

‘We Gon’ Be Alright’: Kendrick Lamar’s Criticism of Racism and the Potential for Social  
Change Through Love

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores Kendrick Lamar's criticism of institutionalized racism in America and its damaging effects on African-American subjectivity on his albums *Section.80*, *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* and *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The albums address the social implications of racism in the present day, throughout Lamar's life and throughout the lives of his ancestors.

In my analysis of Lamar's albums, I address the history of American chattel slavery and its aftermath as a social system that privileges white over black. On the basis of my interpretation of the penultimate track on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, "i," I propose a love ethic as a means through which the American social order can be changed. I take the term love ethic from Cornel West and bell hooks. A love ethic is a means through which individual bodies hurt by racism can be recognized and revalorized. Through the course of his three studio albums Lamar offers a narrative remediation of America's discriminatory social order. In so doing, Lamar enacts the social change he wishes to see in America.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Courtney Heffernan.

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## ‘We Gon’ Be Alright’:

### Kendrick Lamar’s Criticism of Racism and the Potential for Social Change Through Love

In his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar criticizes institutionalized racism in America through his exploration of the damaging effects of racism on African-American subjectivity. Lamar offers his criticism in order to challenge the discrimination upon which America’s social order is based. Rather than focus on present day racial conflicts in isolation, he addresses social issues that stem from generations of hatred. He negotiates with the history of American slavery and its aftermath as a social system that hierarchizes white over black. He proposes love as a means through which the social order can be changed. Through his proposed love ethic, he implicitly addresses the need to recognize and valorize individual bodies hurt by racism. *To Pimp a Butterfly* works in tandem with Lamar’s previous studio albums, *Section.80* and *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. To listen to the albums as a trilogy is to listen to a criticism of the social implications of racism in the present day, throughout Lamar’s life and throughout the lives of his ancestors. Through his criticism of racism and his narrative remediation of America’s discriminatory social order, Lamar enacts the social change he wishes to see in America.

On *Section.80*, Lamar criticizes the social issues of the Eighties that have detrimentally impacted his generation. Within the album’s narrative, he represents the interrelated issues of drug addiction, domestic and gang-related violence, unjust incarceration, and the lack of viable opportunities available to African-American youth. He addresses the proliferation of these issues in the Eighties as a way of criticizing the failure of social services and public policies to mitigate the poverty that disproportionately affected – and continues to affect – African-Americans. He speaks to his own generation, born during the era of Ronald Reagan’s presidency in the late

Eighties in ghettos with predominantly African-American demographics. However, his intention on *Section.80* is to address people of all ethnicities so they can jointly challenge the racism that underlies America's social ills. At the conclusion of *Section.80*, Lamar takes on the role of a leader for his generation, a role he embraces fully on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Underlying Lamar's criticism on *Section.80* is the belief that those who take action are capable of initiating change.

Lamar's autobiographical album *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* is a nonlinear account of his adolescence in Compton. Within his narrative about his generations' feelings of hopelessness Lamar addresses his city's social ills, namely crime and substance abuse, as symptoms of a social order that does not value black youth. Through the "Good Kid"-*"M.A.A.D City"* dichotomy, he analyzes the reciprocal influence of the city's discriminatory social order and his own negative actions and outlook. Following a renewal of his Christian faith, which is signified by the recitation of a baptismal prayer on "I'm Dying of Thirst," teenaged Kendrick realizes that he will not see positive change in his society until he enacts the change he desires for himself and his loved ones. Lamar tells his story on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* in accordance with his mother's wish that he returns to Compton to share his story, to teach youth in underprivileged communities that they too can create futures beyond their limiting presents.

On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar directly criticizes discrimination in America, with the intention of mobilizing the pain caused by racism to challenge and change the social order. The success Lamar has achieved distances him from his home and his heritage, to the extent he feels as though his concept of self has been fractured ("u"). He struggles to rectify his pride in his ancestry with the history of chattel slavery upon which America's social structure is founded, and his musical success in America and abroad with the discrimination that is directed towards those in his community and him. Lamar's inability to rectify the aspects of his African and

American identity result in self-loathing, a self-loathing that becomes a deep depression as he struggles to come to terms with his failures and shortcomings. Lamar's fractured selfhood is indicative of the damaging effects of racism on African-American self-perception. He proposes a love ethic at the album's conclusion as a way of overcoming the hatred he sees in his community and in the world. He encourages his audience to love themselves and each other in order to resist the damaging effects of racism. The conclusion of *To Pimp a Butterfly* suggests that a love ethic can change the social order and remediate the pain caused by racism.

I take the term love ethic from bell hooks's *Salvation: Black People and Love* and Cornel West's *Race Matters*. West describes his concept of a love ethic as "a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people... [S]elf-love and love of others are both modes towards increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community" (19). A love ethic is an assertion of individual and collective worth, in resistance to the hatred of racism. To enact a love ethic, one must treat oneself and those in one's community with respect. Within his albums, Lamar's speaks to the need for his audience to respect themselves and each other. They must recognize their commonality in the shared struggle against racism and its social symptoms, rather than use difference – whether it is in social status or gang affiliation – as a basis for conflict within one's community. While West emphasizes the transformational possibility of self-valuation within African-American communities, Sylvia Wynter suggests that self-valuation must be universally enacted to change a discriminatory social system: "[B]ecause the negative connotations placed upon the black population group are a function of the devalorization of the human, the systematic revalorization of Black people can only be fundamentally effected by means of the no less systemic revalorization of human being itself" (116). A love ethic requires a revalorization of the human so that the discriminatory practice of



hierarchizing people based on presumed worth will be eradicated. A call to revalorize the human is not a call to overlook difference. Instead, we will value each other by recognizing similarity while appreciating difference and learning from divergence. Social policies must first acknowledge the way in which the American social structure has devalorized black people, to begin the process of revalorizing the human.

In order to change the American social structure so that the political and social equality of black people is enacted rather than just constitutionally stated, the pain that discrimination has caused African-Americans historically and in the present day must be recognized. In his conversation with Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson contrasts Hartman's representation of racial subjection during slavery in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* with typical academic representations: "[S]o often in black scholarship, people consciously or unconsciously peel away the strength and terror of their evidence in order to propose some kind of coherent, hopeful solution to things" (183). By contrast, Hartman's representation emphasizes the ways in which terror and resistance during slavery and its aftermath shape African-American identity. Rather than focus on scenes of outright violence that are common in slave narratives, she focuses on the terror of quotidian scenes of subjection (Hartman 4). She does so to explore the way in which the subject is constituted in a social system in which the humanity of black people was denied. To create a social structure that valorizes all people requires an understanding of the pain and terror African-Americans experienced during slavery, and the continued pain they feel living in the discriminatory social system that is slavery's repercussion.

I agree with Wynter's suggestion that improvement of the social system as a whole requires a revalorization of the human. However, African-Americans have been explicitly

devalorized and must be afforded their full human worth before humanity as a whole can be revalorized. Therefore, a confrontation of the reality of discrimination in America requires “a radical racialization of positionality” (Hartman and Wilderson 184). The humanity of African-Americans must be recognized on their own terms – rather than in relation to white people – in accordance with subjectivity that has formed in the aftermath of slavery. *To Pimp a Butterfly* concludes with an affirmation of worth, which I interpret as a belief in the potential for love to transform the American social system. Lamar does not arrive at his affirmation by overlooking the pain caused by discrimination; he confronts the pain he experiences as a subject who is both African and American but is denied a comfortable existence in either identity. By rectifying his fractured selfhood at the album’s conclusion, he implicitly suggests that one must recognize pain before one can alleviate it. In order to create social change, one must recognize the pain of African-Americans past and present who have been made to endure a discriminatory social system.

