

2015

# Resurrecting the hip-hop and Christian cultures: Lecrae's unashamed use of the rap narrative, persona, and language

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RESURRECTING THE HIP-HOP AND CHRISTIAN CULTURES:  
LECRAE'S UNASHAMED USE OF THE RAP NARRATIVE,  
PERSONA, AND LANGUAGE

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Marci Swank  
University of Northern Iowa

December 2015

## ABSTRACT

Hip-hop and Christian cultures do not overlap too often, or do they? As a rapper, Lecrae is able to share his narrative through his lyrical content, which includes his Christian faith. This thesis examines the history of hip-hop, Lecrae's personal influences, and the overarching movement within the two cultures. Lecrae's persona, use of the hip-hop and Christian platforms, and rhetorical decisions reveal him as an example of how the American culture both resists and embraces the less-likely artist. Some view Lecrae as the one bringing hip-hop back to its original origins, but others believe that he is tainting both cultures by trying to blend them. Regardless, Lecrae uses historical events, varying cultural languages, and his personal story to persuade his audience to see life differently.

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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To Steven Merrill, for sharing 2Pac's legacy &  
To Pat Dayton, for continuously seeing life through the music.

To my friends, to my family, to my hip-hop lovers.  
To the unashamed, to the supporters, to the culture makers.

Thank you to my professors, who over the years have pushed me and allowed me to become who I am today, both as a professional and as a person.

Thank you to my thesis committee for without your challenges and encouragements, I never would have found my voice within this experience.

Dr. Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, thank you for pushing me beyond what I thought I was ever capable of, and for always bringing it back to hip-hop's roots.

Dr. David Grant, thank you for the constant reminders that rhetoric is in everything.

Dr. Brooke Wonders, thank you for encouraging me to share stories and research in a more creative way.

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## PREFACE

## PERSONAL NARRATIVE

“I just want to be able to die saying I gave it my all in terms of being a voice.”

– Lecrae (Whitaker)

I am fully aware I have everything against me when it comes to analyzing hip-hop. Yet I am willing to learn and ignore societal expectations. What do Lecrae and I have in common? A few things, but first and foremost, I have never fit into the societal mold I have been placed within, and neither has Lecrae. Hip-hop has been my source of insight, motivation, and eye-opening experiences. As a nod and twist to what Jay-Z says, I have 99 obstacles, but learning ain't one. Somewhere between L.L. Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out," MTV's *Save the Last Dance* film, and Eminem's ever growing empire, I became who I am today. While I am challenging cultural norms, I am not trying to be part of any culture I am not directly related to. I am not trying to say that I have some sort of direct lineage to hip-hop or hip-hop culture. My direct lineage begins and ends with me, being an example of someone who learned most of what I talk about and believe from rap.

I grew up in a household where music of all genres was encouraged. When I was in sixth grade, I got ahold of Eminem's *Marshall Mathers LP*. Eminem was my gateway to the hip-hop culture, as he was for probably most white Midwesterners. In "White America," Eminem raps, "See the problem is, I speak to suburban kids, who otherwise would of never knew these words exist . . . White America, I could be one of your kids . . . Eric looks just like this . . . Erica loves my shit." I was definitely one of the Ericas. I

loved his openness, honesty, and his emotion. Music should evoke some sort of emotion, even if the emotion is not a comfortable one. Eminem's music consistently forced me to form my own opinions about the world, society, and how people are treated. It evoked a passion in my life I would not have gained anywhere else.

While I had always been exposed to all music types, I will never forget the time that I secretly got the *Marshall Mathers LP* in anticipation of what my parents and my parents' friends were going to add to the controversial conversations surrounding Eminem at the time. I don't remember my parents' initial comments when they found out I had the album, but I do remember it feeling like some sort of rebellion as a twelve year old. I probably felt rebellious, because the album included songs like "Kim" and other rather vulgar songs. The lyrical content may have been a shock to my young ears, but the songs became a means of therapy nonetheless. As a twelve year old, I had been through a lot in my life that allowed others to take my voice away from me. At a young age, in my mind, being a victim was the worst possible label to be within. You do not know how powerful your ability to share your ideas and thoughts is until it is taken from you. However, due to what was going on at the time, I had to play out the role. So, Eminem became my voice and my therapy. Through his anger, his passion, his desperation, I was able to cope. It was through the songs that I was able to connect to someone that yeah, may look like someone from my world, but instead, he lived a completely different life. His lifestyle was something I only saw on TV, and thanks to MTV, could see in his videos. I never remember questioning how I could ever relate to someone like Eminem, but instead, I remember wondering what else we had in common.

Initially, I never questioned my love for Eminem, or my love for hip-hop. I became consumed by his lyrics, his beats, and his overarching emotions. The more I learned from him, the more I felt at home with his lyrics playing in my headphones than I did in my actual world. I learned a lot about America; our society, our cultural issues and the like in Eminem's music, but looking back today, I think what all of this was really teaching me was how to be a voice for the voiceless. Through dissecting Eminem, his work, and his approach, I was blindly taking notes on how someday I could do for others what he did for me.

Being a voice for the voiceless is the core of my actions. Showing my students how to find their voice, how to craft it, and how to grow with it is the core of my lectures. Being someone for my friends to share their voice with is what I devote my personal life to. Providing a place for people to come to and be who they are, without any judgment or expectations, is what I consistently want to do. And people say hip-hop is only corrupting the listeners.

Throughout my life, music and travel have been my source of adventure and growth. My ever-growing list of cities I've visited includes a trip to Atlanta, Georgia in the spring of 2015. After being in Atlanta for a few days, exploring the different facets and neighborhoods that make up the city, it was already Sunday. One of the churches we went to that day was Renovation Church, which happens to be where Lecrae attends. It is a younger church, which is bold in being a church empowering social activism. Just as any other Sunday goes, it made sense to me that it was a time to be spent in church. Today was different though. Part of me felt like I was ready to go hear a great sermon, in

a big city, with a lot of strangers. The other part of me felt like I was going to a place that held the potential for me to meet the person I had just been rapping along with in the car.

The parking lot was a distance from the church, because it was located in the center of other cement buildings, which were way taller than the church itself. After parking the car, we were walking the blocks to Renovation, passing by a towering, burnt orange brick church. While this abandoned church definitely overshadowed the size of Renovation's building, it had been left behind.

Upon walking into Renovation, I attempted to contain my excitement of finally going to a church in the heart of a city that was completely foreign to me. Entering the church, which was not typical at all, I saw what I had always hoped a church could look like. The entryway to this small, cement building was filled with people. Everyone seemed to know each other and they were all happy to be there. We were welcomed by the greeters while being overcome with the smell of the varying coffee flavors, and handed a bulletin. Lecrae's "All I Need is You" was playing over the sound system, yet no one seemed fazed by the music. Everyone acted as if this was normal, that this is what church looked like.

Somewhere between hearing Lecrae's music being played in a church, and being welcomed into a group of people that meshed together so well, I was home. I was among people who had different backgrounds, different stories, different jobs, and different skin color, all there to worship and to learn.

My home looks nothing like this picture, yet if I had to tell you where I belonged all along, it was here. I was only reassured that this feeling was real once the worship

band started to play. Don't get me wrong, I can definitely indulge in a great worship band anywhere, but again, this band was different. The meshing of cultures, the combination of instruments, the switching of voices all brought a jazz sound to the hymns I have had memorized since before I could read.

After we worshiped to smooth jazz music, the pastor took the stage, and got down on his knees to pray. I have heard and learned from many great pastors over the years, but this was a first. Never have I seen a man who has a platform at his disposal take it so seriously that he literally, vulnerably, got down on his knees to pray to God. Opening a sermon with this scene resonated with the understanding that we were all there, we all had a voice, but we were only capable because of a much greater God.

Once the pastor was done preaching a rather convicting but encouraging message, the service was over. There was another service to follow, but people were lingering as if they were staying for an encore. The pastor was talking to different groups of people throughout the room, as if he was at a mixer. After people watching and saying hi to varying strangers, we left.

On the walk back to the car, I mentally paused in front of that large, abandoned church, wondering why Renovation did not use this vacant space. They could have moved right into a towering, bold building that everyone would have known was a church. Instead, they moved into a building that looked like any other apartment building entryway, overshadowed by the actual apartments. To me, it showed that they were starting anew. They wanted to be something different, but something that could hold its

own. As a church, they wanted to be at the level of everyone else, but be a place that was bold enough to fully embrace the shadowed and less expected.

I can't help but wonder if this was the feeling I would have had if I were given the chance to walk into the EAME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on a Sunday morning. Would the congregation be just as interactive and friendly? Would the pastor be just as humbling? A few months after visiting Atlanta, Georgia, I had the chance to visit Charleston for the first time. During this visit, I had the chance to go on a tour through the downtown, learning the history of the city. The day happened to be June 17, 2015, and the tour just happened to be a few hours before more history would be made. When the tour guide was informing us of the long, resilient history of the church, my tears and heartbreak hid behind my sunglasses. I was crying, sickened that people let this history take place. I was crying because I was so disturbed by the language used by the tour guide and others I had heard speak that day. The tour guide used words like "angry slaves" and painted an image that made it seem that a slave rebellion was a bad thing. The slave rebellion that a former pastor of this exact church was accused of starting.

See, EAME did not just represent a congregation of Christians. It represented activism, a call for change, and a means of survival. The man who targeted the nine people who sat inside that church, just hours after I stood in front of it, knew this history. He had to have known the entirety of the survival of the church, its purpose, and its continuous fight. My first question for the shooter would be, "When you were welcomed into that Bible study, did you have a hint of the same feeling I had walking into Renovation?" Because if he did, and he still managed to kill nine people in cold blood,

solely based on their skin color, then I only have more questions for him. The same questions I would have for the people who previously have targeted this church and its congregation.

The fact that this church's history involves white people starting the church on fire, with the pastor included, only to prevent a slave rebellion, sickens me. The fact that the very day I was there a racist man took the lives of nine people who welcomed him into their church but probably would not have shot me because of my skin color, sickens me. How are these stories that different? Really. It's devastating to me how unfair it is that in 2015 there is still such evil in this world that one guy can be so engulfed with hate based on how he views skin color.

It is so unfair that my skin can save me, without having any control over how I was born. America is never going to move past racial or any societal issues if we are not willing to openly discuss and learn about what has happened. But that night, I had never felt more emotionally connected to or actively responsible for America. Watching the details of the shooting develop just hours after being in front of the church, I was overwhelmed with guilt, sadness, but most importantly driven. You see, *I* was a hypocrite for judging the past, when *I* have not been active in the present. *I* let history repeat itself. And I am going to use all of my power to make sure I am never in the same predicament again. Since that day, I cannot help but see the world, my place, and my abilities differently. What I once saw as a chance to earn a degree to educate others on how to write is now a degree that I can also use to educate others about our society and culture, past and present. I see a chance to use the platform I have been able to obtain as a college

instructor to call for change. Change that is only going to come if everyone is educated on what has occurred in our country and continues to occur in our country, no matter how uncomfortable and gut wrenching it may be. I see a chance to use rap for even more than just a basis for a lecture on writing, but for linkage to this education. If we do not own up, properly learn, and grow through the collective history we all inherit as being Americans, there is not a way for the future to *not* be a continuous repeat of the past.

Through my experience at Charleston, my desire to expose the darker sides of America was only heightened. The experience at Renovation opened my eyes to the potential of being a part of something that is enacting social change. I saw a church that was a community of people, rather than structure of doctrine. By listening to Eminem, and with always finding my voice within rap music, I can only hope to continue to encourage others to do the same. I can also find my voice in Lecrae's music. He raps about reality, he raps about the truth, and he raps to get you not to just dance, but to create a movement.

I could connect to his lyrics, because I felt that he was providing the voice for the words I could never find. Words I could never find, but felt needed to be said. He finally showed Christianity in a way that I wanted others to see it. He was finally a Christian I did not see as a hypocrite or someone who actually made my life as a Christian harder. Lecrae was finally the voice for my lack of space to share or say what I want the world to hear. With that, I started going to his and his fellow label mates' concerts. Every time, the group I was a part of was close to being the only whites present. But, contrary to what our society says, it never mattered. We danced, we rapped, and we shared a moment in time

of just being in it together. Being part of something greater, remembering that our past is still there, but our present and future can change. In Lecrae's words,

I love looking back and being able to understand that nothing we are dealing with is necessarily new, just understanding how people wrestle with things historically and how I can apply that to the present. (qtd. in Bailey "How")

## INTRODUCTION

### THE PERSONA AND LANGUAGE OF REACH RECORDS<sup>1</sup>

As Tricia Rose claims, “Rap music and hip hop culture are cultural, political, and commercial forms, and for many young people . . . the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world” (19). The rap scene shows what young people are focused on today based on the influence of rappers as performers and social icons, allowing us to evaluate today’s cultural motives. Currently, most rappers are using this platform to discuss sex, drugs, and alcohol, but not the effects. However, there is one rap label with a different approach that is gaining power and attention. The label’s artists are rapping about sex, drugs, and alcohol, but they are also rapping about God in a way that is not strictly for a Christian audience or just the rap scene. They are an anomaly within the music world and are rapidly gaining more followers. What is the secret to their ability to reach a multitude of audiences while having a less common lyrical choice? While rap has changed, the roots have not completely left. Reach Records is becoming a label considered as the one bringing rap back to these roots. The roots of rap music include having a greater message to share, such as insight into deeper issues. This thesis will look at the purpose of Reach Records and rhetorically dissect the decisions and actions rappers are embarking on in order to be part of the rapper persona and platform, but with a message that creates an alternative to the current rap scene. Specifically looking at how Lecrae uses historical events, varying cultural languages, and his narrative to resurrect a worldview that has long been construed in the hip-hop and Christian cultures.

Rap music, along with the hip-hop culture, consists of multiple topics, lifestyles, and purposes. In today's society, most rap music is focused around sex, drugs, and alcohol. It is about doing what it takes to escape reality. Few rappers do rap about God already, so what is the point of this paper, presentation, and this research? There is now an independent rap label that consistently continues to prove it can go up against what rap culture represents today. The rappers on the Reach Records label have won multiple Grammys, debuted at the top of various charts, and consistently continue to sell out shows. Yet, the label's music's stances do not revolve around successfully creating a lifestyle or persona surrounding sex, drugs, and alcohol, but rather a lifestyle that represents the faith they have in God. The rappers are able to use the cultural platform of power and influence to reach the masses and share their specific message.

