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Tell Me What You Know About Dreamin': The Terrors and Triumphs of Party Culture in Kid Cudi's "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)"

While popular music is dominated by artists embracing party culture and—in the view of neoliberal morality—its subsequent vice of drug use, Kid Cudi's 2009 hit "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)" examines the subject as a complicated matter. In collaboration with Ratahat and MGMT, the song's airy piano, hi-hats, and synth beats produce a catchy and diverse sound that, over ten years since its release, is still played at clubs and parties today. However, analyzing the song's lyricism and technological production in tandem suggest it is not solely celebrating party culture but explores the vast racial, social, and psychological means that drive an individual to these scenes. "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)" challenges colonial values as the song's meaning, predicated on the tension between its linguistic and instrumental elements, dismantles the European priority on lyrics as the main source of symbolism in music. Cudi specifically disrupts this white cultural emphasis as his lyricism and composition reflect different values, as he shares a nuanced perspective on partying and aligns with the tradition of Black popular culture that shifts from the binary oppositions of European art.

As the song's narrative both illustrates and critiques the reliance on drugs and alcohol to obtain happiness, Cudi's contradictory message subverts linear, European conceptions of art's purpose. The opening verse portrays the song's speaker rolling a joint and driving drunk, escalating substance abuse from the individual to endangering others. Alongside the lyrics a

delicate piano scale is played, juxtaposing Cudi's harsh lyricism with a blissful composition. Tricia Rose, in her seminal work *Black Noise*, examines the musically dense and complex productions of rap as "rhythm and polyrhythmic layering is to American and African-derived musics what harmony and the harmonic triad is to Western classical music (Rose 66). The lack of connection between the song's linguistic and instrumental tone signify a musical priority differentiating from the European emphasis on linear harmony. "Polyrhythmic layering" is not only in the song symbolically but in its genre-bending composition, with the combination of Cudi's rapping and psychedelic production by electronic rock groups Ratatat and MGMT. Rose expands her description of American and African musical values by suggesting that "these features are not merely stylistic effects, they are aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments" (Rose 67). The vast soundscape of "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)," from its drum-rolls to the electric guitar, mimics the many emotions and the overwhelmed nature of a drug-induced high, especially if they are in an environment of drunk driving as Cudi's first scene depicts.

The song's non-linguistic qualities illuminate Cudi's semantic narrative, and while its lyrics and catchy club sound initially glorify reckless behaviour, this message is complicated by Cudi's exploration into a fragmented, interior self. Contrasting the rash and impulsive scene of the first verse, Cudi's second verse divulges into the psychological troubles of the narrator: "Tell me what you / know about night / terrors every night" (Cudi 2009). The haunting invocation of night terrors after a chorus exclaiming a "pursuit of happiness" exhibits the song's contradictory view, indicated directly by the song's name. "(Nightmare)" being in the title's brackets implies how the consequences of party culture, and utilizing drugs as a means of attaining contentment, is often neglected in dominant pop culture narratives. Cudi's consideration that nightmares are

often the aftermath of partying can be analyzed with Katherine McKittrick and Alexander G. Weheliye's sentiment that "the practice of loving, desperately, the unspeakability of music, is found, in part, in our neurobiological and physiological and intellectual response to that music and music makers" (20). As the chorus does not address the "nightmare[s]" in the song's title, Cudi conveys the "unspeakability" of heartache, mental illness and night terrors in an environment that attempts to numb these difficulties through various substances, while desiring to be loved and heard amidst the noise.