## ‘Show Your Pain’: The Multi-Generational Effects of Discriminatory Public Policy

In Lamar’s 2011 album *Section.80*, both his audience and his subjects are children of his generation, particularly those born in the late 1980s in American ghettos. Though he does not speak about the crack epidemic in American ghettos directly, he refers to the youth of the Eighties as “the children of Ronald Reagan” as a way of alluding to the social issues that were prevalent during Reagan’s presidency (“Ronald Reagan Era”). The Ronald Reagan Era is a metonym for the poverty, drug abuse and violence that impacted black communities in the Eighties. It is also a metonym for ineffective government programs, such as Reagan’s War on Drugs, which allowed these problems to proliferate by naming black people as the source of their own problems rather than fostering positive development within their communities. The consequences of the crack epidemic underlie Lamar’s narratives about characters Keisha and Tammy and their vices, evils and pains, along with a concurrent narrative about Lamar’s own vices, evils and pains. He narrates Keisha and Tammy’s struggles with substance abuse and infidelity, as well as Keisha’s need to turn to prostitution to provide for herself, a decision that ultimately leads to her death. Lamar’s dialogical engagement with Eighties’ and Nineties’ hip hop and popular culture situate the album within the social context he indirectly critiques. Lamar uses samples and quotations from the works of hip hop artists like N.W.A. and Ice Cube to implicitly enter a dialogue about the social issues his musical predecessors address. He supports his dialogical engagement with explicit historical references and allusions to the social issues from the Eighties and Nineties that culminate in the problems his generation faces today. The history and culture Lamar describes on *Section.80* will function as a foundation for my analysis of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* and *To Pimp a Butterfly*; *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*’s narrative is a reaction to the public policies of the Ronald Reagan Era and its consequences for black people

living in ghettos. Additionally, the crack epidemic of the Eighties, which disproportionately addicted and incarcerated African-Americans, is part of the history of racism Lamar critiques on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. I will analyze Lamar's earlier ideas about racism, nihilism, sinfulness and righteousness that he explores in greater detail on his subsequent albums as a way of remediating prominent social issues in urban African-American communities.

"Fuck Your Ethnicity" opens with a skit that provides a narrative frame for *Section.80*. The skit's speaker returns at junctures throughout the album to offer critical commentary that is in dialogue with Lamar's artistic work. He speaks as an authority to the audience gathered with him; in so doing, he affirms the importance of Lamar's message. The speaker's intention of initiating social change is aligned with Lamar's goal of addressing and correcting social issues that his generation faces in urban communities. In the album's first track, the speaker addresses those he is gathered with, among them Keisha and Tammy: "I recognize all of you, every creed and colour. With that being said, fuck your ethnicity." The speaker recognizes in those with whom he is gathered a shared passion for initiating social change that transcends difference in race and culture. "Fuck your ethnicity" is the song's chorus, and a motto for *Section.80* as a whole. Lamar does not imply the irrelevance of ethnicity, nor does he imply that racial identities should be forgotten altogether. Rather, the imperative suggests the need to move past individual identities and their accompanying cultural contexts in order to participate in a dialogue about race and racism in which all perspectives will be heard and learned from. The speaker adds, "We gon' talk about a lot of shit that concerns you. All of you." Through the effect of the frame narrative, Lamar implicates his audience in a conversation about the discrimination African-Americans of his generation face and the history behind it. His audience is called to respond to *Section.80* with the eagerness of those who are gathered with the speaker, to listen and initiate

change. So long as “racism is still alive,” everyone must necessarily take part in the conversation (“Fuck Your Ethnicity”). Ta-Nehisi Coates addresses the difficulty of overcoming racism in present-day American society, along with the rhetoric that is used to discuss race: “America’s struggle is to become not post-racial, but post-racist. Put differently, we should seek not a world where the black race and the white race live in harmony, but a world in which the terms *black* and *white* have no real political meaning” (“Post-Racial Society Is Still a Distant Dream”). In order to achieve a post-racist society, we must first participate in conversations about race and racism to determine how our actions and our points of view reflect upon our society. These conversations are necessary because until we understand the history of discrimination in which America’s social issues are rooted, change cannot be made to overcome racism. “Fuck Your Ethnicity” suggests the need to move past the political meaning of one’s ethnicity in order to view American society beyond the limits of one’s own perspective.

Lamar refers to “the music that saved my life / Y’all be calling it hip-hop / I be calling it hypnotize” (“Fuck Your Ethnicity”). In not directly naming the genre of the music that saved him, he refers to more than his personal experience; he alludes to the history of music as a means for spiritual salvation, going as far back as to the first Africans brought to America. In *Black Noise* Tricia Rose relates the origins of hip hop to a history of music as a means for articulating personal and social hardships: “Black music has always been a primary means of cultural expression for African Americans, particularly during especially difficult social periods and transitions. In this way, rap is no exception; it articulates many of the facets of life in urban America for African Americans situated at the bottom of a highly technological capitalist society” (184). Hip hop stems from a history of African-American music as a means of expressing their lived experience. Through music, Africans enslaved in America shared their

cultural traditions and expressed their “experiencing of experience” (Baker 7). Theirs was as much an expression of individual identity as it was of collective experience. Today, hip hop is a means through which African-Americans articulate and dramatize their lived experiences in opposition to the discriminatory powers that want to keep black voices marginal (Rose, *Black Noise* 3). When Lamar articulates his own experience, he is in dialogue with those who used music as a means for expression.<sup>1</sup> “Trapped my body but freed my mind,” is an allusion to the way slaves found metaphysical freedom through self-expression even while their bodies were under the control of their masters, as well as to his own experience of transcending the limits imposed upon him by society. By the end of “Fuck Your Ethnicity,” he imagines a physical escape with the help of “a plane or angel.” When “Hol’ Up” begins, Lamar has made the escape he desired and writes from “thirty thousand feet in the air.” However, he anticipates that he will be thought of as a terrorist because he is a black man. Though he has made a physical escape from his surroundings in “Fuck Your Ethnicity,” he still cannot escape from the limits racism places upon his self-actualization.

Lamar says that he is “dropping that science” when he raps (“Fuck Your Ethnicity”). The term has its origin in “Droppin’ Science” by Marley Marl,<sup>2</sup> who used the term as a way of describing the intelligence and inventiveness of his rhymes. In his study of hip hop and media theory Jeff Rice writes about the significance of an artist dropping science: “Droppin’ science

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<sup>1</sup> Though the extent of Lamar’s fan base makes it so that his voice is no longer marginal, he continues to represent the stories and perspectives of those who are marginalized. Rose considers it common practice for artists who have achieved fame to continue to represent marginalized voices: “Rap’s stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture... Even as they struggle with the tension between fame and rap’s gravitational pull toward local urban narratives, for the most part, rappers continue to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and experiences of racial marginality in America” (*Black Noise* 3).