Before the present work of Reach Records can be discussed, I feel the need to contextualize their actions by briefly mentioning what rap and hip hop actually embody in our society. James G. Spady was recently quoted in George Yancy's article stating, "Hip Hop culture embodies privileged social knowledge communicated in its own language" (66). A comparable quote from Richard Shusterman, found in Scott Crossley's recent article, stating, "As a post-modern popular art form, it confronts and challenges deeply held social and aesthetic beliefs" (503). If rap hip-hop is the primary cultural means in today's society, if it contains privileged knowledge, its own language, and as an art form confronts and challenges social and aesthetic beliefs, how does that line up with Reach Records? How does the label offer a parallel to what the meaning of rap is?

### Who is Reach Records?

Reach Records is an independent rap label, which was formed in 2004 by Lecrae Moore and Ben Washer. The label consists of five rap artists with various solo acts under the names of: Trip Lee, Lecrae, Tedashii, Andy Mineo, and KB. According to the label's website, they claim they are "The Music of a Movement." As a whole, Reach Records believes that "Art functions as the billboard of culture . . . our passion is changing the way people see the world . . . Our hope lies in the person and work of Jesus. The heartbeat of Reach is Romans 1:16, "'For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes'" (*Reach*). If you were to just read this description, the first half sounds like a typical rap label's mission, but then there is a switch in motive, objectives, and outcomes. While this label is actually creating a situation and music that supports what these scholars explain rap is, they are contradicting what our society today believes rap music has to look like, talk like, and ultimately represent. They are not just challenging social norms, or what society says to do. As a label, they also call themselves the 116 Clique, yet another way to show they are unashamed as Romans 1:16 explains. They are challenging the rappers who say that is what our culture is all about. What is the secret to their ability to reach a multitude of audiences, while having a less common lyrical choice that makes them different?

They are rappers who rap about being Christian, while discussing the effects of sex, drugs, and alcohol, and are ultimately using the rapper platform to change the scene. They are not just using the established rapper platform of challenging society, they are

also challenging the other rappers using that platform. They want to be more than just personas using a platform; they want to be authentic.

### The Line Up's Credentials

Within the five main artists who are signed to the Reach Records label, they cohesively represent a fleet of knowledgeable, multi-faceted, and motivated men. All of them are invested in churches, including founding, planting, and pastoring congregations. They are all songwriters and producer as well. Two of the rappers, Trip Lee and KB, even went to Bible colleges. KB has planted churches, while Trip Lee is currently a pastor as well as an author. One reason for mentioning all of these credentials, if you will, is to show how intentional this label is, both professionally and personally. The other reason is in response to the first, which is they do not fit the societal mold or trope for pastors or church planters. Instead, they look as if they are more fluent in the rapper role. The fact that these men are intentional with their actions, but choose to fit the rapper role, shows the motives of the label. Their actions reflect Christianity, while their appearance reflects our society. Whether or not these societal tropes, or expectations, are correct or fair, they exist, and these men are not afraid to embrace both worlds.

### Decisions and Actions of the Rapper Persona and Platform

Visually, lyrically, and historically speaking, these men fit the stigmas, expectations, and authentication of the hip-hop culture. As a graduate student, I was able to teach a class for a day on visual rhetoric, which gave me the chance to put this idea into action.

Reach Records look like societal tropes, or societal stereotypes, placed upon them, but I wanted to put this idea to the vote of a blinded class. I asked students of tropes that they felt would be present in a rap music video, which I also rhetorically presented to my audience at the University of Northern Iowa's graduate symposium. I played two rap videos on mute, side by side on the screen. One of the videos was of 116's (Reach Record's) "Man Up" track and the other was Eminem's "Detroit versus Everybody," since both songs feature multiple artists throughout. On mute, the videos look the same, and even without the lyrical content, the beats both specifically resemble good rap music. The two videos involve rappers wearing gangster type attire, filmed on the streets, crews are represented, and through it all, they show influence over their domain. They fit the role and the persona of a rapper.

The artists might look and sound the part, but if you listen to any of these five artists' lyrics, you know there is something different about them. Not because they are Christian lyrics, but that they are honest and talking about real issues. These issues include death, addictions, violence, and broken homes; effects of sex, drugs, and alcohol. However, they use currently accepted language that shows they are relevant and still current within the society, specifically still on the streets; otherwise, it is implied, they would not be aware of these terms. Using the expected and accepted language, including slang, they are able to connect with their listeners who either already understand their message or do not, especially with the use of metaphor: "Metaphor in hip-hop is about motion and transformation; its usage allows the artists to move outside of the boundaries of their communities, and even transcend the limitations of human fallibility" (Perry 64).

If Reach's whole goal is to reach the masses with their message, they would have to be able to reach outside of their community. As other rappers do, Scott Crossley explains, "Their [rappers'] metaphors are generally specific to the subculture that either adopts them from the dominant culture or creates them to address their own cultural needs" (501). For example, Lecrae's "I'm Turnt" has a hook repeatedly stating, "They prolly think I'm rollin, I ain't on nothin." And throughout the song, he uses the words "Mary," "Molly," "twerking," "drinking," "burnt" and others to create his own message through the use of words used in the mainstream rap scene. Instead of partaking in those elements, he is showing that he is happy without them, as well as showing how following Jesus allows for the real "turnt" to occur.

The song "Man Up" begins with the lines: "Momma want some Obama in me / The hood want 'Pac / Hip Hop want to see the Common in me / And since it's a senseless contradiction, / I end up a misfit tryin to fit in." They get it. They get the lifestyle the rappers are all trying to create, but they were not okay with just that. They took it a step farther, and started sharing what they claim are the real life stories other rappers are not willing to share. This decision that is woven throughout all of their music and messages messed up the platform and persona that rappers portray, showing they have it all. Instead, Reach Records is trying to show that having all of those things is not having anything at all. Lecrae, Andy Mineo, and KB have all been featured on Sway's Universe Shade 45 Sirius Radio show, "Sway in the Morning," where he discusses a multitude of topics, but also has them rap throughout the segment. During one of the shows Lecrae was a part of, Sway is stunned and says,

You're the evolution bro. You're part of what hip-hop was meant to be. It wasn't meant to bring us down. In the beginnings, it had to happen it brought people together the same way Christianity has. It gave a voice to people who felt disenfranchised . . . the original origins [of hip hop] was to uplift.

This rap radio show is part of Shade 45, which is Eminem's Sirius radio station; in other words, is a well received and respected radio show. Sway is not someone to just give credit where credit is not deserved. This is just one example, of how Lecrae and the entirety of the label is effective in showing they deserve to be part of the hip-hop culture, but also are not afraid of saying what they feel needs to be rapped about.

Historically speaking, as Tricia Rose puts it, "Rap's cultural politics lies in its lyrical expression, its articulation of communal knowledge, and in the context for its public reception. . . . it is not just what you say, it is where you say it, how others react to it, and whether you have the power to command access to public space" (124). Rap was initially a means of showing the society what it was overlooking or ignoring. It was meant to create a space to discuss and present issues. Today, rap is more focused on discussing ways to escape those issues, which is why Reach Records stands out in the hip hop culture. My initial question was: What is the secret to their ability to reach a multitude of audiences, while having a less common lyrical choice? My answer is that these artists are true to both worlds they are within. They are authentic to the hip hop culture by making great music and discussing reality. They are authentic to the Christian world by not just preaching the Gospel in their music, but also within their actions. According to Ogbar, "Though 'authenticity' is used more frequently in this text, 'credibility' and 'realness' also reflect the same meaning of what it means to be authentic or real in hip-hop" (6). Being so determined to be set apart, they are honest with their

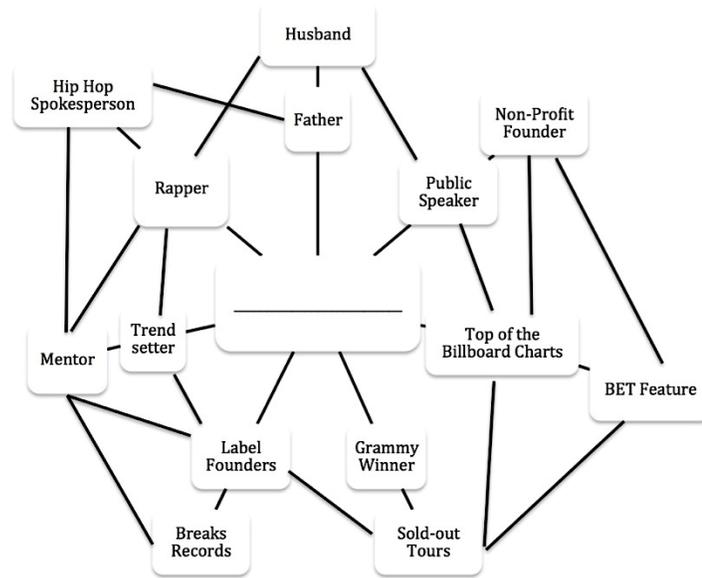
fans about how they fit or do not fit in the mold society attempts to place them within. While doing all of this, and being consistent with the rest of the world, their formula proves they are relevant to our culture. Through relevancy, Reach Records is able to call attention to their message, utilize the rapper platform and personas, and overall, push the boundaries of societal and cultural tropes.

## CHAPTER 1

## LECRAE'S CULTURAL NARRATIVE

“I am a Christian. I am a Rapper. But Christian is my faith not my genre.”

– Lecrae (qtd. in Browne)



*Figure 1 Descriptive Web*

Figure 1 is a descriptive web consists of multiple terms that all centrally connect to a square with a blank line. Who would you write into this blank line? There are a number of rappers that would fit these descriptions. Jay-Z, Ludacris, Lil-Wayne, and Kanye West are just a few that this web could be describing. However, this map is intended to describe Lecrae, a rapper who is currently shifting the expectations, stereotypes, and tropes that are connected to the Christian and hip-hop cultures. While

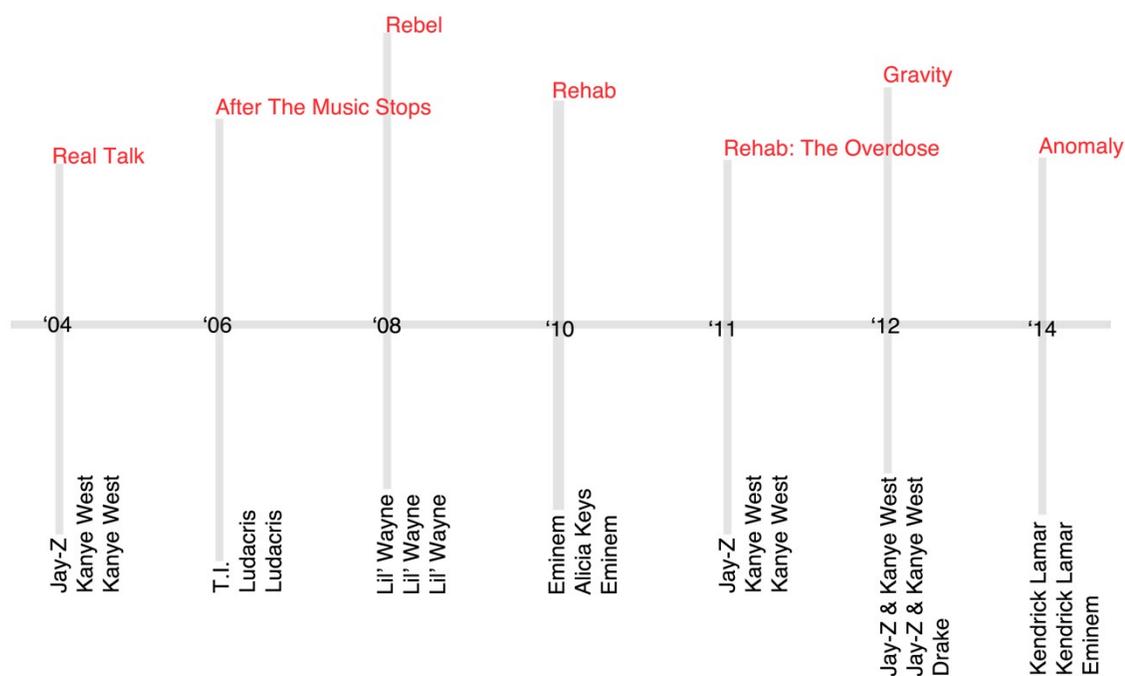
there are a number of other rappers who could hold true to this web, why is it Lecrae is being compartmentalized? Lecrae fits the societal norms of a rapper based on his appearance, musical sound, and description. Yet, Figure 1 shows just how much Lecrae has in common with his competition within the hip-hop scene. I made this diagram in Photoshop, by just brainstorming facets that popular rappers consist of in America. On paper, Lecrae does fit the labels of most other famous, influential, and even controversial rappers. Yet, his lyrical content is what proves to be his difference. His overarching message shares his personal narrative of his life before and after becoming a Christian, showing a Christian worldview on what is currently happening in America.

In America, a rapper embodies a persona and an identity, enabling him to attain a platform broadcasting to the world. With that being said, it is important to study the lyrical content of Lecrae in order to fully understand his persona and identity. On one side of his narrative, Lecrae speaks to the part of his life devoted to selling drugs, using women, and living the life on the streets. His identity within this aspect of the narrative shows the identity most people expect rappers to embody, relating to his audience. This persona within his music shows the hidden or darker side of America, based on societal and social structures. The other side of the narrative is the part of his life after he became a Christian. Most would argue that Lecrae's music does not fit into the mainstream Christian music, but rather answers to the audience of Christians who enjoy hip-hop. The Christian side of Lecrae is not showing a holier-than-thou type of persona, but rather a persona of someone who is trying to get clean, figure things out, and start asking questions about America. This duality is seen throughout his lyrics, blending a multitude

of audience types. Most rappers, such as N.W.A. and Tupac, initially embodied this duality as well, but simultaneously. With Lecrae's lyrics, there is a more definite before and after of the identities, rather than seemingly living both lifestyles. This duality of lifestyles, however, allows Lecrae to be a tangible figure for someone who has a past, but the present looks drastically different. Yet, people would have to see the validity in hip-hop and Christian cultures to even consider Lecrae as this embodiment. Once the audience types are able to consider Lecrae a credible identity for both cultures, his narrative can be examined since according to Perkinson, "Hip-hop culture is actually a mirror of America. It embodies and displays the contradictoriness we all inhabit" (11). If hip-hop culture is a mirroring of America, the duality of America shown in Lecrae's music should be taken seriously. There should be more attention to the darker, more hidden elements of America.

