

A Rap Theory: What is The Control Problem? The Disconnect between Rap Fans and Rappers

FIRST CONTACT

My first exposure to The Control Problem was about a year after the song dropped. Me and a friend were having one of our many discussions on rap and in this conversation we got into “Control” and its impact on the rap scene. Now, the fact that Kendrick's Control verse impacted the whole rap game is obvious, if it wasn't, I wouldn't be writing about it 13 years later. This discussion is about Kendrick's intent behind Control and how we as fans need to hear that verse through the lens of a rapper to understand peers' criticisms against him.

I've been a fan and lover of rap music for most of my life and a Kendrick Lamar fan since I first heard his music in 2011. I was putting people on to Dot even before GKMC released, and nowadays Kendrick is one of my favorite artists, and is in the conversation for #1 GOAT Rap Artist IMO. So my personal belief in The Control Problem doesn't affect how I feel about Kendrick. More importantly, this belief isn't born out of malice for Dot, it's born out of love for rap music and the culture behind it.

ESTABLISHING THE RAPPERS PERSPECTIVE [Future Writing; Rap is Sport & Art]

To start, we need to establish the correct lens through which to view Kendrick's Control verse. For that, we need to understand 2 origins; The Origin Of Rap, and The Origin Of A Rapper (pre-streaming era), and how competitiveness is woven into each.

Whether you want to look to the rap battles at block parties in NY in the 70s and 80s, the Queens v Bronx beef of the late 80s, or the East v West beef of the 90s, competition has always been rooted within the culture of rap.

Every rapper has the same general structure to their origin. They heard rap/hip-hop, they liked it, they started participating in it. But the music industry didn't respect rap until very recently (and arguably still doesn't), and as we stated earlier, rap is competitive. Due to this, when you started participating in rap you couldn't just make a record and go sell it, the music industry didn't care and the current participants won't respect you.

Until Spotify and Soundcloud, the only way to get your rapping heard and respected, was by participating at local battles and/or cyphers. If you called yourself a rapper and attended these battles, someone else could call you out and you had to be ready to defend yourself or if you were gonna call someone else out, you knew you had to win because your reputation was at stake every time you got on stage. So for every rapper that started before the streaming era, you would never call out someone by name, unless it was time for war. The ability to say, "I'm the best, and I'll prove it right now!" is woven into their psyche.

A RAPPERS PERSPECTIVE ON CONTROL

Establishing this is key to The Control Problem because I am not a rapper, I'm just a fan and lover of rap music.

Which brings us back to that conversation with my friend and why I'm discussing The Control Problem now. The Control Problem is actually the main critique I've had about Kendrick's career since this old conversation with my friend. This critique is that it is in bad taste to release Control, placing yourself as the King of Rap, with no intention of defending the crown. This isn't a novel idea, there's been plenty of conversations on this by rappers and fans alike over the years, with the usual rebuttals being; 1. "rappers call themselves the best all the time" and 2. "You're just being sensitive about his claim because you don't think he's the GOAT/best."

Two weeks ago Lupe Fiasco visited the The Rap Roundtable to discuss the controversy around his appearance on Koala Tea's stream. It made me realize, many rappers share my opinion on The Control Problem and the reason I could never articulate the root issue is because The Control Problem is something that comes from a rappers mindset, while I was approaching the conversation as a fan.

Those prior counter arguments to The Control Problem sound good from the fans perspective because we haven't been defending our claim to greatness from the day we started honing our craft. As observers, we don't hear rap music the same way a participant does. The 2 counters I stated earlier, quickly fall apart from the perspective of a rapper: 1. Kendrick on Control didn't just give a bar saying he's the best (something completely normal), he crowned himself king and dropped names, and 2. Every single rapper thinks they are better than everyone else. It's completely reasonable from a rapper's perspective to hear that verse and think, "nah, fuck that, you might be nice, but you ain't that nice." That's not sensitivity, that's how you've trained yourself to hear those bars. That's the competition knotted into the history of spoken word, manifested into a thought.

THE CONTROL PROBLEM EXPLAINED

So what did Lupe say on TRR to spark this revelation on my disjointed perspective?