<sup>2</sup> “Droppin’ Science” was released on Marley Marl’s 1988 album *In Control, Volume 1*.

means to rhyme (usually in a unique way) in order to rhetorically engage with the aural dimensions of discourse. Rhyming... is meant to evoke new types of discursive relationships, to generate new kinds of knowing processes” (268). When Marl drops science, he makes music that is better than anything his peers or predecessors have made; he engages with their work, if only to challenge or revise it. The resultant work is an original engagement with language and rhythm, which is recognized as original by the hip hop community at large.<sup>3</sup> According to Houston A. Baker Jr., when a musician engages with the works of others, “The materiality [is]... enciphered in ways that enable the material to escape into a named or coded, blues signification. The material, thus, slips into irreversible difference” (6). The musician riffs on another’s music and changes its form so the material does not reflect the sound of its originator so much as it reflects the tradition within which both artists work. To apply Baker’s concept of the blues code to hip hop, to drop science is to make variations on music that already exists through wordplay and musical arrangement, so an artist’s sound moves into a space of difference. Like Marl, Lamar is both in conversation and in competition with those who rapped before him. His use of *droppin’ science* implies that his work is an innovation on his predecessors’ work, as well as a direct tribute to the inventiveness of Marley Marl.

In “A.D.H.D.,” Lamar describes the substance abuse and drug addiction that are endemic among youth of his generation. In so doing, he addresses the impact of the crack epidemic of the

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<sup>3</sup> The hip hop community is quick to recognize innovation and disavow conformity. A great offence is to create a work that is insufficiently original. A greater offence is to neglect to acknowledge one’s influencers and contributors. The most damning accusation is to accuse another rapper of having a ghostwriter because he cannot write his own rhymes. In August 2015, Meek Mill made accusations over Twitter about Drake using a ghostwriter. The comments launched debates about innovation and celebrity status in hip hop – along with an exchange of diss tracks between the artists. By contrast, on “Hood Politics,” Lamar acknowledges the dexterous lyricism of underrated MC and activist Killer Mike: “Critics want to mention that they miss when hip hop was rappin’ / Motherfucker, if you did then Killer Mike would be platinum.”

Eighties and the mismanagement of social initiatives that were intended to alleviate poverty on the children who were born during that era in predominantly black urban communities. The song's hook names a number of substances that Lamar and the people around him "hope [will] take the pain away." Rather than seek to improve their situations, they turn to drugs to make them feel "stronger, stronger," even though the feeling will only last as long as their high. They look to numb their pain rather than address its source. bell hooks criticizes the consequences of drug addiction in black communities: "[P]ervasive addiction means that the desire to numb pain is greater than the force of spirit that would lead us to journey through pain and find our way to healing" (*Salvation* 14). The youth Lamar describes on "A.D.H.D." abuse substances to mitigate their pain rather than confront the source of their pain directly. Lamar's friend turns to the prescription drug Vicodin to ease the pain of "feeling like no one can relate." Though Lamar does not divulge the reasons why his friends feel isolated, there are several possibilities for his feelings of alienation within the cultural context of the Eighties.

During the Eighties, poverty increased in communities where the inhabitants were already underprivileged. Robin Kelley describes the poverty that increased in the Eighties in African-American communities as a way of relating the advent of gangsta rap to contemporary social issues:

The generation who came of age in the 1980s during the Reagan-Bush Era were products of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back at least to the late 1960s. While the city [of Los Angeles] as a whole experienced unprecedented growth, the communities of Watts and Compton faced increased economic displacement, factory closures, and an unprecedented deepening of poverty. (122)



Rather than enact long-term solutions to deepening poverty and the crime, violence and drug use that frequently accompany it, the American government offered temporary solutions through public policies that proved ineffective in the long term. Lamar's friend feels like no one can relate to him because he is "part of Section 80." Section 80 is a portmanteau that references the Eighties, the decade in which the youth Lamar addresses and speaks of were born, and Section 8 of the American Housing Act. Under the 1974 Section 8 Housing Voucher Program, low-income families were offered financial help from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development so they could rent project housing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 55, Semuels). The intention of Section 8 was to decrease the crime rate in inner cities, most of which was concentrated in urban housing projects that are commonly referred to as ghettos (Rosin). Rather than directly confront the problems of drug addiction and violence within ghettos, the policy dispersed the inhabitants of urban projects in the hopes that crime would decrease when the population was moved away from poverty-dense ghettos. The crime problems were not solved; instead, they were pushed into the suburban areas in which the Housing and Urban Development homes were situated (Rosin). The failure of Section 8 is indicative of "the massive and systemic failures of programs set up to address poverty and homelessness" (Sharpe 64). Lamar's friend might feel like no one can relate because the problems of poverty, drug addiction and violence in his community have been overlooked in favour of temporary solutions like Section 8.

The failure of programs to address poverty and its accompanying social issues is comparable to the failure of an ADHD diagnosis and drug prescription to address the source of behavioural problems in youth. ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. ADHD is over-diagnosed in youth generally and in African-American youth specially

(Schonwald and Lechner 191). In addition to controversies around who is diagnosed with ADHD, there are controversies around the way in which drugs are prescribed to “high numbers of US children” as a way of managing the behavioural symptoms associated with ADHD (Schonwald and Lechner 191). Though prescription drugs are considered effective in the short-term for managing ADHD, studies show that “medication [is] not a ‘cure all,’ and that symptoms rapidly [return] once the effects w[ear] off... [P]atients could be better supported [long-term] by mental health professionals and... non-pharmacological therapy” (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health 68). Lamar says that his female companion in “A.D.H.D.” has ADHD. She takes a light blue pill that is likely Adderall, a drug that is often prescribed to those diagnosed with ADHD. That she takes the pill “straight to the head,” by snorting it rather than ingesting it orally, suggests that she abuses the drugs she is prescribed. In so doing, she uses drugs as a form of escapism rather than as a way of managing feelings of social alienation that are commonly associated with the stigmatization of ADHD (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health 66).

Lamar repeatedly refers to misuse of prescription drugs on “A.D.H.D.” His friend takes Vicodin to ease his feelings of alienation, despite the fact that Vicodin is meant to relieve pain that is physical and not mental. The hook of “A.D.H.D.” refers directly to Lamar’s “generation sippin’ cough syrup like it’s water.” Cough syrup was popularized as an intoxicant by artists in the southern United States hip hop scene, among them Three 6 Mafia, UGK<sup>4</sup> and Lil Wayne, who referred to a mixture of codeine cough syrup and soda as lean, purple drank or syrup (Palmer 188). According to Lance Scott Walker, the drink has its origins in the Texas blues

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<sup>4</sup> “Blow My High (Members Only)” from *Section.80* samples a distorted verse by Pimp C of UGK. The verse is from Jay-Z’s 1999 single “Big Pimpin’.” Pimp C raps, “Keeping lean up in my cup.” The sad irony of Pimp C’s verse is that he died in 2007 due to respiratory failure after drinking too much cough syrup.

scene of the Sixties, when cough syrup was commonly mixed with beer or wine coolers (“A history of ‘sizzrup’”). Many of the hip hop artists who popularized syrup came from the same neighbourhoods in Houston, Texas as the blues artists who drank syrup originally (“A history of ‘sizzrup’”). Codeine cough syrup, when taken in excess of the amount prescribed, has the qualities of a depressant. Due to the quantity of codeine in the syrup, and codeine’s opiate qualities, one can become addicted to cough syrup. An overdose on codeine can cause respiratory failure, which means excessive consumption of cough syrup cut with soda can be fatal. An overdose is more likely when codeine cough syrup is sweetened with soda and hard candies because the cough syrup is sweetened and made easier to consume. Lamar’s generation drinks cough syrup in imitation of the hip hop artists who popularized its recreational consumption. By drinking cough syrup like it is water, they have developed a tolerance for and perhaps an addiction to codeine. When Lamar’s peers abuse cough syrup to relieve their pain rather than confront the source of their pain directly, they are, given the nature of a depressant, brought down by their problems. Their problems are exacerbated by the learned behaviour of seeking escape through drugs rather than confronting their problems directly. The drug use of Lamar’s generation is indicative of the impact of the previous generation’s drug abuse.