Throughout his interviews and lyrical content, Lecrae does not shy away from the constant backlash he receives from both cultures, yet, he continues to share his message and reach his audience. On his latest album, *Anomaly*, the majority of the songs are simultaneously sharing his own story while sharing what is happening in the United States today, including violence, war, poverty, and every other less popular topic for the media to be sharing. By doing this, Lecrae shows signs of being influenced by some of the first rappers that successfully reached the masses, such as N.W.A., Public Enemy, and Tupac. Just as the previous rappers did, Lecrae exploits the less popular or comfortable topics within the society that may otherwise not be shared with the general population. In his case, by having his faith as the subtle backbone to his lyrics, his message shares the

darker, more broken side of the world. By looking at his lyrics, we see that he was not just influenced by previous rappers, but by historical events. By studying the history of hip-hop, both the culture and the music, a better understanding of Lecrae's relevancy and place within culture can emerge.



*Figure 2 Rap Timeline*

The timeline in Figure 2 shows the years Lecrae's albums were released, and Grammy winners in the rap categories for the same years. The names of the Grammy winners are listed in the order of the best rap solo performance, rap song of the year, and the rap album of the year. The timeline shows that during the decade Lecrae has been releasing music, the top rappers of the year have been rather consistent. With this

consistency, the diagram adds depth to the argument that comes about when Lecrae is consistently compared to Kanye West and Jay-Z. With their longevity of being at the top of the hip-hop scene, Lecrae seems to have a rather influential future. Over the history of rap, the rappers who speak about political and social issues do not necessarily win awards. This diagram also shows the potential for winning against those odds. So, how does Lecrae seem to have influence and a space in this hip-hop culture?

When discussing rap and hip-hop, there is a difference between scenes that these two words provide. While using the terms “rap” and “hip-hop” synonymously, you can be discussing the rap or hip-hop music scene and the hip-hop culture. The hip-hop culture consists of clothing, appearance, dancing, language, and everything else that makes up a culture. While there are varying facets that create hip-hop as a culture, “Hip hop was initially marginalized as an art form because it gave a voice to individuals who were marginalized by society” (McWilliams 51). There is this consistent tension with the public when it comes to how credible hip-hop artists truly are, and if their message is legitimate.

Lecrae’s argument has always revolved around the idea of creating culture that influences the larger culture. He respects, even celebrates, the Christian and hip-hop cultures, while articulating something different from both of them. His identity of promoting the alternative in the cultures reveals him as part hip-hop, part Christian. He is not fully a hip-hop artist, but he is not a Christian artist either. Yet, it works, because hip-hop and Christianity have both embodied this ideal figure as someone who is other. They

both embrace someone who is willing to stand for more than just oneself, and someone who is set apart for a purpose. As Imani Perry observes,

Hip hop does provide a politically unifying force that proves central to any interpretation of the music's transnational presence. Its identity of double consciousness in fact speaks quite effectively to the global postcolonial participant in hip hop culture for its centralization of the voice of 'the other.' (20)

As Perry says, while it may seem as if it is unfitting for Lecrae to be considered the other, it is actually a component of hip-hop's genre. When Lecrae was asked about winning a Grammy in 2015, his response was, "It's funny because it's like, 'We recognize your movement, we just don't know what to call you'" (Whitaker). While it makes sense that he could be part of representing both cultures, there is still some disconnect between people seeing how he can be a part of both. In a different interview, Lecrae points out,

I'm marginalized every time I walk into a mainstream radio station for an interview. The questions rarely surround my art, my craft, the songs, the producers, but almost always are about "do you smoke? Do you drink? Do you curse?" (Bailey "Interview")

Because he is taking on this identity of the other, or someone who is set apart, he is treated differently. He is able to do this because he draws upon a following of listeners who can relate to his otherness. They are people who have been marginalized for a part of their identity. The marginalization does not have to be about faith, but about many of the different labels or identities America typically disregards. Whether his audience is currently marginalized for their faith or not, they are able to relate to the other based on race, class, and other society's stereotyping classifications. Through music, Lecrae can fill that void of encouraging the feeling of being other in our society. America's culture was created and consists of so many different cultures, providing an indefinite audience

who has felt marginalized. The rap genre also helps create a cohesive identity that anyone can relate to because, “Hip hop music celebrates Me and We, as opposed to You” (Perry 89), and he is able to relate with them on multifaceted levels, and then share with the listeners how he is able to overcome those marginalized by sharing his narrative.

As for discussing the other aspect, Lecrae is also using his music to challenge Christian culture. While Lecrae does not claim a denomination or that he is even fully committed to religion, he does claim that he is a Christ follower. Since Lecrae is sharing his personal story throughout his music, including his conversion to Christianity, he was quickly labeled the “Christian rapper.” Lecrae may be constantly fighting the label of Christian rapper, but the Christian platform has allowed opportunities to reach Christians of all ages, denominations, and regions. There is a similar tension between Lecrae and Christian culture as there is between him and hip-hop culture. He is not seen as following the mold that currently exists for someone to be successful within the Christian music genre. For one, he creates music within a genre that is not respected or even recognized within all churches. He is also not rapping explicitly about Christian topics, or making strictly worship music. He is making music that refers to social, political, and religious situations, not just religious situations.

If you listen to his music, Lecrae’s lyrics have almost a formulaic approach in how the song’s story unfolds. Most songs typically begin with a personal story of Lecrae, living his old life, and then a shift in the lyrical meanings once he becomes a Christian in the song. By sharing first hand perspectives from both the world hip-hop embraces and a faith-based lifestyle, he effectively combines the two cultures. However, Lecrae does not

say he is preaching in his music. He says, “I think a lot of people look at the recording booth as a pulpit. I don’t see it as a pulpit necessarily. . . . We should allow things to be as they are so people can see it from a real perspective” (Bailey “Interview”). He is not a sneaky Christian with a hidden agenda to get Christianity into his listeners’ ears. He is not even trying to promote either lifestyle outwardly. Rather, he is creating music that shares his story, providing details to create a specific perspective. But he does use his persona, narrative, and identity within his lyrics to promote a message. Lecrae is able to do so by embodying the rapper’s persona, yet,

It is not only rappers, but hip hoppers in general, whether they consider themselves philosophers, artists, sophisticates, or gangsters, who participate in a distinct “conception of the world,” have a “conscious line of moral [and frequently immoral] conduct,” and who, consequently, contribute “to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought. (Rabaka 297)

Rabaka’s assessment shows that Lecrae’s identity has the momentum within the hip-hop culture that creates a conscious speaker who wants to modify the world around him. He shows that there is a void in America’s society, a need for someone to stand up and speak about unfair actions occurring.

By using his own narrative, as most rappers do, Lecrae has “to anchor [his] narratives in the world of [his] own temporal, geographical, and cultural milieu” (Smith and Watson 11-12). In his lyrics, Lecrae raps about different places he has lived, different experiences he had within those places, and eventually the culture he is observing. Rap is the medium that allows him to share his message based on the expectations that he shares his story from where he came from, where he is going, and who he is sharing for. As Tricia Rose explains, “Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on an

identity of the observer or narrator” (2). Because they rap from personal experience by using a specific identity and narrative, rappers are quickly placed into stereotypical compartments. While all other rappers before him have had to be labeled something, Lecrae is refusing to be labeled anything besides just a rapper, allowing him to cover all variations of topics. Lecrae is using the rap scene and hip-hop culture’s platform, but he is using his own narrative to enforce his Christian mission. As Smith and Watson describe, “We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (1). Lecrae is a moving target, who is using a genre of music that consists of its own language, agenda, and form, but promoting an entirely different culture. The other culture, the Christian culture, also has its own set of words, agendas, and forms.

The personal narrative approach is interconnected with both cultures as well. Hip-hop allows for rappers (specifically MC’s) to take on a narrative or reporter type of persona, while Christianity is spread through personal salvation stories. While Lecrae repeatedly shares his testimony, he is also sharing a larger, story with a broader scope. The larger scope is America, and how the two cultures are influential in American culture and society. He criticizes both Christians and rappers for abusing the platform and power they have within America. He criticizes that while they have this power to influence followers, they are promoting the wrong type of lifestyle. His lyrics include lines such as:

They be talking 'bout the same old thing  
 I'm a have to call a foul in the game  
 What you talking 'bout  
 A little money now you all OG  
 Talking 'bout it's all eyes on me.  
 They ain't talking 'bout nuthin. (Lecrae *Anomaly*)

By contrast, his personal lyrical promotion is rooted in the advancement of educating people about the historical and current events in the world. One of the topics he is trying to educate his listeners on is race. When asked if Lecrae had “an aim for racial reconciliation in your music?” he responded with, “I definitely have an aim for education. I definitely want us to be educated about each other’s circumstances and to realize that, man, we don’t experience the same things every day” (Bailey “Interview”). He is able to draw out this education by comparing today’s news to the news of the past. He is able to draw upon quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speeches, along with other profoundly influential speakers from the past. An example of this is when he raps, “Man I wish I had me a time machine / I would tell Martin it was all a dream” (Lecrae *Anomaly*). In addition to rapping, Lecrae writes for *Billboard* and other outlets using discourse similar to Martin Luther King, Jr., discussing current issues as they unfold. For example, immediately after the Ferguson shooting and riots, Lecrae published an article where he says,

I hate the reckless foolishness that hurts the dream of Dr. King with looting and vandalism. . . . I hate systemic oppression in America. . . . I still have hope for a dream of unity and peace. I’m exercising my faith and fighting for a glorious future, and I want to call others to do the same. It’s going to take a lot of time, long conversations, and education, but if not us then who? (Lecrae “On”)

He is not downplaying the gradual growth required for America to transform. Yet, people watching the news every single night have to see that change is necessary. America is replaying the past that most people think does not matter anymore. People do not believe there is anything to be changed, but Lecrae says differently in his messages to both cultures.

The way that Lecrae supports his actions in defense against both cultures is by showcasing his personal narrative while also promoting a different overall worldview. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Lecrae states,

We have limited Christianity to salvation and sanctification. . . . Christianity is the truth about everything. If you say you have a Christian worldview, that means you see the world through that lens—not just how people get saved and what they stay away from. (Green)

He is not showing non-Christians a way of life, but showing Christians a different way to live out their faith. This quote also shows how Lecrae makes his music. He is not manipulating his narrative to create this pre-Jesus and post-Jesus formula throughout his lyrics. He is literally seeing the world through a different view now, as he says. In a different interview, he explains, “I don’t really fit in either world. . . . But it’s telling to the gospel industry that there are people who crave a sound that is not traditional. To the mainstream industry, there’s a voice of faith from all walks of life” (“Lecrae Breaks”). His listeners can quickly see that he does not fully embody either culture, because he is promoting this lack of categorizing. He defends both cultures, while also creating tension to change them. While defending cultures, he typically ends up defending hip-hop more than the Christian culture.

As for defending hip-hop, Lecrae has always had to explain that hip-hop is not an issue; it is not something that is evil, and not something that is even secular. Rather, hip-hop is another form of music, lifestyle, and worship. Lecrae explains, “Hip-hop isn’t the problem. Art, rhythm, expression, and rhyme are not the problem. The motivation, heart, and use of them are” (Jones). He only brings attention to other rappers’ lyrical content and lifestyle choices when they are promoting a lifestyle that is only going to lead to

death or harsh environments. Recently, Lecrae tweeted a line right after the Ferguson shooting in August of 2014. The tweet read: “Dear Hip Hop, we can’t scream ‘murder, misogyny, lawlessness’ in our music & then turn around and ask for equality & justice” (Lecrae). Quickly, the tweet was deleted, but that was after enough people saw it. When he came to defend the tweet, his explanation was,

What I’m saying is, that kind of inconsistency, when the majority of your songs talk about killing people, and then you are screaming for justice, that inconsistency in people’s minds creates apathy and says, “Why should I care about what you’re saying, because I just heard 10 songs about why you don’t respect the law, and now you want the law to work on your behalf?” (Whitaker)

What he is saying makes sense when you look at the current rap songs that are mainstream. There are not too many rappers who are rapping about anything other than topics of escapism. Lecrae takes on that lifestyle promotion in his music, but this tweet caught the attention of the public. Yet, in the tweet, he is not calling out hip-hop as something separate from himself. Instead, he uses the word “we” to show that he too belongs to hip-hop. As Perry was quoted saying earlier, hip-hop is rhetorically about the “we.” He is just trying to change the purpose and use of the genre, not actually change the genre itself.

While he received backlash from the tweet, Lecrae admits, “The most stressful part is coming from the Christian side. Because everybody has a standard and a conviction that they believe you need to be living by” (qtd. in Ward). Lecrae has inherited the judgment of the rap genre by Christians, as well as embracing the criticisms from them due to his actions. Yet, “From the beginning, then, rap was understandably unpopular with church leaders of all races. For the most part, they painted rap as all bad,

all the time. They called it irredeemable and hopeless— something to be scorned, rejected, and suppressed” (Allen 37). These standards and convictions are pushing not just Lecrae away from the Christian culture, but a large number of people. While our society continues to evolve, Christianity has officially lost ground, and fewer and fewer people even want to be associated with the faith. When he was interviewed more about the tweet, Lecrae explains, “I think it’s almost antithetical to the Gospel to preach behavior modification and not worldview transformation and heart change” (Bailey “Interview”). In other words, if Christians would stop criticizing and convicting their believers, Christianity would look different in the American culture. If hip-hop changed its message, and promoted a better lifestyle, American culture could look different. Allen creates the necessary questions to be answered when it comes to people’s reactions to Lecrae’s music, such as, “So we need to realize that if we’re asking, Can rap glorify God? we are really asking, Can people who rap glorify God?” (68). It seems as if Allen answers his own questions before he asks them: “When it comes to music and the general question of style, the only style God seems to be concerned with is lifestyle” (63). As long as Lecrae is speaking the Truth written in the Bible, who is able to actually evaluate his place in the culture? McWilliams takes that understanding another step when he explains, “Today, spirituality in hip hop can be found inside the ones who are seeking to maintain its original cultural values and roots and rescue the art form from being overtaken by the negative values that comes within commercialism” (45-46). While Lecrae cannot ignore the criticism he is receiving from the Christians culture,

McWilliams defends Lecrae's art from within both cultures. And in Lecrae's opinion, both shifts would allow America to look better.

Lecrae's mission for causing this tension of combining the two cultures promotes social change, cultural norms, and the challenging of stigmas about cultural differences. He is representing someone who has a voice for different cultures, while using languages, ideas, and lessons from both. He is able to combine his faith and his genre by sharing his personal narrative for both audience types. In order to further study Lecrae's work, we have to first look at his influences from both cultures, and how they are used to create his personal narrative and message.

## CHAPTER 2

### LECRAE FITTING INTO RAP'S HISTORY

“Music cannot be separated from the social, political, cultural context from which it develops” (Ogbar 144).

