry for attention alongside more upbeat accompaniment, whereas the second part breaks down into a slightly darker, faster, and edgier self-analysis of how loneliness manifests. Tyler, The Creator established himself as an artist with a more alternative approach, unafraid of controversial lyrics or criticism. Despite this, he has achieved both mainstream and critical acclaim for his studio albums. “911 / Mr. Lonely” was Tyler’s first song in two years after his 2015 album *Cherry Bomb*. In that time, besides touring, Tyler explored areas such as television, fashion, music streaming, and social media. Considering that this track came at the end of all that, combined with the various self-references (such as the line “...yeah I got a sold out show / Crowd wild out but don't matter 'cause you not front row”), it follows that Tyler has a lot to say and a lot to reflect on in “911 / Mr. Lonely.”

Sonically and structurally, the song achieves a classic 90s hip-hop style with modern vocal work. The track opens immediately with crispy, saturated, and chopped drums that aren’t quite on beat. Over these drums, Tyler’s vocals enter as musical, layered, repeating phrases of “call me, call me.” The intro immediately conveys a sense of longing and disorder. It also establishes the singer (either Tyler or a character) as speaking out to an individual and/or the world. The track then jumps into an opening chorus with drawn-out backing phrases from feature Steve Lacey — a popular R&B/alternative songwriter — of “911... call me...” The theme of “911” characterizes Tyler’s loneliness as a potential crisis or emergency, as well as adding a subtle edginess to the track.

Tyler spends his first verse quickly explaining his state of isolation and suggesting to someone “If you fit description, hit me on my beeper.” The second chorus follows and adds a funky bassline and a light lead, moving the song’s energy forwards. The second feature Frank Ocean, another well-known R&B singer-songwriter, makes his debut in the second verse. He swiftly delivers nostalgia with the lines “Woke up in the ‘burbs, ‘burbs / With the birds, birds / Where you used to come and get me with the swerve, swerve / These days you gotta find time...” Clearly, things aren’t going as well as they used to. This first section (“911”) feels half-heartedly upbeat. It conveys a sense of floating along, possibly daydreaming of the past while complaining of present realities. The lyrics contrast slightly with the brighter musical vibe by conveying the expected message of loneliness.

The second half (“Mr. Lonely”) takes on a different tone — tempo increases, drums get tighter and more compressed, a scrappy 808 joins the mix, vocals drop in pitch, and synths get slightly harsher. The section is also consistent, with the beat playing until the end nearly nonstop alongside Tyler’s raps. Everything has more energy, as if the speaker has woken up from the previous section of daydreaming and is now fervently criticizing themselves and the world. The transition to this section loudly exclaims the protagonist’s position, just in case the listener wasn’t paying attention to the first section. “I can’t even lie, I’ve been lonely as f***” is chanted three and a half times. Tyler is now self-aware of his loneliness and other flaws, but seems to hate it and criticizes it with gusto. This meta-position is confirmed in the line “Writin’ songs about these people / Who do not exist, he’s such a f**** phony.” In this way, the section is a frustrated self-analysis. The speaker knows what’s wrong and has thought about it many times, but can’t seem to do anything about it: “Found myself long ago but I haven’t found some- one (Who?).” Tyler recognizes his social compensation for loneliness (“I say the loudest in the room / Is probably the loneliest one in the room (That’s me)”) and his worldly materialism (“I know you sick of me talkin’ ‘bout cars (Skrrt)... / That is the only thing keepin’ me company / Purchase some things till I’m annoyed / These items is fillin’ the void”). He arrives at a humorous, almost silly conclusion: “I never had a pet, that’s where it stems from, I bet” but he isn’t fooling anyone, not even himself.

The song’s two sections draw sonic contrast, but the same themes of loneliness, isolation, social yearning, and a general dissatisfaction with the state of things are well represented in both. The chosen two-part structure could represent contrasting experiences, opinions, or coping mechanisms when it comes to loneliness. Smaller motifs connect each section. Cars and driving are mentioned, potentially representing both a joyride/freedom or isolation from the world depending on if a passenger is present or not. Phone calls and 911 are central, primarily showing fractured social connection; 911 invokes a sense of danger. And seemingly odd mentions of celebrities suggest unrealistic ambitions and parasocial relationships. Ultimately, this isn’t an acute social issue that Tyler is commenting on. Rather, he seems to be decrying the social isolation that’s a symptom of other current issues — perhaps the alienating effect of

American individualism, or materialism, hustle culture, or toxic masculinity. However, this lack of acute commentary is not the case in Kendrick Lamar's "Mirror."

Kendrick Lamar's songs have always been lyrically complex and socially charged. He isn't afraid to rap about politics, culture, or the darker parts of his lived experience. 2017's *DAMN.* was arguably his most successful album, making him the first rapper to win a Pulitzer Prize in music. But in the 5 years after *DAMN.*, Kendrick kept pretty quiet. Then in 2022, he released *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers*, a two-disc album with an unexpected theme: mental health. This was both a departure from and expansion on his previous work. For one thing, Kendrick himself is authentically the main character on *Mr. Morale*. He speaks of his relationship, his newborn second child, and his mind. He apologizes that he "didn't save the world," as he retreats his focus inwards, rather than commentating on society. However, the album's theme of mental health nonetheless adds a dimension to his discography that feels surprisingly natural once considered. Compared to "911 / Mr. Lonely," these songs feel more serious and mature.

Mirror is the final track of its album — the conclusion to the long and rocky emotional rollercoaster — and you can feel it. The song is sonically soft and pleasing throughout, making it very reflective and subtly solemn but nonetheless full of conviction. Full, rich chords and smooth strings bring beautiful complexity while quick, short, percussive and breathy hits play around the edges of the mix — nervous but kept in check. The overall feel communicated by the chords and instruments is one of sensitive finality and newfound emotional intelligence.