In the closing verse of “A.D.H.D.,” Lamar’s female companion says of their generation, “You know why we crack babies? / Because we born in the Eighties.” Lamar invokes the history of the crack epidemic in South Central Los Angeles on “A.D.H.D.” as a way of explaining his friend’s feeling of alienation. In the mid to late Eighties, cocaine was widely sold and used in a freebase form that could be smoked, called crack cocaine (Reinarman and Levine, “Crack in Context: America’s Latest Drug Demon” 2). Cocaine has been smoked in its freebase form since the late Seventies. Crack use came to prominence in the Eighties, due to its proliferation in poor

neighbourhoods, and increased government and media focus on drug problems in America. The earliest media references to crack were in the *Los Angeles Times* in late 1984. The *Los Angeles Times*' mention of crack suggests that it was widely distributed in Los Angeles before the so-called crack epidemic reached New York and Miami, despite the fact that cocaine had entered the United States through Miami, Florida for decades (Reinarman and Levine, "Crack in Context: America's Latest Drug Demon" 2). Crack was distributed and used mainly in poor inner city neighbourhoods with predominantly African-American and Latino populations. Crack gained popularity due to its low cost and intense, immediate high, compared to the subtler, more expensive high of cocaine (Reinarman and Levine, "Crack in Context: America's Latest Drug Demon" 2). By the early Nineties, the crack epidemic had largely come to an end – or at least, the media attention surrounding the Reagan Administration's War on Drugs had come to an end (Reinarman and Levine, "The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare" 42). However, the crack epidemic continued to impact those who had sold and used crack, as well as the generation who were born to drug users and sellers. To relate the crack epidemic to the feelings of alienation of Lamar's friend, drug use has the effect of destroying relationships between parents who were drug users and their children (hooks 69). Drug users are often mentally or physically absent, hence for the children of drug users there were "never no pancakes in the kitchen." The consequence of parental absence is reinforced by the speaker's commentary on "Chapter 6": "The dysfunctional bastards of the Ronald Regan era, young men that leaned to do everything spiteful."<sup>5</sup> In many instances, the children of drug users did not receive the love and parental guidance they needed to become successful adults. Consequently, they feel alienated from their peers when they reach adulthood.

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the word spiteful is a play on the title of the subsequent track, "The Spiteful Chant."

Lamar recognizes the root of his generation's problems and sees elements of his generation's decline but he says, "Who gives a fuck?" His response to the problems of his generation represents nihilism that is at work in black communities most profoundly affected by crack. Gangsta rap was the first genre to express the hopelessness of a generation impacted by the crack epidemic of the Eighties and its accompanying social issues. Nelson George refers to the violent, misogynist lyrics and aggressive delivery of gangsta rap as an expression of America's social ills, to explain the pervasive attitude of youth of the Eighties:

There is an elemental nihilism in the most controversial crack-era hip hop that wasn't concocted by the rappers but reflects the mentality and fears of young Americans of every color and class living an exhausting, edgy existence, in and out of big cities. Like crack dealing, this nihilism may die down, but it won't disappear, because the social conditions that inspired the trafficking and the underlying artistic impulse that ignited nihilistic rap have not disappeared. (49)

The nihilism George describes represents the anger and fear of youth who are devalored by their society. Nihilism will continue to be a prevailing mentality so long as underprivileged black youth are denied opportunities based on their race and socioeconomic status. *Straight Outta Compton*, the 1988 album by gangsta rap pioneers N.W.A., articulates the discontent of a generation that came to maturity when the impact of drugs on African-American society was the most devastating. Their nihilistic rap is a reflection of their lived experiences and a rejection of a white American society that does not value them. In the album's titular opening track, Eazy-E describes his own violent actions and machismo sexuality, and articulates the mentality of a generation that has grown up in Compton: "See I don't give a fuck, that's the problem" ("Straight Outta Compton"). On "A.D.H.D.," Lamar's music is ignited by a similarly nihilistic

impulse. His “Who gives a fuck?” attitude is comparable to Eazy-E’s because he experiences the same devalorization of black youth N.W.A. addressed in their music more than twenty years earlier. Lamar describes his generation’s nihilism as “the daily superstition / That the world is ’bout to end.” The daily superstition is the fear of youth in Lamar’s generation that they will face death or incarceration before they reach adulthood,<sup>6</sup> as a consequence of a society that tries to contain black youth rather than foster their development. “A.D.H.D.” describes the enduring effects of police brutality and widespread gang violence on Lamar’s generation, a generation born when the crack epidemic was at its peak. Instead of N.W.A.’s aggressive condemnation of racial profiling in “Fuck Tha Police,” Lamar says to his female companion, “Just tell your neighbours / Have the police relax.” Rather than respond to social discontent with the aggression of his musical predecessors, Lamar’s generation responds with indifference consistent with their desire to numb their pain rather than confront the discrimination they face.

On “Ronald Reagan Era,” Lamar represents life in the late Eighties in Compton to retroactively explain the social conditions that have shaped his generation. He refers to the youth of the Eighties as “the children of Ronald Reagan” because that generation was directly impacted by the social services Reagan’s administration promoted. Lamar expresses the frustrations of the youth of the Eighties whose possibilities were limited by racialized tension within their cities and by poverty and violence within their communities, as a way of criticizing the discriminatory government policies that fostered these conditions. In naming the song “Ronald Reagan Era,” he implicates the federal government in the crack epidemic and the intensification of poverty that

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<sup>6</sup> This fear is stated more explicitly on the interlude “Chapter 6”: “Pray that we make it to twenty-one.” Twenty-one is the age at which one can legally smoke and drink in America. If Keisha’s age – stated on “Keisha’s Song (Her Pain)” as seventeen – is any indication, the youth whose drug use Lamar describes on “A.D.H.D.” are under the legal age to consume drugs and alcohol.

occurred in the Eighties in Los Angeles and in predominantly black urban communities across America, rather than placing the blame on the inhabitants of those communities. He revises the history of “[t]he Reagan-Bush Administration-sponsored war on drugs [that] contributed to the national press focus on ‘cunning Colombians’ and ‘enterprising urban teens,’ leaving questions regarding federal responsibility for such trade generally unasked and unanswered” (Rose, *Black Noise* 121). Lamar implies that the government was responsible for the deepening of poverty in black communities and for the rampant spread of crack that accompanied it.

During his presidency, Ronald Reagan’s administration launched the War on Drugs campaign to combat America’s mounting crack epidemic. The term ‘war on drugs’ has its origin in 1971, when President Richard Nixon declared a need to control and decrease drug abuse in America, and to approach rehabilitation of addicts in a new way (“203 - Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control”). In early 1986, Reagan called for renewed efforts in the war on drugs. As a consequence of his declaration, “the period from 1986 through 1992 was characterized by anti-drug extremism” (Reinarman and Levine, “Crack in Context: America’s Latest Drug Demon” 1). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act instated longer mandatory prison terms for those who dealt crack cocaine than for those who dealt powder cocaine, based on the presumption that crack was the more dangerous of the two substances (Reinarman and Levine, “The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare” 21). The disparity between the drug sentences had the effect of incarcerating mainly poor black people, the predominant dealers of crack. Gary Webb stated in his series of articles<sup>7</sup> on the controversies surrounding the War on Drugs, “[I]t isn’t just a suspicion that the war on drugs is hammering blacks harder than whites...