Lecrae is new to the mainstream hip-hop scene, while continuing to be influential in the underground hip-hop scene. Lecrae's mere longevity and influence says more about our culture and society than most would initially expect. It is important to historically situate Lecrae's music as part of a longer project within rap, hip-hop, and the struggle of African Americans. In order to understand Lecrae's purpose, we have to first understand the purpose of hip-hop. Ford defines the purpose of hip-hop based on its functions and explains, “It is designed to meet the vast needs of the people that listen to it. For some hip-hop music gives hope and a way of escape. For others hip hop music gives confidence and swagger. Others believe that hip hop's function is to tell a story of trials, tribulation, and triumph” (91-92). This latest generation of rappers generally all pay homage to the same rappers who historically influenced the scene. The list of rappers includes, but is not limited to, N.W.A., Public Enemy, Tupac, Biggie, and Run DMC. The original greats of the rap genre paved the way for rappers to continue to push beyond cultural boundaries, and create influence in varying ways. For Lecrae, he admits he was a product of hip-hop, listening to OutKast, Tupac, and others briefly mentioned throughout his lyrics. Rap, as a musical genre, has been around since the late 1970s and early 1980s, followed by the “The Golden Age of Hip-Hop,” which Edwards explains took place between 1986 and 1994 (149). Scholars draw the creation of rap, no matter the location it

was established, from funk, jazz, blues, and gospel music. Currently, hip-hop “exists and continues to provide comfort, escape, creativity, hope, edutainment (a mix of education and entertainment coined by hip hop icon KRS-One), therapy, and confidence to its listeners” (Ford 85). Ford defines rap as answering to multiple needs from the listeners. McWilliams has a further explanation of what hip-hop initially provided as, “a spirit of acknowledgement, and inner-city youth in NYC and around the country were given a platform that could not be found in other institutions” (39). If rap is a product of these music genres, rap has a lot of implied baggage, stigmas, and yet cultural influence. It should not be a surprise that rap discusses escapism, reality, cultural happenings, political issues, and societal injustices. Rabaka explains,

Obviously rap music and hip hop culture carry a great deal of political weight and cultural clout if, indeed, many of the former moderates of the Civil Rights Movement and militants of the Black Power Movement understand them to be serious impediments to African Americans’ search for social justice, political parity, and cultural pluralism in the present. (288)

Yet, when rap first entered into the entertainment and music scene, there was a lot of backlash, fear, and uncertainty. As Edwards explains, “Criticizing hip-hop for covering these topics is like criticizing the blues for focusing on ‘having the blues,’ or heavy metal for being too loud, or classical music for not having a strong enough drum beat” (35). Rappers such as N.W.A. claim to just be making music that expressed their lives and what they observed from their lives, but were in turn arrested because of the lyrical content encouraging violence and hate towards the police. Hip-hop consistently holds the same purpose throughout regional distinctions, but West Coast rappers were known for

being more politically and socially active in the lyrical content. As Ice Cube recently explained,

We were trying to make records that can go on the radio, and when we started doing mixtapes – which we knew wasn't going on the radio – that's when we really started to talk about the neighborhood," he says. "Talking about what really led into the style that we ended up doing, which is now called hardcore gangster rap. Back then we was calling it 'reality rap'; 'gangster rap' is the name that the media coined. (qtd. in Grow)

In order to understand rap as a genre, and hip-hop as a culture, we all need to realize that the gangsta persona was placed upon rappers. The persona was not something that the original rappers were hoping to obtain. According to Michael Dyson, “At their best, socially conscious rappers tackle thorny social problems and perhaps inspire those who engage in action. Such a role for the artist should not be downplayed, underestimated, or even undervalued” (70). Instead, they used the platform of being a rebel or menace to society, and used it to their benefit. Imari Perry observes, “Hip hop embraces the outlaw . . . metaphorically through lawbreaking, but on a deeper, more symbolic level . . . achieved through a position of resistance to the confines of status quote existence” (102). By embracing the outlaw persona, the context for the lyrics is understood, implied, and influential. Yet the outlaw persona does not go over well with the mainstream music scene. By the end of the Golden Age of Hip Hop, the music was transitioning, becoming less about individual music and moving more towards mainstream messages and sounds. According to McWilliams, “During the 1990s, hip hop was at a point where it sought to be incorporated into mainstream society. One of the first things someone does when they seek to be a part of something is attempt to assimilate” (41). The musicians successfully reached the larger population of listeners only once the lyrics were less about

uncomfortable topics and more about the catchy sound. McWilliams continues to explain, “Themes such as social justice, equality, and communalism were replaced with ones that promoted individualism, competition, and materialism and were more in line with the status quo” (43). While rap is currently still censored, it is censored for different words or uses of the music. The messages that were previously censored within society were replaced by music fitting for MTV and the club. Either way, the lifestyles that have been consistently shared through hip-hop were not fitting for the mainstream world. The way listeners and music distributors were able to accept rap into the mainstream music scene was, “to accept hip hop was to separate the *culture* from the *music*” (McWilliams 42). Rappers exploited the ugly truths woven throughout our society, which is prevalent and context for Lecrae’s lyrics. While this chapter is a limited, or shortened, version of the history of rap, it is the most important to who Lecrae is as a rapper. The historical context of Lecrae’s current placement in society is crucial in understanding his boundaries, implications, and overall abilities in his music.

Before N.W.A. there was Public Enemy, who was also initially confined to limited airplay, and the members were quickly labeled menaces. The media, law enforcement, and government officials labeled the rappers such terms in attempt to silence them, but then the early 1990s began. As Tricia Rose describes, “Overnight (after Rodney King video and riots broke), such rappers as Chuck D and Ice Cube [Public Enemy and N.W.A. MC’s], who were once considered social menaces, became prophets and seeing eye dogs for a nation that had just realized it had gone blind” (183). The Rodney King video and then trial forced the nation’s evening news to show America

what was being hushed and hidden throughout the country. Hip-hop had been trying to share this information, such as exploiting the police forces. Yet the music was not considered credible until the news started looking like the lyrics they were rapping. The same group, who made the rappers out to be un-credible sources, was now seen as the problem. The riots and revolt continued after the police in the Rodney King video were found innocent. With similar, and even harsher, videos being shown today, rappers have the same ability and opportunity to exploit the truth that has been suppressed over time. If it was not for the rappers such as N.W.A. and Public Enemy for creating music that was not just to fit into the mainstream, popular music, rap would not have the power, influence, or freedom it has today.

Lecrae is not just a product of consuming rap, he is also an example of what rap has always been. In order to know what Lecrae, or any rapper in 2015 embodies, the historical context needs to be described. When the first rap song was made or when the first rapper was established varies, depending on the location of the United States you are asking. What can be agreed upon is the firsts for the hip-hop culture:

The first commercially successful rap song: “Rapper’s Delight” (1979); first movie: *Wild Style* (1982); first platinum group: Run DMC (1985); first major hip-hop magazine: *The Source* (1988); first billion-dollar year: 1996; first year in which hip hop outsold every other genre of music: 1998; first Grammy for Album of the Year: 1999. Hip-hop has had its share of firsts; slowly penetrating the mainstream. Its impact is unquestionable. (Ogbar 4-5)

As Ogbar describes, hip-hop was eventually able to infiltrate the music and entertainment businesses, but it took decades. All of the rappers and MC’s during this time had to become more mainstream sounding in order to reach these markings and rankings. By the late 1990s, most rap music consisted of the same elements, which can still be seen today.

These elements include discussing women, drugs, sex, violence, gangs, and sly remarks of political or societal events. Rap has consistently been male-dominated, but a female artist, Lauryn Hill, won the album of the year in 1999. So, regardless of the mainstream rap's message or content, there are still artists who have historically been able to be or share an alternative message.

One rapper who was able to assimilate into the media promoted gangsta rapper image, while also promoting his own message was Tupac. Tupac, like a lot of the original rappers, had a limited amount of time to impact the scene, yet he continues to influence it. As Curtis Allen describes,

Tupac promoted an idea he called 'Thug Life.' . . . Thug Life was a mindset. . . . Thug Life completely disconnected gangsta rap from gangs, and even from the inner city. It gave rap fans permission to adopt a gangsta mentality without ever getting within 100 miles of a ghetto. This made the music and lifestyle even easier to relate to. (44-45)

The media was promoting this image of rappers being problems to the society, and the record labels saw that this persona was selling albums. So instead of completely becoming that persona that was placed upon him, Tupac made the message and image work for him. He promoted an alternative message, similar to that of N.W.A. and Public Enemy years before him.

Tupac and Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G.) were two influential rappers in the 1990s, and a beef between the two rappers only helped to sell their albums. Both men tried to downplay their issues in interviews, but would say otherwise in front of a mic. Issues between rappers had always been found in the lyrical content, beefs back and forth for example. This only sparked more loyalty within listeners. Just as all genres of music,

listeners form an emotional connect between the musician and themselves through songs. Lyrical arguments were safer to rap about than political issues, but the emotional connections only continued. Before either rappers knew it, there was a legitimate divide between Biggie's east coast territory of followers and Tupac's west coast fans. While leading up to the 1990s rap was way more experimental, Tupac and Biggie were part of a time that the culture expected certain ideas or content to come from rap music. They only continued to expect there to be protests between labels and rappers. Edwards observes,

As the golden age was dependent on innovation, one of the things that ended it was the gradual lack of innovation. After 1994, a lot of hip-hop records became safer and more formulaic. While there are notable expectations, the norm after the golden age was to be less adventurous. (158)

Edwards' observations shine light onto what Tupac and Biggie Smalls represent for the early and mid-1990s. After Tupac's death in 1996 and Biggie's death in 1997, hip-hop was stunned with a reality check of the power of lyrics and the influence rappers have. The rappers' deaths did not just shake their fans and fellow rappers, but the entire country was hearing all about it. Again, rappers were making the evening news. Whether or not people want to acknowledge or accept it, rap became a form of music that infiltrated the entire culture. With these men dying because of differing loyalty between the two coasts these men represented, lyrics soon held greater responsibility. Both men, whose murders are still unsolved, but were both killed by bullets.

Following these deaths, an entire year was dedicated to refocusing rap music and rebuilding hip-hop. There was a year dedicated to paying respects to Biggie and Tupac, while also empowering rappers who were to follow. Rap may have come onto the musical scene quickly, but the gradual shifts in the musical and lyrical content was

gradual. Overtime, rap was separated into three distinct categories. There are three categories per song, yet rappers tend to overlap them within an album. As Allen describes,

Over time, the genre developed what I see as three main lyrical themes, each one totally godless: The Battle (bragging about being better than someone else) Social Consciousness (a reprise of black pride) Gangsta Rap (the glorification of a particular gang lifestyle). (40)

You still find rappers who fit into these three genres, making it apparent of the original roots to the music. After Tupac and Biggie, other rappers were inducted into the prevalent rapper positions, such as P.Diddy, L.L. Cool J, OutKast, and eventually Jay-Z and Eminem. All of these rappers pay some sort of homage to rappers before them, and today, you hear rappers paying homage to them. Lecrae consistently expresses his influences as being OutKast in high school, in addition to Tupac before that, adding depth to his influences.

In other words, rappers each have their own mission, narrative, and overall agenda, while also connecting to their influences. Due to rap's structure and history, there is a sense of responsibility to pay respect to the rappers who come before. Due to how rap is established, the roots are secure in the formation, lyrical content, and the persona that every rapper embodies. The sound and lyrics can change with the society its reflecting, but the roots will always be found within the music. Lecrae is both embedding these hip-hop roots in his music, and bringing current rap back to those original purposes.

## CHAPTER 3

## LECRAE'S CHRISTIAN INFLUENCES

“I got a hold of Tim Keller's books / man I promise you it's like my whole life changed /  
 Andy Crouch wrote a book about culture makin' / and after that I had to make a slight  
 change.”

– Lecrae (*Anomaly*)

Lecrae has explicitly stated and rapped about two books that influenced his approach to making his business. He gives credit to Andy Crouch's *Culture Making* and Tim Keller's *The Reason for God* as two texts that showed him how to do ministry within his music without having to be explicitly Christian. Crouch's argument circles around the issue of Christians as a whole historically being afraid of culture. He discusses how historically speaking, Christians are quick to label anything outside the church as secular. Tim Keller's text deciphers the most popular or common myths and doubts around Christianity, while also explaining the basis of Christian beliefs. Both texts reflect on how Christians need to be participating within the culture, rather than separate themselves. Lecrae represents a product of Keller's and Crouch's ideas, promoting the same messages. In a recent interview, Lecrae explains, “Christians have no idea how to deal with art . . . They say, ‘Hey Lecrae you can't do that. That's bad. That's secular. You can't touch that’” (qtd. in Ward). In order to see how these two texts truly do influence Lecrae's work, it is important to highlight what these two men are saying, as well as the discourse used in explaining the messages.

Andy Crouch's book focuses on sociology, Scripture, and understandings of life callings. The target audience of the text is Christians, with Crouch's hope being to, "offer us a new vocabulary, a new story and a new set of questions" (10). Since he is presenting a foreign or uncommonly preached idea to Christians who have more than likely only seen Christianity done a certain way, Crouch spends a lot of time defining or redefining various terms that are within the Christian culture. He advocates for the need of creating of culture, but within all parts of life, rather than just within the church. Crouch explains, "One of the most mysterious and beautiful things about culture is that it has to be shared" (12). When this quote is applied to Lecrae's platform, Crouch is saying Lecrae cannot make or remake cultures without sharing them with everyone else. Lecrae would not be influencing cultures if he was not using language, art, and lifestyle decisions to represent that cultural change.

Lecrae breaks through a barrier of what has always been perceived as a high culture and a low culture. He is breaking the barriers of the separate cultural compartments, creating his own middle ground. Crouch believes this separation of cultures is the issue today, and states,

Many attempts, especially Christian attempts, to come to terms with culture have fallen short because they paid too much attention to one of these categories of culture. High culture, pop culture, ethnic culture, political culture -- all are part of culture and worthy of attention, reflection and action. (18)

Categorizing everything in American culture does not fully work, because nothing is that simple. This was historically seen when it even came to the original rappers who were blurring a low culture (rap music) with a high culture (politics).

Andy Crouch continues to discuss what culture actually is and how Christians have continuously failed at embracing culture. Everyone belongs to a culture or multiple cultures, because it is what we make of the world. Culture is everywhere, it is the way of life, it is what we decide what everything is. Lecrae is able to change culture, in the simplest of terms, because he is just sharing his life, which correlates to both the Christian and rap culture.