1. "I've never heard a rapper of a high skill level say somebody is better than them."
2. "I love dude (Dot), I always have, I always will. I don't want to battle him. I don't want to battle anybody. I didn't want to battle Royce, I don't want to do none of that. If somebody bring it, then imma respond, I ain't no punk..."

These 2 quotes reinstate the notion that rap is intrinsically competitive and that regardless of personal feelings towards an individual, Lupe (along with every other rapper he asks) believes, a rapper that claims he is the best must always be ready to defend that claim. Herein lies the root of The Control Problem and where I'm going to make my first extremely bold proclamation; "Through the lens of a fan, Dot's Control verse was just a call for competition that may have been in bad taste, but from the rapper's perspective, it's disrespectful to rap culture and every rapper that came up before streaming." Kendrick claimed himself to be the King of Rap while simultaneously saying that he'd make sure all of his peers would never be heard from again, along with the ultimate taboo in rap, saying specific names, all with no intention of defending the claim.

WHAT DO FANS DO WITH THIS INFORMATION?

With hindsight, the optics of The Control Problem get even worse and confirm its validity. Prior to the last few years, we as fans could look at Control and say that Dot was just playing the game of saying he's the best, like everyone else. We now know that Kendrick's purpose behind Control wasn't just flexing skill, claiming greatness, saying everyone is trash, or a call for competition. Kendrick's purpose behind Control was an attempt to bait Drake into battling him and more specifically, getting Drake to explicitly diss Dot in a song, hidden behind a statement that every other rapper is beneath him. This is where I'll make my second extremely bold statement; "We now have a duty as rap fans to view Control through the rapper's perspective." If you were a rapper with this belief at the time of release, you couldn't say what I'm saying now in public because; 1. Kendrick hadn't made his intention clear, and 2. The public would have decided you were being sensitive before you got a chance to state your case.

WHY IS KENDRICK'S CONTROL VERSE DISRESPECTFUL TO RAP?

At this point you might be asking, "But if Kendrick's Control verse was dissing everyone, why did only some rappers respond and/or take offense?" Because Kendrick's intent with Control and his words are incongruent. Let's remind ourselves of the part of this verse we're talking about. "And I'm gon' get it even if you're in the way, And if you're in it, better run for Pete's sake. I heard the barbershops be in great debates all the time 'Bout who's the best MC: Kendrick, Jigga, and Nas, Eminem, André 3000; the rest of y'all, New niggas just new niggas, don't get involved... I'm usually homeboys with the same niggas I'm rhymin' with But this is hip-hop, and them niggas should know what time it is, And that goes for Jermaine Cole, Big K.R.I.T., Wale, Pusha T, Meek Millz, A\$AP Rocky, Drake, Big Sean, Jay Electron', Tyler, Mac Miller, I got love for you all, but I'm tryna murder you niggas, Tryna make sure your core fans never heard of you niggas, They don't wanna hear not one more noun or verb from you niggas, What is competition? I'm tryna raise the bar high, Who tryna jump and get it? You better off tryna skydive..."

Kendrick starts his claim to greatness saying he'll go through everyone that is rapping in order to get there. Then he attempts to narrow his focus by claiming he isn't actually talking to the rappers who are already in conversation for #1 GOAT along with adding himself to that conversation, at a point in time where Dot had only released 2 albums and before releasing what many consider to be his best work, To Pimp A Butterfly. The grouping of himself with some of the GOATs of rap at that time, followed by saying he is just speaking to "new niggas" is where the line gets extremely blurry. Who is Kendrick calling for competition? All the other rappers named in the "GOAT barbershop conversation" started in the 90s and had impressive resumés already. Kendrick's first album, Section.80, came out in 2011, just 2 years prior. If "new niggas" is just the people that came up with you, you're not addressing a whole decade of rappers who have been building their resumé before you even started, and a couple of the named rappers could even fall into that category.