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<sup>7</sup> Webb’s article series for the San Jose Mercury New, “Dark Alliance: The Story Behind the Crack Explosion,” was widely read and damning enough that the U.S. Department of Justice released their own reports to combat the allegations made in the articles.

83 percent of the people being sent to prison for ‘crack’ trafficking are black [according to the Bureau of Justice Statistic reports in 1993] ‘and the average sentence imposed for crack trafficking was twice as long as for trafficking in powder cocaine’” (“Flawed sentencing the main reason for race disparity”). Though the War on Drugs was intended to aid those who had been impacted by drugs, it harmed populations that had already been most devastated by crack by prosecuting crack dealers and users with unjust sentences.

In spite of the War on Drugs campaign, crack sales continued in black communities, undermining the positive effects of the social initiatives the Reagan Administration promoted. Controversial reports, namely Webb’s series, suggest that the propagation of crack in South Central Los Angeles was not due to a failure of War on Drugs policy. Rather, reports suggest that cocaine was trafficked in the region by dealers associated with the Contras, a Nicaraguan anti-communist party, as part of a Central Intelligence Agency plan to use the proceeds of drug trafficking to fund the Contras’ war against the communist Cuban-backed Sandinista regime (U.S. Department of Justice). According to Webb’s investigation, from the mid-Eighties to the early-Nineties, “a San Francisco drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods street gangs of Los Angeles and funneled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency” (“America’s ‘crack’ plague has roots in Nicaragua war”). To take this accusation as truth, though Reagan publicly declared war on drugs, his administration facilitated the entry of cocaine into America for nearly a decade. In so doing, the Central Intelligence Agency’s drug dealings hurt those who the War on Drugs was intended to help. According to Matthew Pulver’s account of popular opinion about the Ronald Reagan era in black communities, “That Reagan permitted or actively facilitated a massive influx of cocaine during the 1980s is not even an allegation in the hip-hop community — it’s accepted fact,



political bedrock” (Pulver). Lamar’s implicit criticism of the policies of the Ronald Reagan era is in keeping with popular opinion, both in his community and in the hip hop community at large.

Lamar’s language of war invokes Reagan’s War on Drugs, as a way of criticizing its impact on his community. He employs war as a metaphor for the struggle youths face trying to survive and succeed in Compton. His mention of the Compton Crips and Bompton Pirus<sup>8</sup> suggests that gang violence is a war within the city. However, gang violence is a symptom of a community beset with poverty and addiction. Lamar’s language implies that those within his community face an unavoidable struggle, hence why “[you] [c]an’t detour when you at war with your city.” ‘Your city’ is a metonym for the social ills the people of Compton try to resist. The war is not fought by gang members alone; it is fought by everyone in the community who is confronted with forces of discrimination and the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and addiction. Lamar refers to gang violence as war in order to equate the damage caused by intra-city violence with the damage caused by the War on Drugs in poor black communities. While claims that the Central Intelligence Agency was indirectly dealing cocaine have not been proven – however much evidence exists to support the veracity of the claims – the negative impact that the War on Drugs had on poor blacks communities can be factually confirmed. The War on Drugs did little for communities other than create the profile of black youth as criminals. Lamar summarizes his community’s sentiments surrounding the Ronald Reagan era: “When you fight, don’t fight fair, ’cause you’ll never win.” The War on Drugs hurt communities that were most detrimentally impacted by drugs because the government’s initiative racially profiled black youth as criminals (Glasser and Siegel 238). On the basis of this profile, youth were denied viable employment opportunities. Though some attempted to combat the government’s

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<sup>8</sup> Pirus are affiliated with the Bloods, and Bloods refer to Compton as Bompton.

corruption with corruption of their own, by dealing the drugs the government was ostensibly selling, most youth still could not win because those who were caught dealing or using were given unjust prison sentences (Bourgeois 65). Lamar's generation inherited the previous generation's war and is left to fight a battle that is discriminatory by design. Lamar returns to metaphors of a city at war on *To Pimp a Butterfly*: "but while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city, I was entering a new one."

On "Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice)," Lamar explores ideas of good and evil as a way of overturning the dichotomy between them. He describes himself as "twenty-three with morals and plans of living cordial," but he complicates his self-representation by referring to himself as "a nigga that's evil and spiritual." Lamar is a practicing Christian, though he is not publicly affiliated with a particular denomination of Christianity (Ugwu). In an interview with *Complex*, Lamar says he uses his music to express his faith: "God put something in my heart to get across and that's what I'm going to focus on, using my voice as an instrument and doing what needs to be done" (qtd. in Ahmed). On "Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice)," however, he describes his struggle to do God's will when he is instinctually driven to act sinfully: "ministers tried / To save me, how I'm gon' when I don't even hear God?" He recognizes that his inclination towards violence is at odds with his faith, yet he is unable to live according to a Christian moral code. Instead, his actions are dictated by the street culture that surrounds him. Faced with the violence around him, he believes, "I need me a weapon, these niggas ride." The tension between Lamar's spirituality and the violence in which he partakes forms the basis of his "Good Kid"-*"M.A.A.D City"* dichotomy. On *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, he tries to maintain his religious faith in a city plagued by injustice, and tries to act against his tendency towards vice, which is at odds with the code of Christian righteousness. The need for spiritual guidance forms the basis of "Swimming

Pools (Drank)” and “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” in which thirst is a metaphor for depravity. On “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” Lamar suggests that thirst can only be satiated by holy water, a metonym for God’s influence. While he does not name his vice as such on “Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice),” on “Kush & Corinthians” and “The Blacker the Berry” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he refers to himself as a hypocrite for the contrast between the code of righteousness to which he ideologically subscribes and the sinfulness of his criminal actions and violence.

On “Kush & Corinthians,” Lamar returns to the conversation about morality and evil he began on “Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice).” “Kush & Corinthians” is significant because it is the first song on *Section.80* in which Lamar attempts to better understand human nature as a way of criticizing his own actions and the way he interacts with the world. In particular, he wonders why he acts violently when he knows it is wrong to do so: “But why must we retaliate? Is it human nature?” He asks a series of questions about human nature in an attempt “to figure out the world and escape all of [his] demons.” His demons are his own inclinations towards vice, which plague him even when he intends to act morally. Additionally, his demons are the poverty, crime, violence and addiction that beset his community, all of which have their roots in America’s discrimination. He hopes that by examining the source of his community’s demons, he will change his reaction to them. Despite his plan to figure out the world, he decides to “look for the answers later”; he does not explicitly criticize America’s discrimination until *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

Lamar interrogates his own values and wonders whether it is human nature to strive towards goodness but to turn to vice. He rearticulates the good-evil dichotomy, according to which, “I’m good, I’m bad, I’m a Christian, I’m a sinner.” Rather than attempt to define himself

absolutely, he accepts the contradictions he embodies and concludes, “What I’m doing, I’m saying that I’m human.” To be human is to reside imperfectly between good and evil. Lamar cannot embody a single vice or virtue definitely. While his own nature remains indefinite, he asks, “To the meaning of life, what’s my purpose?” The question is as much about Lamar’s purpose in life as it is his purpose in creating *Section.80*. Lamar’s interrogation of his personal values and the meaning of his life is important to his social criticism because he is both a product of his environment and a producer of his environment. He must determine how he relates to the society he criticizes if he is to take accountability for his actions. By taking accountability for his actions, he can inhabit his imperfections and better himself. On “Ab-Soul’s Outro,” he responds to his own questions, to emphasize the need to look for answers within oneself: “I spent twenty-three years on this earth searching for answers ’til one day I realized I had to come up with my own.” In the same way that he will not see a better world by passively waiting for change, he will not find answers by waiting for society to reveal them. Lamar’s inquiry into his relationship to society underlies the “Good Kid”-“M.A.A.D City” dichotomy. This inquiry also forms the basis of Lamar’s introspective reflection that goes along with his critique of society on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. He fights to compensate for his shortcoming but ultimately realizes that he can be a leader even though he is imperfect.