Lecrae is not trying to change what Christianity and hip-hop embody, but rather create a persona that allows both to co-exist. As Crouch argues, “So underneath almost every act of culture making we find countless small acts of culture keeping” (77). Culture keeping is referring to the act of adding previous parts of culture by not forgetting the past, and using those parts to create a new, current culture. Lecrae is taking the Gospel, the salvation and sanctification, and other Christian beliefs, but sharing them through rap. He is using Christianity to promote or provide a message that calls for political and societal changes, just through a belief system.

Finally, Crouch also describes the complexity of culture making. He warns, “cultural creativity requires cultural maturity” (77). Cultural maturity is a requirement for effective culture making. Lecrae has the credibility to create this imagined community, or specific combination of cultures, because he has matured through both worlds. He grew up in a world that hip-hop represents, all while learning about God and growing in his own faith. Both his faith and hip-hop insight allow him the power to look at the cultures and see how they can be shifted or recreated. Crouch explains, “To ‘engage’ with culture became, and is still today, a near-synonym for *thinking about* the culture” (87). That is

everything that Lecrae is doing; he reinforces the need to be educated on our world before anything else. He is not singling promoting Christianity or hip-hop, but rather using both platforms and cultures to promote an entirely new idea. For example, in Lecrae's song "Dirty Water," he raps,

Worthless, worthless  
400 years we done heard that  
Now we extreme, buying fancy things like gold chains  
Just pretty shackles, we still enslaved  
Put 'em round your neck, cuz we still hangin'. (*Anomaly*)

Education on the historical mirrored with current events in what is crucial to Lecrae. Crouch's guidelines for doing this is, "So if we seek to change culture, we will have to create something new, something that will persuade our neighbors to set aside some existing set of cultural goods for our new proposal" (67). Lecrae is able to use Crouch's advice in the way he raps about topics he wants to draw attention to. He promotes his faith as a means of living, but more than that, he promotes lifestyle changes for everyone. He is trying to explicitly show what goes on the world, specifically America, and how horrific the violence, hate, and political issues are. By combining cultural ideas, he is able to create a different worldview.

Tim Keller actually endorses Andy Crouch's book but has a rather different approach in his book, *The Reason for God*. While both texts recognize the issues Christians have caused in the past when it comes to compartmentalizing cultures or just people in general, Tim Keller's mission is to argue myths and underlying issues with Christianity. In other words, while Crouch is focusing on issues within broader culture, Keller is arguing the issues within Christian culture. Keller's initial purpose may not be

culture, but he does observe and discuss American culture. He explains, “In short, the world is polarizing over religion. It is getting both more religious and less religious at the same time” (x). He further observes, “The people most passionate about social justice were moral relativists, while the morally upright didn’t seem to care about the oppression going on all over the world” (xii). There is this disconnect between faith and action; Christians and world issues.

Keller observes and describes the culture by showing the polarity of beliefs and respect of the differing beliefs. Keller explains,

Because doubt and belief are each on the rise, our politician and public discourse on matters of faith and morality has become deadlocked and deeply divided. . . . Those who believe in God and Christianity are out to “impose their beliefs on the rest of us” and “turn back the clock” on the less enlightened time. Those who don’t believe are “enemies of truth” and “purveyors of relativism and permissiveness.” We don’t reason with the other side; we only denounce.  
(xvi)

The way Keller explains it is that differing cultures are not going to go away anywhere, but rather only continue to grow apart. This is the current issue in America. Keller warns Christians of the way they deal with the world around him. One of the most profound quotes is still within the introduction when he says, “Christians should reflect on the fact that such large sectors of our formerly largely Christian societies have turned their backs on faith. Surely that should lead to self-examination” (xvii). Lecrae does not just call out rappers on their faulty and harmful lifestyles, but also on the Christians who have given Christianity a tainted name. Also in his song, “Dirty Water,” Lecrae explains,

But if you can't see my light then maybe I ain't in it . . .  
Ain't trynna get to know you, I'm too busy readin Daniel  
Most segregated time of day is Sunday service  
Now what you think that say about the God you worship?. (*Anomaly*)

Christians described in this song are at fault for a lot of this divide, and even the polarity in current beliefs. Keller, along with Crouch, is calling for a reevaluation on how Christians are involved in culture. While Crouch is calling for Christians to create culture, Keller is asking for people to respect and think about it. Lecrae is also mirroring this call for reexamination throughout his lyrics, drawing attention to the way churches are functioning, as well as how Christians are actively participating in the culture.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE REBEL

“That’s bullshit when a rapper says he don’t want to be a role model. You become a role model ‘cause what’s the biggest role model? The rebel.”

– Tupac (qtd. in Perkins 170)

“You can only be what you see. I saw Tupac.”

– Lecrae (qtd. in DJ Envy 2014)

While the entire *Rebel* album (2008) will not be analyzed, there is a need to discuss the rebel persona that Lecrae weaves throughout all his albums. Lecrae’s portrayed image through social media, his videos, lyrics, and speaking events is consistent. The content may vary based on his audience, but the identified man saying the words is consistent. The persona Lecrae embodies is approachable, attentive, involved, aware, supportive, loyal, and humorous. While being all of these socially appropriate characteristics, how does he actively attempt to change or expose the world around him? He rebels against the societal tropes placed around and near him. He takes on a rebellious persona that allows him to offer ideas or observations that would typically go against the cultures he is a part of. Yet, the rebel is a persona or figure that is both widely represented in the Christian and hip-hop cultures. Both cultures actually embrace and idolize the rebel, seen in the expectations of what a rapper should look and act like, as well as a Christian going against the worldly culture. Lecrae’s rebellious persona is standing up against the government, society, Christian expectations, hip-hop culture, critics, and fame. The rebel persona’s platform consists of pushing a transparent and blunt agenda,

which can be seen through Lecrae's label, music, and any event he speaks at. While comparing him to Tupac is more of my focus and idea, Lecrae is typically described as today's Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecrae is not organizing demonstrations or meeting with political officials, but he does have followers and lyrically approaches the government. Lecrae is actively seeking change with a nonviolent approach, which is also similar. But what do Tupac, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lecrae all represent? The rebel. For all three men, being considered and acting as an outlaw, outsider, and rebel all stemmed from their faith in God. In simplest of views, all three men were seen as needing to be censored by society. Censored not because they promoted violence or derogatory ideas. As Tim Keller describes, "When people give their lives to liberate others as Jesus did, they are realizing the true Christianity that Martin Luther King, Jr. . . . and other Christian voices have called for" (69). These men all promoted a rebellion against what the culture embodied during their time, to ensure equality and a better way of life than what they had lived.

Lecrae has been able to use the platform from the beginning to create a persona that intentionally does not fit in with the general population. He recreates a similar persona that Tupac and Martin Luther King, Jr. used. This persona replicated from the persona that Jesus embodied. Jesus was considered an outlaw, outsider, threatening figure, popular teacher, and to his believers, the Messiah. His mission infiltrated change in the religious and political spectrums of the culture and society. So Lecrae may say he is a product of Tupac's music, and learned from Martin Luther King, Jr., but really, he is replicating his Lord. According to 1 John 2: 6, "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (*ESV*). In other words, whoever says he or she

is a Christian or Christ follower, is called to live as Christ did. Lecrae is being considered a rebel because his example to live by was a rebel. The rebel persona can be further exemplified by focusing on the closest example of Lecrae's influence, Tupac.

Tupac followed the messages of N.W.A. and Public Enemy while also promoting his own demand for change and societal transformation. What made Tupac different than his predecessors is that he embraced the thug or gangsta person placed upon him. He did so by using the labels, such as thug, but changed the meanings. For example, he made "thug life" into an acronym which stood for "The Hate yoU Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody" ("Thug Life"). He also created similar acronyms for "outlaw," and "niggaz." He used what the culture has tried to label and encapsulate him within to his advantage. He was not in the rap scene to make money or to become famous. When asked what motivates him, he responded with, "poverty, needs, wants, pain" (Light 97). Lecrae promotes discussion and education on the same topics. Tim Keller would give the credit for these topics to the Bible, which he says, "leads to both an emphasis on external religious forms as well as greed, materialism, and oppression in social agreements" (61). McWilliams explains, "In Luke chapter 4, Jesus, while quoting the prophet Isaiah, proclaims, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering sight to the blind, to set liberty them that are bruised'" (52). This verse, along with Keller's research, shows the power in using Jesus as the persona to replicate in the society. Tupac used this same type of perspective to create music that

called for a change in the world. Tupac did not only make music that entertained people, but music that shows uncomfortable truths.

Tupac embodied multiple personas, which are all seen in his lyrics and actions, creating an issue within the hip-hop culture. They were an issue because they promoted a different lifestyle than what other rappers aspire towards throughout their music. He was considered other in the scene, yet you cannot find a rapper today who was not influenced or inspired by him. Lecrae is one of these rappers who continuously pay homage to Tupac, to both his message and his talent. Lecrae says that he most respects Tupac's "transparency and openness with struggle" (Barili). Both are honest throughout their lyrics about his struggles, pains, and life events, creating a transparency. The transparency allows for listeners to feel a sense of connectivity and honesty from Lecrae. While authenticity has always been important to the hip-hop culture, transparency seems to be the underlying influential approach to reaching an audience.

If Lecrae is following this same approach to tropes and labels as Tupac, what does Lecrae do to be his own form of rebel? He subtly preaches the Gospel by boldly describing the world around him. After boldly depicting the world, Lecrae provides a different approach of moving forward, which is through following Jesus. This alternative view allows for a different conversation than what other rappers would be using their platform for. Tupac also provided an image that showed a better route or better ending to life and life's struggles. Wesley explains, "Essentially [Tupac's] 'Thugz Mansion' is a song that highlights eschatological power to both transcend these structures of power and

transform ‘what is’ to ‘what ought to be’”(81). Tupac’s tactics of creating a space where everyone was able to be safe and at peace, is similar to what Lecrae is doing.

Lecrae uses his personal perspective on the world to promote his lifestyle and message, willingly being the leading person dealing with the obstacles and tension that comes along with these actions. He is intentionally rebelling. Lecrae is not the first rapper who portrays Jesus differently than what churches typically show him as. Brooks-Tatum explains,

Christian hip-hop artists identify with the image of Jesus as a rebel warrior: someone less of time, space, or appearance, and who ultimately “gave his life for the sins of the world.” This rebellious martyr Jesus figure . . . is central to many Christian hip-hop artists’ formulations of community and identity, as they challenge the status quo of the church, intend for their music to reach the “saved” and the “unsaved,” and constantly state that their music is not about garnering fans but about bringing souls to Christ. (219)

Christian rappers are able to show a Jesus that stands up for the marginalized and less likely to be seen in a church. Brooks-Tatum continues to explain,

Their Jesus is not primarily the one who prays to God in silence and humility, the one who says, “of my own self I can do nothing,” but the young Jesus who conversed with religious scholars in the temple, being “about his father’s business,” and the angry, adult Jesus who turned over the money changers’ tables in the temple. (219)

This Jesus is found in the New Testament, but is rarely portrayed in a church, because priests and pastors in the past would never have wanted to promote questioning from the citizens or congregants. This Jesus provides people with a power that they otherwise would not have obtained. This Jesus is not within the church, but within the world. This Jesus does not want to be compartmentalized, but rebels against society.

While Lecrae is intentionally rebelling against culture and society, he is not rebelling in a sense of doing anything illegal. His actual lifestyle is the rebel, not any actions beyond being a rapper and speaker. The evidence shows that Lecrae is not looking to break any actual laws, but rather to change the unspoken ones. This is similar to what Tupac also says: “I think I’m a natural born leader because I’m a good soldier. I know how to bow down to authority if it’s authority that I respect” (Joseph et al. 80). While a rebel has multiple things to rebel against, these men are rebelling against culture, against society, against obstacles they had to be a part of in the United States. They are not the same men who are killing, hurting, or abusing any of these people who are in charge of these obstacles. Instead, they are verbally fighting.

In his introduction track on *Rebel*, Lecrae speaks to the person that rebels against the law and even more so, Christian doctrine. He is speaking to the person who parties, uses drugs, and cheaters that are usually also considered gangsta in the hip-hop scene. Instead, he says,

I'm in Rebellion (I know in our day rebel means sinner.)  
 I'm in Rebellion (But everyone is sinning, so it is no longer rebellious to sin.)  
 I'm in Rebellion (Jesus was a rebel that was a counter culture.)  
 I'm in Rebellion. (Lecrae *Rebel*)

Just as Tupac did with his own terms, Lecrae is changing the meaning behind the term “rebel” through his lyrics. Through the song Lecrae is not just saying he is the rebel, he is saying everyone else who thinks they are rebels for sinning, is actually merely the norm. Doing anything that is illegal or previously seen as rebellious is in fact the expected cultural activities, especially for the age group he is speaking to. This song encompasses the persona in which Lecrae is able to show he is rebelling against something that any

one of his listeners is aware of. Just as Tupac did, Lecrae is taking his perspective on choices people make, placing his narrative within those choices, and embodying a different form of rebel.

Lecrae is his own persona with his own agenda, yet it is important to draw out parallels and influences on how he became this rebel. Tupac and Martin Luther King, Jr. are both figures that most people within the United States has an opinion about. Both men started their own form of relabeling of societal terms and revolting against societal norms. Yet, neither of them were able to live those out entirely. Lecrae, being a product of their influences, is now able to show the world again what it can look like to be a rebel. The rebel who is standing up against tensions and obstacles that are only in place due to powerful people enforcing a specific lifestyle or formation. Through the use of the rebel persona, Lecrae is most importantly able to replicate Jesus' actions and lifestyle. While Lecrae is in no way saying he is Jesus, he is living out the Biblical calling of following in Jesus' footsteps. As Andy Crouch explains, "Perhaps most fatefully, Jesus confronted head-on the most powerful cultural institution of first-century Judaism, the temple in Jerusalem, lashing out at the commerce in its outer courts" (138). Further, "Jesus did not just teach creatively, he lived creatively, and the guardians of the horizons were unsettled by him" (138). Jesus did not come to earth to promote the same lifestyle that had always taken place, a lifestyle similar to today's society. He came to earth to promote a freedom from all of the structural issues, and confined lifestyles. He came to promote a lifestyle similar to Lecrae's, Tupac's, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s. And as long as rap music is not promoting that lifestyle, then rap will never be a threat to society.

It is when rap is used to promote this alternative lifestyle does it become something to be censored. Being able to embody both the secular and Christian rebels, Lecrae is a threat to both cultures' labels and expectations.

## CHAPTER 5

## LECRAE'S CRAFTED LANGUAGE

“Everyone is articulating a worldview. Everyone is articulating a paradigm, what they believe about life, about love, about people. The difference is that I’m articulating a vastly different worldview.”

