Whitman College

They Not Like Us:

The Sound of Dissent in Kendrick Lamar's Halftime Show

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They Not Like Us: The Sound of Dissent in Kendrick Lamar's Halftime Show

How does dissent sound when injustice is pouring down on your community? Mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, Auntie Trinetta, the candy lady down the street—all victims of unjust, oppressive policies. We weren't together when Kendrick Lamar made history at the 2024 Super Bowl performance as he stood unflinching under the stadium lights, using patriotic colors, lyrics that could dissatisfy a spoiled billionaire, and electrifying choreography to deliver a performance that felt like a protest and a halftime show. Kendrick Lamar's 2024 Super Bowl Performance closely reminds me of the legacy of Justice William O. Douglas. As one of the longest-serving Supreme Court justices, William O. Douglas consistently championed the First Amendment, arguing that democracy survives only when the right to dissent is fully protected—even when that dissent is uncomfortable or unpopular (Douglas). Similarly, Kendrick Lamar, a Pulitzer Prize-winning rapper known for his socially charged lyrics, uses his platform to challenge systemic racism and cultural divides. His 2024 Super Bowl performance of *"They Not Like Us"* functions as a modern act of protest. This paper argues that Kendrick Lamar's 2024 Super Bowl performance, staged in front of President Donald Trump, was a bold act of dissent that highlights the enduring importance of free expression in modern society. Through its patriotic color scheme, provocative lyrics, and symbolic performances by Serena Williams and Samuel L. Jackson, the show reflects William O. Douglas's belief that democracy thrives when dissenting voices are boldly expressed. Lamar's set design and color choices visually emphasized his message of protest.

Kendrick Lamar's stage design and choreography turned patriotic imagery into a form of protest, challenging traditional notions of American identity. The performance's red, white, and blue lighting, paired with dancers who formed the shape of the United States, visually

reimagined the American flag as a symbol for all people, not just the powerful. By featuring Serena Williams—a global icon of Black excellence—Lamar underscored the resilience and cultural contributions of marginalized communities. This act aligns with Douglas's argument that dissent is not about destroying America but about strengthening it by "creating dialogue between conflicting views" (*Terminiello v. Chicago*). Through the halftime show's color scheme and choreography, Lamar's art boldly reclaimed American patriotism, insisting that true loyalty to the country lies in challenging its injustices and inviting collective reflection.

The visual symbolism of the performance was further reinforced through Lamar's lyrics. Lamar's lyrics made the performance a direct act of cultural resistance. Early in the set, he declares, *"The revolution 'bout to be televised / You picked the right time but the wrong guy,"* signaling that his presence on the Super Bowl stage was deliberate and unapologetic (Lamar). Later, in *"Not Like Us,"* he raps, *"It's a cultural divide, I'ma get it on the floor,"* directly addressing systemic divides in America (Lamar). These lyrics function as what Douglas described as "speech that stirs people to anger," which is precisely the kind of speech democracy must protect (*Terminiello v. Chicago*). By delivering these lines during a live broadcast to millions, Lamar challenges audiences to confront uncomfortable truths. His lyrics embody Douglas's warning that silencing dissent only weakens the democratic process, while bold, unfiltered expression keeps the system honest and accountable.

Samuel L. Jackson's recurring commentary added a layer of meta-critique, symbolizing the pressures faced by Black artists to conform. At one point, Jackson, playing a satirical "Uncle Sam," interrupts Lamar with, *"No, no, no, no, no. Too loud, too reckless, too ghetto, Mr. Lamar, do you really know how to play the game? Then tighten up."* This moment embodies the societal tendency to silence dissenting voices, particularly those of marginalized communities. Rather

than “tightening up,” Lamar responds with even more energy, using the interruption to highlight the tension between artistic freedom and social acceptability. Douglas emphasizes in *An Almanac of Liberty* that ‘the right to differ is the cornerstone of democracy,’ which he means that democracy depends on protecting even the most unsettling forms of expression, a belief mirrored in Lamar’s refusal to self-censor during the performance (Douglas). By staging this narrative within his show, Lamar reinforces Douglas’s idea that dissent is often uncomfortable—but that discomfort is necessary for progress.

Going back to that golden question: how does dissent sound? Dissent is silent and loud at the same time. Some of us heard the music rather than the message at the moment, but we all felt it. We, my friends and I, felt connected to what Lamar was courageously protesting. We found that dissent is loud—we loudly ended the night chanting, *“They not like us, they not like us, they not like us.”* I can imagine Justice William O. Douglas, if he were at that performance, nodding in agreement with Kendrick Lamar, moving to the sound of dissent. Douglas believed that democracy only works when voices like Lamar’s—voices that provoke, challenge, and inspire—are heard. Lamar’s performance reminded us that dissent is not just an act of resistance, but an act of love for the ideals of freedom and justice that America claims to stand for.

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