The mention of Corinthians in the title of “Kush & Corinthians” and in BJ the Chicago Kid’s verse is a reference to St. Paul’s letters, in which he addresses the difficulties and immoralities of the Corinthians (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1 and 2 Corinthians). Paul was a Pharisee who persecuted Jesus’ followers (Acts 8:1-3). He was on his way to Damascus when a light from heaven struck him down, and he heard Jesus ask why he persecuted Him (Acts 9:3-5). Paul was blinded for three days. On the third day, one of Jesus’

disciples appeared to him to restore his vision and fill him with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). Paul converted to Christianity and became a devout follower of Jesus and a missionary to the Gentiles. In spite of his sinful past, Paul became a spiritual leader. On “Kush & Corinthians,” Lamar reflects on his own difficulties and sinfulness as a way of determining his relationship to his society. Over the course of his subsequent albums, he has a spiritual conversion that enables him to act as a leader on “HiiiPower” and at the conclusion of *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Like Paul, he overcomes his self-doubts and self-loathing in order to teach the people in his community to love themselves and respect each other.

Kush is a strain of cannabis, frequently referenced in hip hop culture. Through his juxtaposition of the Bible and marijuana, Lamar offers a representation of good and evil – evil, at least, from the perspective of law enforcement that prosecutes drug users. However, he complicates the representation by smoking kush while he reads the Bible. Rather than disassociate himself from the stereotype of black youth as drug users, he subverts the stereotype of criminality to suggest that spirituality and cannabis use are not mutually exclusive. The juxtaposition of kush and Corinthians emphasize that drug use does not make one immoral and religious practice does not free one from sin. A single practice does not denote the entirety of one’s personality; Lamar cannot reduce his identity with a single descriptor or judgment. Lamar refers to the juxtaposing aspects of his personality on “Ab-Soul’s Outro”: “See, a lot of y’all don’t understand Kendrick Lamar because you wonder how I could talk about money, hoes, clothes, God and history all in the same sentence / You know what all them things have in common? / Only half the truth if you tell it.” Lamar admits he is moral and sinful because to do otherwise would make him a hypocrite. He would rather present seemingly incongruous ideas than offer half-truths or false impressions. The topic of hypocrisy becomes particularly important

on *To Pimp a Butterfly* as he discusses the need to acknowledge one's own faults and shortcoming in order to engage in an open conversation about overcoming racism.

On "Ab-Soul's Outro," Herbert Stevens, known and credited as Ab-Soul, is in dialogue with Lamar's work on *Section.80*. He extrapolates on the points Lamar makes throughout *Section.80* to offer a cohesive criticism and to articulate the ethos surrounding the album. Stevens's question, "What's your life about?" reiterates Lamar's question on "Kush & Corinthians" about the meaning of his life. Stevens reinforces the need to know oneself before examining one's society. He speaks of the transformative power of music: "Come to our show, you can see the diversity / Unify the people... / We might not change the world but we gon' manipulate it." Stevens's mention of diversity harks back to the concept that underlies "Fuck Your Ethnicity": those who wish to can unite to make change in their society. Diversity can be an asset to positive change when people unite to learn from difference. Stevens refers to the potential for music of all genres to unify people and inspire change. He also refers to the way in which the Black Hippy collective brings together those who see the potential to make positive social change through love. Since its genesis, hip hop has been used by artists – notably, Tupac Shakur – to articulate the evils of their society and to propose positive social change, with the belief that "political and social conditions must not, cannot, and will not circumscribe the vision of trust artists" (George 48). Lamar and Stevens believe that political and social conditions are the necessary subject matter of artists because they have the power to encourage dialogue and inspire positive change. Through music, Lamar "speak[s] for Generation Y." He encourages his generation to fight back against discrimination and to make change through love and respect. The concept of making social change through love and respect is the basis of Black Hippy's HiiiPower movement.

Lamar engages with Ab-Soul's criticism on *Section.80*'s coda "HiiiPower," to articulate the ethos behind the HiiiPower movement and *Section.80* as a whole. The HiiiPower movement is an egalitarian system on the basis of which those who desire to make change can unite. HiiiPower is a metonym for "heart, honour and respect," which are the core tenets of Black Hippy's movement ("Ab-Soul's Outro"). HiiiPower's three I's represent its three tenets. Black Hippy "started HiiiPower because our generation needed a generator in the system made to disintegrate us" ("Ab-Soul's Outro"). By treating others with love, honour and respect, Lamar's generation can generate the change they wish to see in their society. Lamar first refers to HiiiPower on his 2010 mixtape *Overly Dedicated*:

HiiiPower is the way we think, the way we live

.....

What we're about to do is raise the level of expectations

.....

You don't have to be rich

But you will be rich in mind and spirit. ("Cut You Off (To Grow Closer)")

HiiiPower is an ethic, of which Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* love ethic is a part. One must enact HiiiPower to make positive social change. The stylized HiiiPoWeR means "Poor We Are" (*Genius*, "HiiiPower"). The phrase refers to the poverty affecting Lamar's generation (Kelley 122). PoWeR also alludes to the Beatitude "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). Those who live with heart, honour and respect will be rich in mind and spirit regardless of their wealth.

Lamar builds on the self-knowledge that he and his audience arrive at over the course of *Section.80* and issues a call to action. Essential to the HiiiPower mentality is the need to

acknowledge the past before one can confront the issues of the present. One must recognize “[w]hatever you think is negative in your life, overcom[e] that and still hav[e] that self-respect” (Lamar, *The Come Up Show*). Instead of hoping for change without working for it or accepting the past as a dictate of the future, he calls his audience to “get up off that slave ship / Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs.” Lamar’s generation must challenge America’s discrimination to create a society based on social and political equality. His mention of slave ships suggests the need for society at large to recognize the impact of chattel slavery on America’s social order. Christina Sharpe maintains that to address present day discrimination requires “a continued reckoning [with] the *longue durée* of Atlantic chattel slavery, with black fungibility, antiblackness, and the gratuitous violence that structures black being, of accounting for the narrative, historical, structural, and other positions black people are forced to occupy” (59). Present day discrimination has its basis in the discriminatory social order that has been in place in America since the start of slavery. White slave owners treated black people as though they were fungible bodies rather than as humans “whose mind[s] [were] as active as [their] own” (Coates 65). To challenge discrimination, all must acknowledge its impact on the American social order, whether they experienced discrimination as individuals whose subjectivity was formed within an oppressive social order, inflicted it as individuals who have discriminated or have borne passive witness to discrimination, and inherited it as those who live in a discriminatory society that is not of their making. Discrimination must be confronted before it can be worked through and overcome.