Despite the somber nature of Cudi's second verse, he does not feed into the spectacle condemning partying at-large, as the song's upbeat production aligns with a typical club soundscape. Cudi's refusal to not didactically judge or ridicule partying relates to how "music dancing, music jumping, music singing [...] is one way black communities physiologically and neurobiologically navigate racist worlds" (McKittrick and Weheliye 21). As hip hop gained prominence within New York's club scene in the 1970s, — and as the genre's birth is credited to Afro-Latino youth emphasizing joy when a highway expansion project displaced them— partying is not merely a means of debauched escapism but a way to "navigate racist worlds" during oppressive capitalist measures. Thus, the upbeat, electronic hip hop of "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)" displays partying as emancipatory in a colonial society that elicits projects detrimental to marginalized communities. The form in which Cudi amalgamates music and sociopolitical discourse can be explicated by Mark Campbell's scholarship that argues "found objects and technologies, which inform and enhance black cultural production and music making, provide us with new ways of narrating humanity" (McKittrick and Weheliye 31). Cudi "narrat[es] humanity" by combining technological production and poetic lyricism to express a complicated relationship with party culture.

Cudi's narrator experiences a vast range of feelings toward drug use and negligence, and the song's instrumentation mirrors this complex attitude through its layered and elaborate composition. The complex narrative found in the song's linguistic and musical production can be understood with Tricia Rose's stance in "My Mic Sound Nice: Art, Community and Consciousness," her chapter for *That's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*: "Hip hop realism is filled with metaphors and metonyms of existence that trouble listeners or commentators from a wide range of political, social and intellectual perspectives" (505). As "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)" does not take an explicit side in either praising or vilifying party culture, Cudi's liminal position may "trouble listeners" who are accustomed to the European priority on binary, black-and-white thinking. The song's complicated lyricism and composition reveal a perspective of hybridity, disputing the European emphasis on purity and singularity of meaning as art's ultimate goal. Imani Perry, in her introduction to *Prophets of the Hood*, reflects on the diversity of expression in hip hop as an inherent "ideological democracy [which] prevents the kind of coherent political framework necessary" (7) for the genre's morality to be defined by European values. Cudi utilizes an "ideological democracy" in "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)" as his lyrical and instrumental production illustrate different views of party culture. For example, the eeriness of the second verse rapped against an upbeat, ethereal piano challenges the uniformity and harmony of thought in European standards of art.

The simultaneous embrace and criticism of partying in "Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)" alludes to the wider space of contradiction that hip hop occupies. Cudi engages with the fast-paced, electronic melodies of a nightclub soundscape whilst airing critique on its escalation of dangerous behaviour and emotional repression, positing a dual narrative that both

replicates party culture while holding reservations for it. This juxtaposition is common in hip hop music, as explored by Stuart Hall:

By definition, black pop culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low [...] There are always positions to be won in pop culture... (26)

As Hall contends that Black popular culture subverts rigid binaries distinguished by European values, Cudi continues in this tradition by dismantling conventional oppositions. While not following the messages from “high” culture that deride nightclub scenes and electronic music as lower forms of entertainment, he neither fully celebrates these environments by suggesting the tacit “nightmare” that looms over partying and drug use. Cudi does not essentialize party culture as good or bad, and instead examines it as a nuanced atmosphere where people pursue happiness at night and then “lay awake in the bed full of sorrow” (Cudi 2009). Thus, “Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)” rejects stringent European notions as Cudi does not represent a specific moral position but embraces the ambiguity that is integral to hip hop and Black popular culture at-large.

By equally examining the linguistic and instrumental elements of “Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare),” the song’s unique and complex view toward partying, drug use and mental health emerges. While European beliefs on popular music prioritize lyrics as exhibiting a song’s message, analyzing the composition of “Pursuit of Happiness (Nightmare)” generates new meanings and angles that must be read in tandem with Cudi’s lyricism. The song’s complicated narrative disrupts colonial traditions by emphasizing nuanced over binary thinking, communicating clubs as a space of liberation from capitalist policies (despite Cudi’s critique of party culture), and dismantling high and low conceptions of art. By employing scholarship in

Black and hip hop studies to dissect the song further, audiences can better understand the longevity and playability of Kid Cudi's 2009 hit, aside from its catchy and memorable chorus.

## Works Cited

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