At this point the verse isn't disrespectful, it's just kinda confusing. By putting 11 artist's names into the verse, with no intention of battling them, Kendrick disrespected a culture that learned that calling out another artist in song is a call to battle. By putting so many names in here Kendrick also cleverly creates 2 smokescreens. The first smokescreen is to his content, that being the confusing nature of what he's said so far. By saying names he's inciting the visceral competitive roots tied to rap and rappers, but by saying so many names also making it seem as though it's not serious that he's doing so. As fans, we couldn't see the second smokescreen until recently, and even most rappers couldn't see that all of this was to serve a second smokescreen which was to block Kendrick's intent.

Kendrick wanted a beef with Drake, he wanted to take down the guy at the forefront of his claim to current greatness, but he couldn't be perceived as the initiator because when you initiate beef you allow your opponent the chance to attack, and Drake was too big at the time for Dot to shoot first. By creating these smokescreens he offers himself the chance to respond only to who he wants. This is what leads to the incongruence of Kendrick's content and its intent. Were other rappers friends, being invited to a sparring match, or adversaries that needed to enter battle? Which rappers was Kendrick referring to? The truth is, none of that mattered to Dot, it was all a facade to bait one dude.

KENDRICK ADDRESSING THE CONTROL PROBLEM

Now if you came into this piece skeptical and are still reading, I commend you for that, but you're probably still thinking, "you saying a lot just to defend rappers being sensitive about Control."

And to that I'd say, "DO YOU FOOLS LISTEN TO MUSIC OR JUST SKIM THROUGH IT?"

Kendrick has already addressed The Control Problem and given validity to everything I've said. In fact, it was one of the very first things he did after the Drake beef.

Tell me if this sounds familiar, "It use to be fuck that nigga, but now it's plural, fuck everybody"

This is from the opening track of GNX and is in response to Drake in an interview after Control saying, "If it's fuck everybody, then it needs to be fuck everybody." In one bar, Kendrick is confirming that Control was intended solely to bait Drake, acknowledging that he was in fact dissing EVERYONE and implying he's ready to battle anyone now.

If that isn't enough for you, how about this one from the beef itself, "The very first time I shot me a Drac', the homie had told me to aim it this way, I didn't point down enough, today, I'll show you I learned from those mistakes." On its surface, this is simply a great triple entendre using Drac'/Drake as the catalyst to the 3 meanings; 1. learning how to shoot a gun (Drac') 2. I didn't come at Drake the right way in the past 3. Now that I'm a larger artist, I have to aim lower in order to hit you.

But that's how a fan processes rap, what happens when you combine these meanings? "The first time I shot at Drake (in Control), I didn't make my intention clear, I'm not going to make the same mistake this time."

KENDRICK VALUES NARRATIVE CONTROL OVER COMPETITION AND TRADITION

Disclaimer: Valuing narrative control is not inherently a bad thing, it is something every artist strives to have.

Despite saying he wouldn't make the same mistake twice, Kendrick still failed with intent on Like That because his primary concern was never a beef or competition, it was being perceived as the best. Due to his need to control the narrative, Dot couldn't be the one to diss first this time either. He once again feigned competition in an attempt to bait Drake, this time narrowing his focus down to 2 individuals, without saying either name. By narrowing his focus, this puts pressure on both to respond but by not saying names it will still be perceived as competition by fans. But Kendrick only wanted beef with Drake and the first response came from Cole.

Two days after 7 Minute Drill was released, Cole infamously apologized on stage for the track. It is my belief that Dot and Q used the previously established blurred content of Control and Like That to gaslight Cole into believing 7 Minute Drill was the first shot fired. Kendrick never intended on battling Cole in a competitive or disrespectful manner. Dot couldn't address 7 Minute Drill in song because it was the perfect blend of competition and diss so a response would force him to choose a lane (competition v beef). Dot and Q gaslit Cole to step back because Dot was more concerned with winning the public narrative battle and being perceived as the best, than he is rap competition.

KENDRICK IS STILL MANIPULATING THE PERCEPTION OF THE CONTROL PROBLEM

The fact that Kendrick has given validity to my claims brings up a whole new issue within The Control Problem while also being a subtle way for Kendrick to manipulate the perception of The Control Problem and critiques against himself.