On “HiiiPower,” Lamar takes on the role of a leader to his audience. He must act as a leader because he sees “visions of Martin Luther staring at me / Malcolm X put a hex on my future.” He aligns himself with the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement by alluding to their



revolutionary missions and echoing their words. He calls his audience to “Stand for something or die in the morning,” which is similar to the call to arms on “Poe Mans Dreams”<sup>9</sup> and “Ab-Soul’s Outro.”<sup>10</sup> The lines are variations on a quotation attributed to Malcolm X, “If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.”<sup>11</sup> Through his engagement with Malcolm X, Lamar echoes his predecessor’s political urgency; his social criticism culminates in a political manifesto. In his emphasis on the need for his generation to know themselves and their contribution to society before they can initiate social change, Lamar alludes to Martin Luther King Jr.’s belief: “A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institution is a revolution” (*Why We Can’t Wait* 137). Lamar articulates his intention to “fight the system” of oppression, which is the productive aim behind his social criticism. He articulates his mission and its surrounding culture throughout *Section.80*; “HiiiPower” is his movement’s battle cry.

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<sup>9</sup> “Stand for something or fall for anything.”

<sup>10</sup> “Is you gon’ live on your knees or die on your feet?”

<sup>11</sup> British broadcaster Alexander Hamilton is often credited for the above quotations, in which case the quotation has been misattributed to Malcolm X. However, prevalence of the quotation’s association with Malcolm X in popular culture is such that Lamar likely alludes to Malcolm X, even if the quotation is not associated with him.

‘You Still Rose From That Dark Place of Violence’: Overcoming Limitations to Act Upon  
Positive Potential

Lamar’s 2012 album *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* is a non-linear narrative representation of his adolescence in Compton, California around 2004. The album is subtitled “A Short Film by Kendrick Lamar.” The narrative is told through a series of flash-forwards and flashbacks during which Lamar speaks with the voices of his adolescent and adult selves. The narrative’s temporal disruption is significant as a way for Lamar to relate his past to the success he has achieved as a musician that has enabled him to move past the negativity of Compton. The temporal disruption also brings the difficulties Lamar faced in the past in closer proximity to the social issues and self-doubts he experiences in the present on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Lamar’s adolescent voice provides a firsthand account of the destructive consequences of prevalent poverty and violence on his generation and on him. He describes witnessing and participating in crimes and gang violence, struggling with substance abuse and his inner conflict as he tries to act righteously in a city filled with corruption – or, tries to be a good kid in a mad city. Through his representation of the “Good Kid”-“M.A.A.D City” dichotomy, Lamar interrogates his relationship with his society to determine the reciprocal influence he and the City of Compton have upon each other. The negativity within his community is as much a consequence of his own actions – namely, his participation in crimes, which perpetuate the stereotype that African-American youth are criminals – as it is of social issues rooted in a history of discriminatory public policies and the intergenerational effects of poverty.

Lamar defines negativity as criminal and self-destructive behaviour, which he details on “The Art of Peer Pressure” and “Swimming Pools (Drank),” respectively. He also defines negativity as moral and spiritual depravity, which he addresses through the metaphor of thirst on

“Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst.” Within the trajectory of the album’s narrative, he overcomes this negativity when he achieves success that enables him to leave Compton, and when he renews his commitment to his spirituality.<sup>12</sup> With the voice of an adult, he contrasts the past limitations he faced with the present success he has achieved. He describes the way he overcomes obstacles to become a positive person. In so doing, he remedies his past negativity and inspires youth who are still living in limiting environments. To distinguish between Lamar’s two voices, I will refer to the sixteen-year-old voice as Kendrick and the adult voice as Lamar. The voices differ in cadence and pitch, as well as in perspective and critical distance from the narrative; Kendrick revels in his gangsta lifestyle and materialistic fantasies while Lamar is critical of his past actions. I will consider the narrative Lamar offers on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* as a supplement to the historically-based critique on *Section.80* and as support for his social criticism on *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

On “The Art of Peer Pressure,” Kendrick partakes in substance abuse and crime, in spite of his disinclination towards drugs and violence. Lamar continues the scene he set in “Backseat Freestyle” with Kendrick and his friends driving around the city, intoxicated and overly confident. In the opening verse, Lamar represents the voice of intoxicated Kendrick “smoking on the finest dope” with distorted vocals and chattering delivery. The audio and nonsense words are indicative of Kendrick’s perception; his thoughts are distorted by the influence of drugs and his peers. Kendrick knows that living recklessly is “gon’ burn you out,” but he ignores his own realization; he justifies his ignorance because “I’m with the homies right now.” Though the title “The Art of Peer Pressure” suggests that the song’s narrative is about the extensive peer pressure

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<sup>12</sup> While he overcomes negativity on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, he has to negotiate and live with negativity on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, some of which comes from the guilt he feels now that he has left Compton without making the social change he hoped for in his community.

Kendrick faces, the narrative instead details Kendrick's uncritical participation in a break and entry. A peer-pressuring scene is absent from the album's narrative because the negativity in which Kendrick partakes exceeds his own will and the will of his friends. Their criminality is the reaction of youth who have been denied viable opportunities to escape their community's poverty. The willingness of Kendrick and his friends to turn to crime to fulfill their material desires is indicative of a culture that does not offer viable career options to young black men. Kelley writes of the effects of poverty on African-American youth: "[E]conomic restructuring resulting in massive unemployment *has* created criminals out of black youth" (118). They lack the opportunities to support themselves financially through legitimate means, so they turn to crime to break the cycle of poverty. In the next verse, the bass deepens and Lamar begins his clear-voiced and clear-headed recollection of robbing a house with his friends. The bass represents the increased gravity of the narrative, and adds an element of foreboding to Kendrick and his friends' robbery. The contrasting sounds in "The Art of Peer Pressure" represent the contrasting perspectives of adolescent and adult; Lamar no longer believes his actions were justified because he lacked a legitimate means through which to fulfill his material wants and needs. Though his criminality is a reflection of poverty and lack of opportunity within his community, which suggests that pervasive crime is a social issue, Lamar makes himself culpable for his own actions. When he commits crimes, "the energy we bringing sure to carry away / A flock of positive activists and fill the body with hate." Lamar recognizes that his actions damage his community and perpetuate violence and criminality indefinitely. Not only does his criminality support the stereotype of black youth as criminals, it incites violent retaliation that causes the death of his friend ("Swimming Pools (Drank)").

Lamar's criticism of his contribution to society underlies his exploration of the "Good Kid"- "M.A.A.D City" dichotomy. He offers antithetical views on his relationship to Compton. On "Good Kid," he reflects on the social issues in Compton that force his negative actions. He portrays himself as a victim of his city's corruption. By contrast, on "M.A.A.D City," he reflects on his actions as an exacerbation of the city's ills; he portrays himself as a perpetrator of violence and a cause of his city's criminality. Lamar's intention on "Good Kid" is to "bring you into [his] world" (*Genius*, "Kendrick on 'Good Kid' hook"). In the song's three verses, he presents three symptoms of his city's social issues: gang violence, police brutality and substance abuse. He is a victim of gang violence because he is "easily prey[ed]" upon by those who are willing to hurt and exploit others for their own benefit. "Good Kid" follows a skit at the end of "Poetic Justice" in which Kendrick is jumped by his girlfriend Sherane's gangsta cousins because they believe he is affiliated with a rival gang.<sup>13</sup> Even though he does not have gang ties himself, he is "accustomed to" the lifestyle and the criminal behaviour that goes along with it. According to West, gang violence and "homicidal assaults by young black men on one another are only the most obvious signs of [an] empty quest for pleasure, property and power" (10). While West's assumption about the causes of black-on-black crime is in keeping with Kendrick's desires on "Backseat Freestyle," black-on-black crime is also indicative of growing animosity in communities where black youth are denied opportunities to become respectable members of society. The lack of opportunities available to African-Americans in poor communities is a reflection of a discriminatory culture that does not aim to bolster youth so much as it aims to contain them. That black youth must be contained and their energy nullified is the tacit belief of the police Kendrick encounters in Compton.