Lyrics drive home Kendrick's message on "Mirror." Three words open the track: "I choose me." This is Kendrick's thesis. The first verse immediately conveys separation, likely from a partner with lines like "Better if I spare your feelings and tell you the truth / Lately, I redirected my point of view." Kendrick confirms this departure as "Blink twice again, I'm gone" segways into the chorus. The chorus is a repeated, melodic chant of "I choose me, I'm sorry." It quickly becomes familiar as the strings riff on solemn but decisive chords. Although Kendrick's made his choice, he's still sensitive as he apologizes helplessly. This opening of the song makes clear Kendrick's need for solitude for his own healing.

A very brief second verse and repeated chorus brings the song to the third verse / bridge (structure feels somewhat subjective here, and also unnecessary). Here, Kendrick reveals more of his situation, stands up for himself, and confirms his need for solitude. He rejects toxicity with “Personal gain off my pain, it's nonsense,” and reveals his dedication to his child and to therapy (his future) by saying, “Baby, I just had a baby, you know she need me / Workin' on myself, the counselin' is not easy.” Kendrick explains his self-reflective process of transforming grief into freedom with the lines “Do yourself a favor and get a mirror that mirror grievance / Then point it at me so the reflection can mirror freedom.” The mirror is the symbol of the track, representing self-reflection and a primary focus on oneself. Kendrick confirms his need for space in the next stanza as he wonders if “Maybe, it's time to break it off / Runaway from the culture to follow my heart.” The final two lines before the final chorus are powerful: “Sorry I didn't save the world, my friend / I was too busy buildin' mine again.” — this is an extension of Kendrick’s initial thesis. He’s putting himself first and trying to heal rather than live up to the unrealistic expectations of others. The song closes with the same chorus and ends decisively, underscoring the finality and conviction of Kendrick’s message.

Kendrick’s message on “Mirror,” and *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers* as a whole, is clear: mental health matters, even if it means stepping away from others. Many tracks in the album discuss his struggles and imperfections on the topic, but on “Mirror,” Kendrick seems to be positioning himself as a positive example. He’s making space — full separation, even — because it’s the right choice for him. This is a mature type of solitude rather than a lonely one, a solitude by choice and with serious justification.

A few technical connections can be drawn between “Mirror” and “911 / Mr. Lonely.” They both utilize sonic palettes that elicit emotion, yearning, and of course, solitude. Both artists sing repeated phrases to emphasize their main points. Both tracks were released after an extended period of silence from their respective artists and seemingly stem from each artists’ lived interpersonal experience. And as a funny coincidence, Tyler even references mirrors when saying “Mirror, mirror on the wall (who) / The loneliest of them all (me).” Kendrick would probably advise him to use that mirror for some proper

introspection. However, they present very different messages on loneliness: “Mirror” is about solitude being a healthy choice while “911 / Mr. Lonely” is about it being undesirable. Despite this, I’d like to suggest that the latter song has more to offer when it comes to mature commentary on loneliness.

While Tyler, The Creator’s track may appear immature, self-deprecating, and generally negative on the surface, it may hold a more subtle meta-criticism on “being lonely.” Rather than speaking directly about himself and his struggles, Tyler may be extrapolating from his experience to form a satirical character whose life is a complete example of how *not* to approach social connection. This character — introduced at the beginning of the song with “how you doin’? / (Call me) my name is Lonely, nice to meet you” — is characterized to have an unhealthy obsession with being in a relationship, or even having friends, for that matter. Importantly, “Mr. Lonely” is focusing on these missing elements of his life *before* addressing his own wellbeing. Tyler clues the listener in to this structure through humorous exaggeration and exterior commentary. Lines like “My thirst levels are infinity and beyond,” and “The loneliest of them all (me),” are just so extreme that they suggest a fictional character. This character’s number is also 911, further suggesting this character’s position as more of a metaphor/device. Additionally, a few select lines that utilize different vocal styles seem to be actual Tyler commenting on this character. An alternate voice in the transition spits “Old lonely ass n****... Need to go somewhere and get some b***** or something” and later a pitched-down line mutters “Oh my God, that boy there is so f***** lonely.” Despite Tyler’s additional references to himself, the hyperbolic characterization and subtle meta inserts suggest the protagonist of this song is a fictional one.

What, then, is “911 / Mr. Lonely” really saying? How does it now compare to “Mirror?” Tyler’s song presents an isolated character who is convinced isolation is a bad thing and has fallen into materialism, self-hate, and generally complaining as a result. What this character fails to recognize is that “loneliness” can be okay — and perhaps even a sign that they need to work on themselves before reaching out to others. Thus, Kendrick’s “Mirror” holds a similar message from a different angle. Kendrick has *too much* connection and responsibility in his life and is stepping away from it into a

“lonelier” position by choice; he recognizes what Tyler’s character does not: the situational utility of solitude.

While I’m sure Kendrick and Mr. Lonely would love to trade places, they’re both undergoing important times in their life. Capturing these experiences in musical form reflects commentary for the listener to consider. Putting others before yourself can be mentally unhealthy. As a result, sometimes we need to take a step (or ten) back. Isolation from others can *seem* unhealthy. Sometimes it truly is, but other times, that unhealthiness is actually coming from inside. Obsessing over our loneliness bogs us down further and can’t simply be explained by never having owned a pet. Kendrick Lamar presents the clearer, more polished version of all this: choose yourself before trying to save the world.