–Lecrae (qtd. in Bailey “Interview”)

Lecrae may have a specific message that blends two different cultures, but he did not always embrace the two different forms or platforms. His original music was more explicitly directed towards the Christian audience, and would not be something non-Christians would feel comfortable listening to. His latest album, however, will call for uncomfortable realities, no matter what belief system the listener associates with. Below are three diagrams created in Wordle, which show the lyrical content to Lecrae’s first album, *Real Talk* (2010), his later album, *Gravity* (2012), and finally, his latest album, *Anomaly* (2014). These visuals are included to show the blatantly obvious differences of lyrical content over the Lecrae’s musical career. The content has minimal words in common, showing that Lecrae’s messages evolved over time. In his song, “Non-Fiction,” Lecrae shares how his mission changed after reading Tim Keller’s and Andy Crouch’s books. The change is blatantly obvious when it comes to language used, and the perspective from which the story is being told. “In other words, rap music is a rhetorical form that is narrative, utilizing rhyme schemes and distinct cadences, performed over rhythmic and musical drumbeats” (Ford 87). Lecrae’s mission shifted from addressing a narrow audience, to a broader audience, challenging culture as a whole. The more





*Gravity*, which was released eight years later, has drastically different results. The top used words include “know,” “like,” “world,” “tell,” “ain’t,” and maybe “Lord” would be the sixth most used word. The album came out after the shift in Lecrae’s lyrical content, and showed in his album sales. *Gravity* won Lecrae his first Grammy in 2013, as well as his first mainstream attention.

Thirdly, *Anomaly* has been Lecrae’s most-heard album, showing that his message is being accepted by a larger audience. The most common words in this album were “know,” “like,” “time,” “America,” and “just” and “ain’t.” There are some similar words with *Gravity*, but “America” is brought into the most used words, along with “time.” This album is definitely more focused on reaching the broader public, educating people on the lack of time America has spent and has left to change society. The results represent that differing message.

All three albums have differing frequent words, yet there are some that are in common, such as “know,” “like,” and “ain’t.” “Know” is important because it is a call to action from Lecrae. In a sense, by repeatedly saying the word, he is either saying he does know, or that we should know. “Like” represents his metaphorical use of imagery and comparison of stories or ideas throughout his descriptive lyrics. And thirdly, “ain’t” is common to *Gravity* and *Anomaly*, which makes sense because he does a lot of comparison of lifestyles, but he explicitly reminds his audience he is not like his counterparts.

The most important word transition seen throughout these albums however, is the most common words for each. “Christ” is the most common in the beginning, then it goes

to “world,” and finally, the last album’s most common word is “America.” This evidence shows Lecrae’s scope is changing. His targeted audience as well as argument has shifted to examine different lifestyles than his initial album does. While his message has been consistent, the most emphasized focused has changed.

The results are surprising for someone who has always enjoyed Lecrae’s music and lyrical content. They represent the evolution of Lecrae’s use of words and rap genre, while also showing his different approach to Christianity. It is obvious why the Christian culture is confused by his message. The results seem to conflict with hip-hop’s notion of saying Lecrae is too Christian for the genre. The lyrical content most used for the latest album does not show anything about God. Yet, the evolution reflects this consistent tension between the two cultures, and deciding where Lecrae fits. The research and studies of his lyrics would be different if they were consistent, and one was able to see why both cultures were unsure of Lecrae. But his inconsistent lyrics are supported by his constant persona or character throughout the entire process, showing that he himself has not changed in character, narrative, or persona.

## CHAPTER 6

THE AUTHENTIC TRANSPARENT PERSONA IN *GRAVITY*

“I just have to have integrity and be true to who I am and what I believe in. Music doesn’t need to be categorized. It just needs to be good.”

– Lecrae (qtd. in “Lecrae”)

Gravity is something we all (obviously) deal with, but is also something that just comes with the territory of living on a planet. The word represents a force that controls the matter and moving elements around us, including us. *Gravity* (2012) creates a space for discussion of the outside force, pressure, and efforts everyone encounters. Lecrae, just like all artists, was intentional in labeling his entire work of art something that encompassed the overarching theme. Gravity is something that defies our human understanding, but is also something that is necessary for our world to exist the way it does. This idea of gravity can be translated into other Biblical experiences but also in our world or society. Biblical examples include the Holy Spirit, Jesus, God, and salvation. In our society, examples include values, nature, and creativity. Almost half of the songs on the album explicitly say the word “gravity,” and every song mentions a part of society that forces or suppresses ideas and actions.

Lecrae’s *Gravity* embodies the different aspects of reality, culture, and beliefs he is trying to show his audience. Through discussing these aspects, Lecrae is forcing his audience to look into a world that is otherwise hidden from society. The album earned Lecrae his first Grammy, and put him on the radar of the broader culture. His target audience is always dominantly males, but the message is available for all genders. While

this album is less about quoting Scripture than his previous albums, it still holds a rather bold and obvious Christian content. *Gravity's* tracks tell various stories, but all trace back to the basis of Lecrae's personal narrative of his life before and after becoming a Christian. While the album does not seem to have the strict notion of trying to convert his audience into believers, it does have a definite motive to persuade his audience to question the culture and beliefs around them. Immediately in the intro track, Lecrae is sharing his challenge to the American society and culture to shift their views on money, drugs, violence, women, and power. His concluding track leaves his audience encouraged to go "light up the night," or in other words, to shine light into the darkness. Through this tactic, Lecrae is able to introduce his listeners immediately with his mission, overall message, and pressing motive, ending the album with a call to action. The motive behind the album exploits the cultural expectations of both hip-hop culture and Christian culture. Just as in all of his other work, here Lecrae intentionally draws upon texts, including the Bible, as well as mentions of historical events, to show his mission as being fit for all generations, while also calling for a different reaction than of the past. Edwards explains,

The difference between being good and great is when you can change other people's perceptions and realities. If people still think the same thing about you now, that they thought when you first came out, then you're doing the same thing. If you look at somebody who is considered great, they've changed people's perceptions. [Some rappers are] stuck in between talking about dope and killing people. I consider guys like that limited. (33)

Lecrae's motive, just like that of Tupac and N.W.A. and all of the other more conscious rappers, is to change the way people see the world.

### Message of Gravity

The introduction track sets the tone and overall theme for an album. Lecrae shares his overall message of calling for social change, creating his own position within his message as the leader. He raps about being willing to be the leader, as well as offering an example of how to actually change. In the song, Lecrae says, “Keep the fame and acclaim, I won't be a slave for a chain / And why stay the same for the change, / let's talk 'bout change for a change,” which explains how Lecrae’s intentions vary from those of his peers in the rap industry. Lecrae is a product of hip-hop, as well as a creator of the culture. He has been able to see what happens when creative people like him are in the industry, and how their message can shift. He is not going to rap about fame, money, and in this case, a “chain” in order to make that money or receive power. Those lyrics are followed by him depicting another similar scene throughout the hip-hop industry, of which he says, “Mundane, killa' bang, sell cane for the gain, pump vanity in your veins / No, they hopin' I quit, 'fact they hopin' I die, no, they hopin' I'm plain insane” (Lecrae *Gravity*). The hip-hop culture, but also the broader culture, is attracted and drawn to violence, drugs, and vanity. Instead, Lecrae is stating that because he does not want to be a part of that lifestyle, the people he is going up against are hoping he dies or is insane. As a whole, any industry or field allows for people to buy into false ideas, or sell out for a certain amount of money. This is not generally discouraged, but rather encouraged or justified by the American dream. No wonder Lecrae is saying that he is counter-cultural, and an issue to an industry that glamorizes those societal elements. The lyrics are profound, bold, and rather obvious to the listener, but are followed by a long outro. This

musical content provides the listener with either time to reflect, or time to get motivated for the next song. Maybe both. Either way, the outro is rather unexpected, but creates a build up for the following song, which is the album's title song. He begins "Gravity" by stating, "I pen songs for the perishin' and parishioners" showing that his audience is not just Christian nor is it just for non-believers. His work is for both audiences, already showing that he recognizes the divide, but is not answering to it. His lyrics continue to show that he has seen and been a part of a world that the "pastors are corrupt," kids are all about getting "blitz" and that "reality is cheap." Everything he is observing and bringing to the listener's attention is relevant to both his audience types. None of these observations are strictly for Christians to act upon, or non-believers to start following. Rather, he is creating a vision of what the world looks like today, from his perspective. Finally, by discussing how the devil is involved, "hoping we just burn for the hell of it," his Christian beliefs and message are shown. However, discussing the devil's desires is less controversial than discussing Jesus's words, so Lecrae is not marginalizing one of his audiences over the other. If this song is to truly represent the album's themes, there does seem to be obvious parallels to how Lecrae discusses the mission he has for his music. "Fuego" reiterates previous songs that involve actions such as "lighting up the night" and "set the world on fire." With it being the final song of the album, Lecrae brings all of his ideas back for the final thoughts. He even uses the line of "this little light of mine" which is done in other Lecrae songs as well. Drawing back his audience to his main points of just being a light in the darkness, not dwelling on pasts, or judging others in the present, shows his overall message. He is not the Christian who is going to hide from his

mistakes, hide his narrative, or push any agenda of Christianity onto his listeners. His music, shown in this song, is more about encouraging and being light in the dark world we are all a part of.

### Leader Role

While every song on this album seems to hold some personal truth or narrative of Lecrae's, "Walk with Me" feels rawer than the initial tracks. Lecrae sets the listener up by giving the basis for understanding who he is and what he stands for. Now, this song lets the listener into his world, reinforcing the title of the track. Lecrae explains, "Oh, I'm on mission, / they probably think missin' / Some screws, but it's these three nails that keep me drivin'." While the lines are clever, they reverberate the depth of Lecrae's faith and mission. The line speaks to the fact of the reason he stands out, or people would think he is crazy, is because he is living for the crucifixion of Christ. That graphic and bold of a statement is nothing short of counter-cultural. Yet, the way he says it through his lyrics, does not in any way push a religion or belief on anyone listening. The non-believers and lukewarm believers might not even pick up on that description. Yet, Lecrae is able to answer to his Christian listeners and show the true motive behind his work. The hook to this song is not a rap, and has a reoccurring question of, "Lord, please won't you hear my cry?" which is a question everyone at some point asks. While it is more culturally acceptable to not be a Christian, the world of hip-hop still asks the question of where God is.

Lecrae is authentically asking as a Christian, but he is not disrupting the hip-hop culture in doing so. It is through songs like these that Lecrae is able to be authentic and

autobiographical in a way his audience can relate to. One of the most used quotes of Lecrae's lyrical content originates in this song: "You live for their acceptance / you die from their rejection." No matter what faith, belief, or value system, age, gender, place in life, this quotation is applicable. It is human nature to desire acceptance. Lecrae tends to call upon historical, but also timeless ideas, such as this one. A lot of rappers or performers in the spotlight deal with needing to be accepted to gain insight and power. Yet everyone, whether they are a consumer or a creator, inherently strives for acceptance. Lecrae, being as counter-cultural as he is, is encouraging us to see things the other way around. He is saying you will die by their rejection if you are only living for their acceptance. "Their" represents an open-ended person or persons, and allows for the audience to relate to Lecrae's struggles. This song shares the hurt, pain, and suffering of the need for acceptance, but Lecrae's message is that if you believe in Christ, you are "free from it all."

### Life Decisions

Intertextuality is important to "Fallin," including a children's prayer and Bible verses. Ecclesiastes 3 is used when Lecrae says, "There's a time to be born and a time to die," but follows the line with a different Biblical understanding woven throughout the Bible discuss the coming of Jesus. Ecclesiastes 3 discusses the variations of how time is spent, explaining, "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven" (*ESV*). The verse that Lecrae uses in his song is the first example for the explanation of seasons and activities here on Earth. This verse is foreshadowing for the rest of the song's message of not buying into the tangible items found on earth.

For additional context, the entire book of Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of a speaker named Solomon, who focuses his writing on warning people of the mistakes he had made in his life. These mistakes include materialism, empty promises, and other tangible items. Just like Solomon, Lecrae is calling for future generations to focus on different things as well. In Ecclesiastes 3, Solomon offers a daunting list of when it is the time for something to happen. And then in Ecclesiastes 3: 14, he states, “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him” (*ESV*). Just as Solomon is saying, Lecrae is reiterating the warning that while people continue to accept worldly things as the final necessity God has created everything, and God endures forever.

As for the children’s prayer Lecrae uses, he does change one of the words of the line of prayer, which is actually crucial to recognize when focusing on his motive. In the song, Lecrae says, “If I die before I wake, I pray to the Lord your soul He’ll take.” The original line to this commonly known Christian prayer does not pray for “your soul” but rather “my soul.” By changing the pronoun here, Lecrae is showing the prayers he has for not just himself, but more importantly, for others. He is showing his listeners he is praying, or thinking, about them and not himself.

“I Know” is also a song that consists of a two-sided narrative. The overall narrative is Lecrae responding to all of the negative responses of people saying “I know.” The satirical approach of just recognizing the negative responses shows that Lecrae does represent hip-hop culture through his music. One side of this narrative shows the negative

reaction from the hip-hop culture however, while the other side exposes the church's opinions. His response to the hip-hop culture is depicted when he says, "Yeah I know they be lyin', they misquoting my lines / They like what you think you doin' putting hope in your rhymes / You would think I'm shooting folk or putting coke in my rhymes / I just give them bass for free and push the dopest of lines." While most rap music tells stories of violence and drugs, but that is not nearly as controversial or repulsed as speaking about hope. Lecrae does not just recognize this, but finishes it with almost a rap battle mentality of making the point that he has "the dopest lines." As for the other side of the story, Lecrae's reaction to the negative response from the church involves the people judging him for being in place or with people who are not typically accepted by Christians. One way Lecrae is breaking that stereotype is by being friends and being authentic with non-Christians, and even people who are drug dealers, and everything else. Finally, there is hope that the authentic, true Christians who actually follow the Bible can be shown in the spotlight. There is a spot in the song where both points of the two-folded story are shown together, which is when Lecrae says, "I can't say that 'cause 'Jesus Walks: they don't play that (I know) / Shouldn't be here 'cause people rollin' they trees here (I know)." Lecrae is aware, even early on in his career that he will have to fight to be mainstream because music referring to Jesus does not get airtime. He then recognizes that people in the Christian culture do not feel like he should be around people getting high. If there is a song on this album that seems to fully represent Lecrae, and who he is and is representing, this is the song.