Everyone that was listening to rap music at the time knows that the response from rappers at large wasn't, "oh, he just called himself the best like everyone else does, I can go about my day." There were dozens, possibly over 100 responses, on wax, to Control, ranging from pure competition to actual diss tracks. Is Kendrick saying that NOW he is actually claiming to be king and intends to defend that crown, despite the fact that the claim was actually made 13 years ago with no intention to defend it? What are those rappers who responded and/or felt a way supposed to do with that information? They already let you know how they feel.

This is simply a way for Dot to manipulate the narrative around The Control Problem. Dot threw the first shot with Control and it never mattered if your response was a diss to Dot, or just an opportunity to flex your pen and take up the call for competition, Dot didn't care at the time, because the intention of his verse wasn't consistent with what he was saying. This means there's "no right answer," for how a rapper responds. If you were named there was no reason to respond, your name didn't matter, it was simply a tool to elicit a certain response by fans, also because you were not dissed, Dot just... uh, listed you, like a girl's name in a Drake song. If you weren't named and responded at the time in song, Dot never cared because his intent was never competition or beefing (Unless your name is Aubrey Graham). If you voiced that you thought you were better than him in public, the narrative from fans was that "you're sensitive," a sentiment that has carried through to this day... because fans aren't rappers.

By giving validity to The Control Problem, Kendrick is giving his fans the ability to say, "see, it wasn't that serious before, but he'll battle anyone now, just try to take his crown." But this argument isn't valid from the rapper's perspective. "What, you want me to release ANOTHER track because of something I addressed on wax 13 years ago?" Expecting that is disingenuous to the entire nature of competition within rap culture.

ADOPTING THE RAPPERS PERSPECTIVE

This is why I say, "We now have a duty as rap fans, to view Control through the rapper's perspective." But what do I mean by that? Rappers are each other's peers and competitors, in private they critique each other all the time understanding this dynamic, but in public would generally keep answers short and positive when prompted to speak on each other, unless there was already public beef. Regardless of the competition backstage, in rap, you only call names with the intent of doing battle. Kendrick opened the door for public criticism amongst his peers with Control. Because of that verse, if a rapper is asked about Dot, any answer other than, "I think I'm better than him," is disingenuous at best.

We as fans must adopt The Rappers Mindset when discussing The Control Problem, and critiques towards Kendrick in general because, within this competitive world of rap, we can acknowledge that it's fair for a rapper to be critical of another who proclaimed themselves better than you, and because Kendrick will forever be the one who took the first shot without intent to respond.

PUTTING THE RAPPERS PERSPECTIVE INTO PRACTICE: Lupe as a case study

This brings us back to Lupe on The Rap Roundtable stream. The first thing he did was dispel the notion that "Lupe has always hated/resented Dot," by showing a video of them on stage together a few months before GKMC released, where Lu gives Dot his flowers and says he's the next big thing. Next Lupe clarifies that he has never brought Dot up, and urges the hosts to find any instance where Lupe being critical of Dot wasn't prompted (something I'll definitely be doing in an effort to make \$500K).

Through some bickering, one of the hosts eventually asks, "So what happened between that video on stage, and now?" To which Lupe replies "Control happened," (this conversation is abbreviated) along with clarifying that what he is saying now is the same thing he's been saying for 12 years when asked.

So what can we take away from these 3 quotes:

1. "I've never heard a rapper of a high skill level say somebody is better than them."

2. "I love dude (Dot), I always have, I always will. I don't want to battle him. I don't want to battle anybody. I didn't want to battle Royce, I don't want to do none of that. If somebody bring it, then imma respond, I ain't no punk..."

3. "Control Happened."

Lupe Fiasco has done martial arts his whole life, and the first thing you learn doing martial arts is that you always keep your skills practiced and tools polished, but only show them in self-defense. This is the same mindset as all those rappers that started in clubs battling and cyphering have (at least once they've established a baseline level of respect within their scene). So just like my belief in The Control Problem isn't born out of malice for Dot, but rather, my love for rap and its culture. When any rapper is asked about Dot, and doesn't respond with some cookie cutter PR answer, it's coming from that same place of love for rap and it's competitive roots. Due to Kendrick's Control verse, criticisms against him aren't an attempt to start a beef, it's essentially a continuation of "sport trash talk" that started with Control.

WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US NOW?

Kendrick didn't start 1000 beefs with his Control verse. By putting names in the verse that he didn't intend to beef with, he did something that could be considered disrespectful to everything rap is built off. By naming himself king in the same verse, he opened himself up to public criticism amongst peers.

Because Kendrick has recently given credence to The Control Problem through his lyrics, we fans owe it to Rap Culture to see this criticism for what it is; a continuation of the call for competition from Kendrick that he never addressed.

The onus is now on Kendrick to do what he set out to do 13 years ago, starting with Control; convince every rappers' fan base that Kendrick Lamar alone, is the undisputed GOAT of Rap.

POST-THEORY: KENDRICK GOING FROM GORN TO GOAT

News moves fast and circumstances change even faster in today's internet age. Since I began writing The Control Problem theory, there's been a new theory floating around the internet; that Kendrick Lamar's next album is going to be boxing themed. When I first heard GNX, I believed it was the closing action to say that Dot had achieved what he set out to do when he was riding around with his friends in his momma's van. When I first heard Samurai I loved the allusion of the samurai's sword = a rapper's pen.

As a huge fan of both artists I've heard every angle of the "Kendrick bites Lupe" argument, and while I don't agree that Dot is a biter, it is an interesting addition to the theory if Dot is releasing a boxing themed album next. Lupe's last album was Samurai, and it was born from a real life voice message Amy Winehouse left talking about battle raps she had been writing, and referring to herself as a "samurai."

By releasing a boxing themed album, could Kendrick be finding his own way to attack both The Control Problem Theory and the theory that he bites Lupe (possibly the 2 biggest criticisms of his career thus far)? Is this going to be Dot's attempt to convert Lupe's fan base to his side in the GOAT conversation? Is he attempting to do something Lu just did, but better? Is he saying that he's ready to throw the first punch and it's up to the opponent to survive? If any of this is true, will Dot continue to attack those that have publicly critiqued him, or even people that replied to Control so many years ago?

How will Kendrick's next album be his first step in attempting to go from Greatest Of Right Now to Greatest Of All Time?

A samurai always keeps his blade sharp but hopes not to use it, while a boxer is trained to hit first and hit hard.

Future conversations that can branch off this theory: written after final proof-read

Dot manipulation leading to Drake beef victory. - Very low interest and relevance for future writing due to thp6 and lawsuit, only interesting if there is a future 2nd beef

Does Dot need to respond to everyone who responded to Control? - While this would be the most direct way to address the critique I've laid out, Kendrick Lamar is his own person and artist, and it'd be pretty silly to randomly release diss tracks in response to 13 year old songs. low/no interest in future writing as it's just an absurd idea

Does Dot need to respond to Lupe/other peers + critics? - No he doesn't, Dot can choose to move how he wants, the goal Dot seemed to set out to do with Control is now complete, there's very little argument for anyone else as the current 'greatest.' However, if Kendrick's ultimate goal is to be the undisputed GOAT, I do believe he should initiate rap battles or competitions with his peers that have shown public criticism, due to his more recent allusions to Control. (I specify battles OR competitions as Dot has already 'changed the rules' with Control, I would love if he took this opportunity to collaborate with Lupe and compete in a J. Cole Black Friday-esque way)

Are Lupe and Kendrick going to battle? This was something I was considering writing about when the videos that sparked this theory were first released. I would have broken down some lines from each rapper that could be subs thrown at each other, however all of the possible subs I looked into have better and more clear meanings. Also it's been about a month since these videos were released and both sides have indicated there is no 'beef' making this conversation

obsolete unless clear disses are made in the future. I do discuss a few of these possible subs in the comments of my "Lupe Fiasco's Purpose" post if you are interested enough to go search for that.

Lupe v Kendrick as rappers - This is something I will definitely look into in the future, as it can be directly tied to discussing "how we determine greatness in rap." Both artists are highly effective rappers, however their impact primarily comes from opposite 'aspects' of rap music.