Kendrick Lamar is playing a different game

The “great American game” is played to win and to exclude. Lamar’s halftime show made the case for turning our attention to something better.

by Chris Thiessen
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Kendrick Lamar and others perform in the 2025 Super Bowl halftime show. (Screengrab / YouTube / NFL)

Let’s be honest: Super Bowl LIX was a snore. Thank God for Kendrick Lamar, whose halftime performance marked the first time a solo hip-hop artist headlined the Super Bowl. While most halftime shows serve merely as hit-filled career retrospectives,

Lamar's performance was a carefully crafted display of audiovisual storytelling designed precisely for this moment.

Lamar is coming off one of the most triumphant years of his already illustrious career. Just one week before the Super Bowl, Lamar made history by garnering not one but five Grammy Awards for "Not Like Us," a feat previously unimaginable for a diss track. (For the uninitiated, a diss track is a combative song that engages a rival, usually another artist, in a sort of lyrical boxing match—in this case, Canadian rapper Drake.)

Instead of pandering to audience nostalgia with a medley of greatest hits—something the powers of capitalism would certainly espouse—Lamar made the most of his time on screen by telling a story that needed to be told. His Super Bowl show may have lacked the explicit political critique of his past performances, like when he performed atop a graffitied police car at the 2015 BET Awards or when he rapped "The Blacker the Berry" in prison chains at the 2016 Grammys. One would be forgiven for believing Lamar had toned it down for the masses. However, a closer look suggests that he is still the prophet speaking truth to power he has always been. For those who have ears, let them hear.

The 13-minute set took place on and between stages that looked like the buttons of a PlayStation video game controller, immediately raising the question, "Who is controlling the game?" The first voice we heard was that of the show's antagonist: Samuel L. Jackson portraying Uncle Sam, the embodiment of American control and a callback to the satanic, exploitative character Lamar presented on his 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

Throughout the set, Uncle Sam tried to control Lamar. When Lamar performed the highly danceable "Squabble Up," Uncle Sam came down on him and his crew as "too reckless, too ghetto," not respectable enough for mainstream (read: White) America. When Lamar was joined by R&B singer SZA for the poppier "All the Stars," Uncle Sam was more congenial: "That's what America wants, nice and calm." Uncle Sam wants Black entertainers to be, well, entertaining, not to challenge the status quo—not to disrupt the game. It's a game that has been played throughout the history of Black music, from jazz and gospel to Motown and Stax. But Lamar doesn't play those games.

Instead Lamar presented the American game as one of division. As his song “HUMBLE.” began, he found himself in the midst of red, white, and blue-clad dancers joined together in the formation of an American flag. But as soon as he began rapping—“Nobody pray for me”—they were torn apart and spent the rest of the song squaring off and turning their backs to one another.

The American game of power struggle is tearing us apart. We live in a house divided, as a people divided, and this is just as the game masters want it. When nobody prays for or acts out of concern for their neighbor (let alone their enemy), the powerful stand to benefit. However, the answer for Lamar isn’t to hit us with shallow platitudes, talking about how we should all just get along. (He left that to Snoop Dogg and Tom Brady in their commercial for the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism.) Rather, he remains antagonistic, taking out his anger on Drake and on all “those that feel entitled.”

In reality, Lamar’s beef with Drake has always been about more than Drake. For Lamar, Drake represents all who willingly play Uncle Sam’s imperial game—pursuing capitalistic pursuits over artistry, fame over authenticity, and exploitation over community.

Though Lamar warned at the top of the show that “the revolution ’bout to be televised,” this was perhaps overstated. The great Gil Scott-Heron is still correct: the revolution—the kind that truly transforms communities and brings liberation to the oppressed—will not and cannot be televised. It will not be brought to you by Apple and broadcast by Fox. There will be no commentary by Tom Brady sandwiched between ads for Pringles and TurboTax. Sometimes being drawn into Uncle Sam’s game is inescapable, but Lamar seeks to do it authentically, even if imperfectly, as he points toward a much bigger game.

The climax of the halftime show was of course “Not Like Us,” which Lamar had teased throughout despite Drake’s propensity for defamation lawsuits and despite Uncle Sam’s warnings not to mess anything up. (How dare Lamar force Fox and the NFL to become potential defendants against Drake?) On the surface, Lamar’s combative song sounds just as divisive as the American systems of power he critiques: “They not like us.” Us versus them. But there’s more to it than this. Theologian Gavin Hopps has suggested that more important than what songs say is what they do, “the sorts of experiences they afford, the orientations they foster, the questions they provoke and what they lead the listener towards.”

My perspective on “Not Like Us” changed last year when Lamar performed the song at the Kia Forum, on stage with dozens of LA-based artists as well as members of seemingly every gang in the city. The level of unity and peace that Lamar & Co. displayed flew in the face of harmful narratives about different communities and what keeps them apart. So to play the adversarial anthem “Not Like Us” on the Super Bowl stage—less than a month after the inauguration of a president, who was in attendance, who intentionally sows discord—was an act of communal defiance. I would suggest it was prophetic.

The competitive spirit Lamar embodies in this song is less about winning the zero-sum “great American game” and more about prophetically critiquing the cancerous powers of systemic oppression and abuse that plague our nation. It reminds me of James Carse’s 1986 book *Finite and Infinite Games,* in which he suggests that two sorts of games are played in this world. The finite game is played until there is a clear winner. Its goal is control, domination, conclusion. The infinite game, on the other hand, is played “for the purpose of continuing the play.” This is the game of freedom, played with “complete openness” to the future and with hopes “to bring as many persons as possible into the play.”

What Lamar calls the “great American game” is a finite game. It is played to win and to exclude. What Lamar’s halftime show said and did made the case that this American game must end, because it directs our attention away from the infinite game.

This infinite game creates space for all to freely and authentically experience dignity, hope, and life in community with others, just as Lamar created space for Black people to express themselves on stage through dance, song, and joyful celebration. Those who seek to play the infinite game must, therefore, present a prophetic *no* to those who would try to limit or control life. We might participate in temporary, finite games from time to time—say, a rap beef or a football game—but this should always be done with an eye toward the infinite. Lamar, then, infiltrated the commercial space of the Super Bowl to offer a critique that is at its heart spiritual. He engaged the “great American game” not to bring about political revolution but to direct our attention toward one another as part of the global community.

In a rare interview given before the halftime show, Lamar shared a glimpse of what it means for him to play the infinite game. “The number one thing people feel in the

room—over love and over fear—is being authentic," he said. "You are an amazing individual. You are a miracle. . . . You have to carry that authentic nature of allowing yourself to say, 'This is who I am.' . . . When everyone is authentic, what comes out of that is true love."

This is not a call to rugged individualism. It is a call to love others as only we can, to show up for each other with the unique gifts we've been given, and to celebrate the differences in our neighbors. To be locked in to the infinite game requires that we experience a self-giving love that sees the dignity of our neighbors and desires their flourishing. It requires that we listen to the voices from the margins and seek to invite more and more people into life together.

Though we are constantly engaged in America's divisive games of power and empire, we must consistently ask ourselves, as Lamar does, *Am I willing to disrupt the rules of the game?* The revolution may not have been televised on Super Bowl Sunday, but we can still accept the invitation to authentically play a game that offers life to all.