### Culture and Sin

While *Gravity* has the reputation of being Lecrae's more Christian-themed album, "Fakin'" definitely holds the same message as his more recent, less Christian music. The album refers towards more Christian theology and Bible references, but "Fakin'" mirrors the same meaning behind Lecrae's later song, "Nuthin.'" The entire song focuses on calling out rappers for creating a false story or persona. Since Lecrae is from the streets, but is also a part of the hip-hop culture, he has the credibility to call out his peers. "Fakin'" lists the various elements that are necessary to seem credible or authentic to the streets such as guns, drugs, power, and money. Lecrae's reaction beyond just saying they are faking it is that he is "not impressed.'" The lyrical content does not contain any Scripture or anything, making it more attainable or relevant for calling out other rappers. If someone is not a Christian, how is Scripture ever going to mean anything to them? The last line of the song, however, does mention a personal prayer of Lecrae's, which is that all of this faking would stop because people are worth more than what they are making their personas out to be. The theme of faking it can easily be translated into being someone who is a robot, or does just as they are told in order to be who they think they should be within the cultural norms.

The hook to "Violence" is sung by a robotic, monotone voice which is rather uncomfortable to repeatedly listen to. It seems that this is intentional. The song's first verse describes a more socially conscious side to Lecrae. He says, "From passionate catastrophe, to genocidal blasphemy / No respect for humanity, they resort to insanity" as the reason for the actions for violence. He continues to depict a narrative saying, "Close

range; when he point, I just blank-out / Felt my heart sank when that bang thang rang out / Now you got yo thang out, you take life, you give it / You took his life away, but you gave yours up to system” showing that violence is truly not the way to life. Killing someone out of any motive may take that person’s life, but will also be taking yours. He continues to say, “Killin’ is the religion, service is in a prison / Ignorance got a slave and our name in the mentions” since revenge is the way to win, and ignorance is the way to live. “Violence” may have a catchy beat, but the tone and lyrics are vividly uncomfortable. Lecrae’s message clearly resonates throughout these elements, showing how violence is not the best answer possible, so it should be uncomfortable.

Lecrae’s song “Mayday” shares a lyrical story of men falling for worldly desires and things. Within a genre that typically promotes everything that Lecrae is discrediting, “Mayday” continues to be an uncomfortable song. The song depicts Lecrae’s upbringing with his grandmother being the one who took him to church, to him trying to figure out the world and his faith for his own too. Psalms is mentioned, including a reference towards Psalms 23:2 which states, “He [God] makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.” Yet Lecrae still making a point that wolves are just as real as his shepherd, implying he may be a sheep for God, but he is living within the devil’s reign. This is one example where Lecrae is using a Bible verse that has been popular for generations, but he is challenging it. He is making his point that while verses that are repeated to generations are great, knowing what we are a part of today is something just as important. In the song’s second verse, Lecrae begins with, “Father forgive us for we know not what we do” which is another common Biblical reference. It refers to the final

words of Jesus on the cross when he asks God to forgive humanity for they do not know what they are doing by not believing. Again, it is followed by this idea that Lecrae believes this Scripture, but is torn on how to relate it back to the people around him. He continuously explains how he is “tired of crying” because of this situation. But he ends the song by explaining that “he is a product of this thing” and that he has found Jesus himself. If he is able to initially follow the culture, and do what everyone says he should do, anyone is able to turn the other way.

Lecrae’s lyrics are typically autobiographical, but the narrative to this song, “Confessions,” is built around others’ stories shared with him. The song involves the confessions of millionaires, and what happens once you reach that level of income and societal status. The song does not mention God, faith, or religion anywhere, but rather focuses on the reality of money not answering the issues people have. It also paints a picture of how people with money have similar personal struggles to those without. The people Lecrae is rapping about all still have insecurities, stress, and loneliness, they just have money to hide behind. What is important to recognize about this song is that a common theme in rap music is money and everything it can buy. This song is taking a completely different stance, showing how counter-cultural Lecrae is to the hip-hop culture. Yet the song does not use any reasoning from the Bible to support his view, showing he does not derive his viewpoints from the Bible. Instead, he is simply using stories of real people, whom he actually knows, and how they really are.

### Portrayal of Relationships

“Confe\$\$ions” is followed by “Buttons,” a song about Lecrae’s relationship with his wife. This song is another example of how Lecrae does not always use Scripture to show how he is counter-cultural to the labels placed upon him, but rather just uses first-hand experience. The song is about him and his wife, and how their relationship is going to withstand everything, including when they push each other’s buttons. Rappers typically spend more time discussing the quantity of women they have, typically referring to them as “hoes.” Lecrae is talking about his wife, and how he is dedicated to her no matter what. Having this song be the following track to “Confe\$\$ions” shows how Lecrae is not afraid to be obvious about his alternative viewpoint. While Lecrae does not hide the fact that he used to cheat on girls, always used girls, and even led a girl to having an abortion, that he is not different. He is able to show that he at one time was consistent with the majority of American men, who view women as something less than a commitment, but then he found the better alternative in marriage.

### Grace and Mercy

The song “Power Trip” focuses on power, money, and respect, which are three themes woven throughout hip-hop culture and rap music. With those elements as the focus, the lyrics show that the reason for this is that they are cursed from Adam. Being proud of accomplishments such as power, money, and respect is expected and universally accepted, except for this group of guys. Lecrae and his featured rappers take turns describing how buying into these concepts is part of the Fall. These ideas are natural, but only because humanity is sinful ever since the Fall. In other words, this song refers to a

rather larger but commonly heard Biblical story. But the rappers are great, the beat is sick, and the flow is there, making this song relevant to the hip-hop culture.

The hook for “Lord Have Mercy” repeatedly refers to Matthew 17:15 circling around the story of Jesus casting a demon out of a man. Jesus has to cast the demon out himself, because the disciples were unable to do it, because they did not have enough faith, according to the verses. Referring to that story throughout the entire song singing, “Lord have mercy, and pity on your son,” shows a binary story of followers of Jesus. One side shows that even the disciples failed at always having faith, and because of that, were unable to do the most possible acts. If they had had faith in Jesus, they would have been able to cast out the demon themselves. The other side of the story shows that when someone is possessed by a demon, or just caught up in demonic actions, Jesus can remove that part of their lives. The story in the song tells of Lecrae and the featured artist, Tedashii, being other people before they knew the truth. But also, they are observing the same actions by others in their lives. The verse being placed in the song shows that Jesus is needed in all of the intertwined stories otherwise nothing will be changed. There are other Biblical stories that circle around the idea of people doing one thing that is common or even expected from people in the culture, and them meeting Jesus, only to realize they should not be doing those actions. With Lecrae and the featured artists portraying their lives involving sex, drugs, and violence only to be changed to “screaming Jesus is King!” shows the power within those Biblical stories, but in a present day context.

### Call to Action

Probably the catchiest and most known song on this album is “Tell the World,” being the encouraging, “pump up” song on the album. The song tells about how Lecrae is going to tell the world about God, be a “billboard” for the message. He is explicitly unashamed in this song, sharing his praise to God. By Lecrae not rapping, but rather speaking a Bible verse as the end of the song, there is a sense of focus and centrality to the verse. When Lecrae does so by quoting 2 Corinthians 5:17 to end the song, he seems to be showing a final word, or message. While Lecrae is saying he is brand new in the song, the Bible verse is implied already. Yet, he chose to have the verse spoken in the middle of the song as a verse. The Bible verse says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (*ESV*). The word “behold” is within this verse, which is always a call to action for readers. By using the word “behold,” it is implied that this is something that the person in the story cannot control, but rather just needs to witness. The song replicates that understanding, and Lecrae is now just stating he will be the example shown in culture for others to witness.

“Lucky Ones” includes a discussion of what God is to Lecrae, and how he does not believe in luck, but he “believes in grace.” The song lists multiple ways that Lecrae and every other human falls short, but the many ways that the grace he is depicting wins against it. In the middle of the song, Lecrae states, “We have the faith to start a riot” calling out an image of people coming together, sharing a common goal, and drawing attention. While he repeatedly states he does not believe in luck, he does recognize the

lucky ones as those who are Christians. Overall, this song is showing the power within the grace Lecrae believes in, and the power it has within someone's story.

Another way Lecrae uses someone's story is by featuring bands who have their own crafted stories. "Higher" features one of the most popular Christian bands, Tenth Avenue North, definitely made for the Christian industry. It never fails, when Lecrae makes music with a widely-known and followed Christian band, they make noise on radio, concerts, and everything in between. The song asks for a relationship that grows closer and closer to God. Tenth Avenue North dominates the majority of the song, making it unique on the album that is predominately rap. This song allows for those who are not typically rap listeners to be drawn to Lecrae's album. Being definitely part of the Christian culture also shows the difference for this song, and how there is a more specific audience for the song.

Overall, *Gravity* provides insight into Lecrae's history and background, laying the groundwork for anyone to know who he is and what he stands for. This album is necessary for building that authentic, transparent persona Lecrae is obviously wanting to establish. Lecrae actively draws upon past experiences and historical events to create his present day motives. While this song is predominately attached to Biblical stories, it is still historical information, especially for a follower of Christ. While not everyone will believe in God, or that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is found within historical events and records. Regardless, Lecrae is using himself as the primary example throughout this album. He is showing that his past is dramatically different than his present, but is not something to be ignored or put aside. He is using his past experiences as a centerpiece of

being applicable and personable with his fans. When a rapper, or any musician for that matter, is able to show consistency, transparency, and understanding of their lives, fans have a hard time not feeling some sense of emotional connection or loyalty. *Gravity* was the first album that really allowed Lecrae a place on the hip-hop platform, so it is important to note that his beliefs were boldly shown throughout, but were widely viewed by various audience types. Attention is brought to this because his following album, *Anomaly*, draws away from predominantly discussing faith, to more discussions on societal issues. By taking a stance on cultural and societal issues, Lecrae is able to securely create a space of discussion within both the hip-hop and Christian cultures.

## CHAPTER 7

*ANOMALY*: HISTORICAL AND CURRENT ISSUES

“He may not swear, but *Anomaly* is as hard-hitting as any rap record out right now”

(Weingarten).

*Anomaly* debuted at the number one spot on the Billboard top 200, while simultaneously being number one on the gospel charts on September 9, 2014. By debuting at number one of both of these charts, Lecrae made history with this album. No other rapper had accomplished this. The album also earned a Grammy. *Anomaly* is his most honest, deep, and emotional album. Lecrae has gained a lot of attention, which shows that there is room for a rapper to be part of both the hip-hop and Christian cultures, at the same time being separate from them. By now, Lecrae recognizes he does not fit into genres, so instead of trying to fit in, he is wanting to create his own space. The songs on the album cover historical and current issues, in a way that force the listener into his world, to see his perspective. Lecrae’s choice of language allows him to be relatable to his audience. As Rembert Brown states, “Christianity isn’t universal. Feeling odd, misunderstood, and weird very much is. That’s the true foundation of this album, and that’s why it deserves its place in the mainstream” (1). Through his powerful narrative consisting of honest details and overwhelming imagery, the listener can at least admit he is a powerful lyricists, but also that he knows how to share his mission.

Persona

A common theme shown throughout the entire Old and New Testaments of the Bible is the understanding that followers of Christ are outsiders to the world. Jesus being

the embodiment of what it is like to live on earth as a follower of Christ. If Christians are told to live like Christ, as many of them are told to do, then there should not be any surprise that Christians will feel out of place. Lecrae is using this reality throughout this song, and really as the overall theme of the album. The song includes many examples from Scripture, but also MC-type language calling out his peers. One example of Lecrae referring to Scripture while also calling out his peers is when he says, “You probably couldn't tell that we over here, because you hardly sober / Double shots in that ego / They laughing at us, yeah, we know.” Lecrae is just mentioning how his peers are laughing, maybe even the entire hip-hop culture is laughing, but the fact that he is recognizing it, gives him power in the rap scene. But, the lyrics are also referring to John 15:19 which states, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” Having his peers laughing at him, or others finding a means of laughing at Lecrae and his label, shows how much they are unwelcomed outsiders. Another way that Lecrae uses Scripture in subtle ways is when he describing that they “Maybe at the bottom, but we not forgotten / The directors plotting that sequel” which refers to Matthew 20:16. This verse states, “The last will be first, the first will be last.” The promise in Scripture is while Christians are outsiders on earth, when Jesus returns, Christians will be back into fair stature. The final portion of the song that involves references to the Bible is when Lecrae admits, “If you wanna exclude me / for being the true me/ It's Gucci / I already found my home / Homesick / Homeless, if I'm on this / Cause' my home is somewhere I ain't never been before.” This lyrical content is referring to Luke 9:58, which states, “And

Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (*ESV*). Jesus is saying this statement after the man speaks about a desire to follow him, but wants to go home first. What Jesus is saying in this verse, is that even the Son of Man does not find comforts of a home. Lecrae is reiterating this idea that because he believes in God, and is trying to live a Christ-like lifestyle, he too is in fact homesick.

As for other references in this song, Lecrae explicitly mentions Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela in the same line when he says, “Martin, Mandela, yeah, we need these folks / We believe these folks / We can be these folks.” As most rappers do, Lecrae is mentioning men who have come before him and created social change. Instead of just paying homage to the men, Lecrae is actually encouraging his listeners to learn from these men, and not to think they cannot be social activists too.

“Say I Won’t” is the only song on the *Anomaly* album that has a featured artist, Andy Mineo. The song consists of the two rappers exchanging witty, light-hearted one-liners. Or so it seems on the surface. The song is actually calling out the entire rap scene, while creating a divide between Reach Records and everyone else. “Say I Won’t” is a typical rap song that is causing this battle sounding content, wanting to exploit the faults of other rappers who make the same music over and over again. The song is also a means for the two rappers to say that there is nothing they are not willing to do when it comes to sharing their mission. The song is not meant to be a serious song, especially when placed within such other powerful songs. Yet it seems to be a common thread in our culture to laugh at issues that are actually serious to the field being discussed.

While Lecrae and Andy use playful words, they reiterate the album's theme of being outsiders. They are only saying "say I won't" because people have questioned their abilities, motives, and actions. They are saying "say I won't" because they have had to go up against what is expected of them based on both their faith and their musical careers. For example, Andy's line of "just a white man excelling in a black sport" reminds the listener that he has barriers around him when it comes to entering the hip-hop culture. While Lecrae recognizes that the culture around him is full of violence, his goal is to create a great concert experience. He says, "Look, I'm from an era of fast living and mass terror / Boys cover them cover girls like mascara / I don't need to keep a gun and a mask ever / I still make 'em put their hands up." The lyrics cover a multitude of topics, including expectations based on historical occurrence. If hip-hop was not seen as a culture established and only for African-Americans, Andy Mineo would not have to deal with racial barriers. If Lecrae was not raised in a world that involved constant violence, but also a time where mass shootings happen often, he would not use that as the powerful example to show. Even when Lecrae is having a comical, light-hearted track on his album, he still has full intentions of calling out issues from the past and present.

Lecrae is transparently describing his biggest fears as he continues to make music and be in front of the world. He describes various scenarios where he is unable to do what he needs to do out of fear, such as not being able to sleep, or not feeling comfortable around people because he is too worried about what they are thinking. Interesting enough, the song follows the track "Nuthin" which is calling out rappers for not sharing their real lives and struggles. Lecrae answers to his own criticism in that song by sharing

his personal struggles. The image he creates in “Nuthin” is that of rappers not sharing the truth about how they live and what or who is important in their lives. Through this track, Lecrae is also answering to that by calling attention to needing Jesus.

The album’s title song, “Anomaly,” consists of two parts, both defining the word “anomaly.” The first half the song is a description of a boy who grew up getting made fun of, did not fit in, had a lot of struggles, did not get a lot of encouragement, only to be a natural born leader. The turning point of the song is when Lecrae says, “Nobody ever told him he could be more than he is, but inside he's a leader / I didn't know who was inside me either.” This line of Lecrae placing himself within the song allows for the song to shift the second definition. The second definition consists of a dictionary based definition involving synonyms. The final idea is, “But I say, we are / exactly who God created us to be anomalies / The system didn't plan for this.” Referring back to the album cover, Lecrae is labeling himself and anyone being their own self as an anomaly. Somebody that the “system” was not prepared for, in other words, someone that society or cultures were unprepared for. While everyone has been quick to label Lecrae, he is now defining himself. He is not labeling himself within the hip-hop, or within the Christian culture. Instead, he is labeling himself something that can be within both cultures, as well as in his own category.

#### Societal and Political Issues

Lecrae uses his own story intertwined with other well-known issues to create a collaborative narrative to show what America truly embodies. The introduction to “Welcome to America” is a pilot using an intercom to welcome the people on the flight to

America. Lecrae does not waste anytime listing off the horrific, but truthful, things that someone in America can easily witness. The list includes sex trafficking, indebted immigrants, people selling anything from babies, drugs, porn, and themselves. Another item on the list includes the treatment of veterans, including their treatment while serving time, but more importantly how they are treated as second-class citizens upon returning to the States. Lecrae also spends time describing the inner city when he says, “All I know is drugs and rap / I probably could have been some kind of doctor / Instead of holding guns and crack.” The entire song, but specifically these lyrics, shows a visually compelling description of the different types of “Americas” not typically shown to the general population.

While the story is not entirely his, Lecrae uses a first-person voice within the song, rhetorically showing that he is on the side of these victims. The main focus for the entire song focuses around people wanting to come to America based on America’s reputation, only to find out the reality is entirely different. In the final verse, Lecrae builds this entire narrative around someone who is on the outside of the States seeing how much excess can be found here. That must only mean that everyone has excess, and that there is enough for everyone to live. But instead, the person sharing the perspective is making the products in sweatshops in his or her native country.

The introduction to the song is immediately direct, but the final lyrics of the song leave the listener without any closure. Lecrae’s final words are, “I done made it to America / I’m amazed at America / But I couldn’t get approval to stay so they sent me away from America.” Choosing to have the song end this way shows Lecrae’s motive to

leave the listener stunned, but also without any sense of closure. The entire song exploits everything bad, but true, about America. Yet the final lines of the songs shows someone who is “amazed at America.” but is not even given a chance to see the bad and the good for themselves.

Lecrae did not make a song that was actively calling for anything specific to be changed within the American culture. He is not pleading for civil rights, for less violence, exploitation, drugs, or anything. Instead, he is taking on an innocent perspective by observing what happens in America. By taking this approach, Lecrae seems to be an unbiased observer, while actually having a full agenda of what he wants to call to the listeners’ attention. The song is able to be more powerful and influential when the listener does not feel attacked, but informed about social injustice. This is the approach that allowed Tupac to be the powerful voice for the victims, and still holds true to being impactful today.

Another song that uses the similar tactics of Tupac is Lecrae’s song, “Dirty Water.” “Dirty Water” is a powerful song that exploits all of the tainted aspects of our society, but are the aspects we as humans have inherited, consist of, and must still take in. Lecrae addresses aspects including slavery, racial profiling, rapists, broken homes, and materialism. He shows that all of these only exist because of the historical events Americans today have inherited. Yet, the only reason they still exist today, and we have not progressed beyond these inherited issues, is because they are not addressed. Lecrae warns near the beginning of the song that, “It's not a guilt trip, it's a field trip that's gon last more than one day.” The song continues to draw parallels, comparisons, and

connections of previous history with today. One of the most heart-wrenching, stunning quotes is when Lecrae describes his own ancestry by stating,

Worthless, worthless, 400 years we done heard that  
 My family came here on slave ships  
 Some herd cattle, some herd blacks  
 Know some of ya'll done heard that  
 My kin was treated less than men  
 That's why we raised to hate each other, cause we hate our skin. (Lecrae *Anomaly*)

Lecrae comes from a background consisting of both white and black ancestors, forcing him to inherit mixed emotional baggage. He connects slavery, where people owned people, to present-day hate amongst African-Americans. Lecrae's claim makes is that because African-Americans are treated as less than men, or similarly to the mindset of how people treated slaves, they automatically hate each other. The reason there is tension and violence within the African-American community is not because of anything short of the hate they received and always have received from whites. Lecrae can make this claim, living and observing such actions, but also because he consists of both races. Credibility is established because he can answer to both races. In addition to having hate within races, racial profiling is also brought to the listener's attention in the song. Lecrae mentions, "I must be a thief, she locked the doors when I was walking by," showing that because people are treated as something, they will eventually start believing it. While this is a false stereotype, Lecrae continues along the same idea, and discusses women who are judged for getting pregnant outside of marriage or any relationship for that matter. Lecrae says, "They must be whores cuz the master rapes them and leaves / The child / So dead beat daddy was taught to me way before my time." He is able to say that "dead beat daddy was taught to me" because it was what he knew as he was being raised.

Addressing the lyric about rape, he is discussing an issue that typically falls under the stereotype that there are multiple ways women are asking for bad attention, or asking to be raped by men. Lecrae does not have to go into great detail about any of these issues, because they are common issues everyone knows and is aware of within our society. They are issues that are occurring within all cultures showing Lecrae is able to call attention to what is happening today, but also what has always happened.

Another topic that has always occurred within America is the idea of the American Dream, and always having everything anyone could ever want. His warning is that we buy gold chains, or other jewelry, or other materialistic things, only to be enslaved to them too. He is saying that the more we spend money, the more we need it, and find fulfillment in it. When he says, “Now we extreme, buying fancy things like gold chains / Just pretty shackles, we still enslaved / Put 'em round your neck, cuz we still hangin’” he is not just saying to stop buying stuff. No, he is using sensitive, powerful words that typically depict slavery and killings. He purposely uses words that would relate to the previously uncomfortable, horrific stories he just described. Materialism is something that is not typically looked at as something bad, especially within the hip-hop culture. Lecrae is using the words that are typically seen as bad to show that materialism is just as toxic. Yet it something we still have always been associated with.

Lecrae ends the song with two simple lines that describe the entire issue of history constantly repeated itself. He says, “Blood in the ocean to these African streams / This dirty water ain't nothin we haven't seen” which shows that there is not anything new happening within our society. He is saying that this tainted, falsely understood way of

living is not something that is new to the current generation. But rather, the second people started buying people, the second people started using people, the second that people started killing other people, is the day that the water we are made of and ingest became dirty. And that is the issue in society today. Nobody is cleaning the water. Lecrae admits this is not a simple fix, but it is something that needs to be fixed. Lecrae continues with this theme into the following song, “Wish” where he says, “And I probably passed on a whole lot of truth / But I know about a whole lot of lies / Man I wish I had me a time machine / I would tell Martin it was all a dream.” When he says that he wishes he could tell Martin it was all dream, everyone knows exactly what dream that is. What “Dirty Water” and Lecrae’s overall message is saying, is that nothing new can happen until current situations are changed. He is trying to show the historical events everyone listening knows about, but how important it is to apply those to the present. Lecrae’s lyrics express a fear that nothing will ever change, because people are choosing to separate the past from the present when that is not possible.

“The Good, The Bad, The Ugly” is another song that blends time together, creating a cohesive story. It is the most talked about song on the album, where Lecrae discusses abortion, sexual abuse, and drug use. This song is the most transparent, honest, authentic song in the rap scene. Lecrae is sharing how one of his previous girlfriends had an abortion because he wanted to, and he shares being molested as a child by a babysitter. While those are obviously the bad and the ugly in correlation with the song’s title, the good in the song is how Lecrae says, “We are not defined by our pasts / The future look bright, I see the light on.” In interviews, Lecrae admitted that his mom was not aware of

these situations, and he had to call her to tell her before the album was out for the world to listen to. Lecrae uses his narrative to share the mission he has, but he does it in a way that allows you into his shoes. You are able to see his perspective, and why he says what he does, because he allows you to.

### Cultural Issues

“Nuthin” was the first single released for this album, giving it a unique place within the analysis. The album’s theme is being an outsider, calling out observations that are wrong within the world. This song fits right within that theme, with the main target being the hip-hop culture. Lecrae is to the point where he is a part of both the Christian and hip-hop cultures enough to have credibility to call out the issues within them.

“Nuthin” sounds similar to other songs that he has written, but he finally has the credibility and experience to call out specifics. He repeatedly says that the rappers are saying “nuthin” but rather spreading a message that is unattainable for consumers of the music. Lecrae does this by sharing what is commonly heard in all rap music, which has been there since the beginning of time; the music just continues to “go in circles.” The content in the song shows that Lecrae is calling for rappers to use the power they have by creating music to be shared amongst anyone, anywhere for honesty. Half-way through the song, Lecrae says,

And every song talking 'bout they selling work on every corner  
 Don't talk about the laws, taking kids away from mommas  
 Don't talk about your homie in the trauma cause he shot up  
 Or what about your young boy messing up the product  
 They don't talk about the bond money that they ain't have  
 And everybody snitch on everybody in the jam  
 They don't talk about the pain, they don't talk about the struggle

How they turn to the Lord when they ran into trouble  
I'm a talk about it. (Lecrae *Anomaly*)

Lecrae successfully exploits what rappers choose to talk about in their music, by sharing what they do not talk about in their songs. The list consists of everyday life struggles that anyone could relate to. But instead, the rappers are sharing advertisements and selling a false lifestyle. Lecrae is not saying that every rapper needs to share the Gospel. He is asking for rappers to start sharing real life, start sharing their true narratives, which is what hip-hop was initially established by and for. Lecrae ends the song with a voiceover of him defending what he is saying in the song. The lyrical content consists of Lecrae's overall desire for rap content, but he is harsh in his words. His approach mimics that of what an MC would have originally done, or anyone in a rap battle. The lyrics that he just speaks at the end of the song are:

Hey man, the way I see it  
I think we were made for more  
Than just, ya know, the simple things that we aspire toward  
We were made for more than just telling stories about  
How much money we can get by selling poison to people  
It's time to talk about who we are and who we can be  
And we need to build each other up and not put each other down  
I feel like we not talking about nothing right now. (Lecrae *Anomaly*)

He is not taking back what he says in the song, but is rather rhetorically approaching the message in a more one-on-one manner. The ending of the song feels less like an attack, and more like an encouraging message. Being able to put both tones into the song allows for Lecrae to express his frustration, but also speak his underlying reason for being so harsh.

While “Nuthin’” addresses rappers and their lyrical content, Lecrae has a song that actually utilizes a term a lot of rappers use. “Timepiece” consists mainly of wordplay on the idea of calling a watch a timepiece. Some of the wordplay involves synonyms for timepiece, or wordplay with specific brands of watches. He begins by discussing Audemars, followed by a section on how time is spent never watching the expensive watches people buy. The other expensive brand of watch he discusses is Rolexes, which he refers to them as “Rollies.” Other wordplay includes “ticking” God off, adding or subtracting time, and a “stopwatch that [he’s] racing.” Lecrae knows that other rappers always have to mention the type of watches they have, along with other pieces of jewelry. He knows that that is what his audience expects from rappers. Yet, he uses the words and ideas, to discuss time, eternity, and how God fits into the understanding of timing.

#### Love Stories

Lecrae can still have fun with his songs, which typically reflect his marriage and understanding of relationships overtime. The song “Runners” provides Lecrae with the time to warn his friends about bad relationships, while the following song, “All I Need is You,” is his love song for his wife. Both songs are upbeat, clever, and just cute. They both show different desires for relationships, but are back-to-back on the album showing Lecrae’s goal. After listening to “All I Need is You,” the listener would understand the encouragement from Lecrae to have healthy relationships and to take care of women.

### Christianity

There are a few other songs on the album that have the more upbeat sound to them. These three songs are the three songs on the album, “Give In,” “Broken,” and “Messengers,” that have singers featured for the choruses. All three singers, Kari Jobe, Crystal Nicole, and For Kings and Country, are well-known, popular Christian artists. In other words, Lecrae has again avoided involving any well-known, popular rappers on his album. The three songs featuring these artists are catchy songs that are appropriate for air time. They are the only songs listeners will hear on the main Christian radio stations. That is why it is not a surprise “Messengers” is the song that earned Lecrae a Grammy in 2015. The songs are catchy, encouraging songs that may sound mainstream, but are not worship songs either. They all have great messages for the Christian audience, showing that Lecrae still does make music that fits better into distinct categories.

## CONCLUSION

### THE FUTURE OF LECRAE'S CULTURE

“Everyone lives and operates out of some narrative identity, whether it is thought out or reflected upon or not”

– Tim Keller (16).

Lecrae is creating his own culture that does not fit into a clean, simple form. Instead, he is creating a space that allows people to be who they are, that day, at that time. As for the future of Lecrae, he can only continue to create music in a way that promotes change. A change that resonates throughout a multitude of avenues, yet affects everyone in the process. The fact that he continues to gain momentum and influence shows that there is a space for him within present society. By the use of his narrative, he will continue to have a story to share, always going back to his personal experiences and faith. With the role as leader and mentor, his label will follow suit. As we have seen with the comparison to Tupac and Martin Luther King, Jr., the rebel persona's legacy will always be relevant and persistent, even within the history textbooks. As long as Lecrae remains transparent and honest, his followers will remain loyal. If he continues to be inspired by others, influenced by people throughout different fields, his music will continue to be something of an anomaly. In the end, if nothing else, Lecrae's legacy will live on through the people who can claim they are now a product of his music and message.

## NOTES

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