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<sup>13</sup> In the most prominent use of flashback on the album, Lamar sets the scene for the skit at the end of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*'s first track, "Sherane a.k.a. Master Splinter's Daughter."

Lamar compares gangs and police with his parallel descriptions of the red and blue of the Bloods and Crips with the red and blue of police lights. His comparison implies that corrupt police officers are as detrimental to his society as gang members. He refers to the police as “the biggest gang in California” (qtd. in Eells 44). When Kendrick is stopped and interrogated by the police, he thinks, “I feel you just want to kill / All of my innocence<sup>14</sup> while ignoring my purpose / To persevere as a better person.” He is a good kid who aspires to be a good man, but the police judge him to be a gang member and criminal all the same because he is a young black male. The denial of opportunities to youth is indicative of the racist belief in “the irrelevance of black life [which] has been drilled into [America] since its infancy” (Coates, “On the Killing of Jordan Davis by Michael Dunn”). Social structures that marginalize those who are most in need of social support imply that underprivileged demographics are less important. African-American youth internalize the belief that black lives are less valuable; consequently, they feel resentment towards the people in their own communities and they undervalue their own lives. Faced with a society that seeks to limit his potential, Kendrick has “animosity building / It’s probably big as a building / Me jumping off of the roof / Is me just playing it safe.” His animosity towards those who inflict injustice upon his community grows. Without a means to act upon his anger to change his situation, his resentment towards his society turns to self-loathing to the extent that he would rather die by suicide than by homicide, either at the hands of a gang member or a police officer. Suicide seems like the only option Kendrick has to express his agency. Rather than work through his pain to improve his situation, Kendrick abuses drugs while he “quietly hope[s] for change.” His drug use exacerbates his self-loathing until he “feel[s] it’s nothing to lose” his own

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<sup>14</sup> In a stylistic representation of innocence, “Good Kid” is only song on the regular edition of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* without profanities.

life. Lamar returns to the topics of resentment and depression as responses to internalized racism on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, as he explores his own tendency towards self-destruction.

Lamar's other intention with "Good Kid" is to "try and let you understand, who is the good kid in the mad city?" (*Genius*, "Kendrick on 'Good Kid' hook"). On "M.A.A.D City," Lamar complicates his self-representation as the good kid. "M.A.A.D City" – stylized on the album as "m.A.A.d city" – is an acronym that means, "my Angry Adolescence divided." Kendrick is divided by his desire to be a positive person and the crushing influence of the mad city. Given the pervading social order in Compton, he believes "[t]he streets sure to release the worst side of my best" ("Good Kid"). For lack of better options to achieve success, he will act in accordance with the criminality he sees in Compton street culture. His actions will be a quintessential example of the criminal behaviour for which black youth are racially profiled (Kelley 118). The narrative in "M.A.A.D City" is the result of Kendrick's internalization of violence and criminality in Compton; his actions are a reflection of the culture around him. Though he presents himself as a bystander on "Good Kid," he is a perpetrator of crimes and a participant in the city's madness on "M.A.A.D City." Kendrick's perception of his world shifts as he "adapt[s] to crime" ("M.A.A.D City"). He reacts to the negativity of his society with crimes of his own because he believes the only way to respond to the inevitable violence in Compton is to participate in the violence himself. "M.A.A.D City" is also an acronym for "my Angels on Angel dust." Angel dust is the colloquial name for Phencyclidine, also known as PCP. The acronym refers to the joint laced with cocaine that Kendrick accidentally smokes at the end of "The Art of Peer Pressure," an episode that is based on the true story of Lamar smoking a laced joint. "My Angels on Angel dust" is also a metaphor for the effects of the city's influence on Kendrick. He looks for moral guidance but even his guardian angels are overcome by the

influence of drugs. Having grown up in a negative environment, Lamar says that by adolescence, “I’m totally adapted to it and I’m numb to it... I’m in it and I’m locked in” (*Genius*, “Kendrick on ‘I was straight tweakin the next weekend we broke even’.”). Rather than run from the influences around him, Kendrick runs with them. The negative culture in “Compton, USA made [him] an Angel on Angel dust.” He is overcome by negativity and becomes one of many youth in Compton that turn to crime and drugs.

Each of the verses on “M.A.A.D City” has a different form to represent Lamar’s differing narrative techniques. Lamar’s first two verses are poetic raps in which he describes images of gang violence in Compton. Both the form Lamar uses and the images he describes are typical of gangsta rap. Like he did on *Section.80*, he uses “stereotypes of the ghetto as ‘war zone’... [which] structure and constrain [his] efforts to create a counternarrative of life in the inner city” (Kelley 118). The first verse is an impersonal representation of the ghetto, without the autobiographical details that make up the majority of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. The impersonal verse implies that Lamar is not the only one who has been impacted by gang violence; he tells the story of an entire community devastated by crime. As a result of Lamar’s regulated rhythmic delivery and his emphasized alliteration on the /k/ of fuck, suck and dick and the /d/ of dick and die,<sup>15</sup> the verse takes on a strong, aggressive rhythm to evoke the ghetto as a war zone. Though Lamar’s delivery adheres to the 4/4 time of the bass drum, the rate of his internal rhymes increases as the tension mounts in his narrative (Connor).

Lamar tells personal stories from his adolescence about staging a robbery and smoking a laced joint in the second verse. However, he tells his story with other rappers’ words. He sets the scene: “Fresh outta school ’cause I was a high school grad.” The line is from “A Bird in the

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<sup>15</sup> “Suck a dick or die or sucker punch.”



Hand” by gangsta rap pioneer Ice Cube.<sup>16</sup> Lamar alludes to the frustration of the song’s protagonist, who turns to drug dealing because he cannot make ends meet by legitimate means. Additionally, Lamar samples the same song as Ice Cube, B.B. King’s “Chains and Things.”<sup>17</sup> King is frustrated because he “can’t lose these chains that bind [him]” to his troubled past (“Chains and Things”). Though Lamar does not quote King’s song, he alludes to King’s feeling of desperation by sampling his music. Like King, Kendrick feels as though he will never escape the negative situation he is in. After Lamar tells the story of staging a robbery when he worked as a truck lot security guard, he quotes Kanye West in “We Major”: “Projects tore up, gang signs get thrown up.”<sup>18</sup> While Lamar’s use of the line depersonalizes his experience in Compton – West is a Chicago native, and he refers to projects and gangs without any geographical references – it also emphasizes the inevitability of underprivileged black youth joining gangs for lack of a positive alternative.

The pitch of Lamar’s voice is raised so he sounds like his adolescent self. Lamar’s voice is “pitched at a pleading, near-hysterical sob” (Greene). His high-pitched voice combined with the syncopated rhythm of his delivery represent his desperation. The tone of desperation is particularly notable on his parallel pronunciation of the phrases: “[S]traight tweaking / The next weekend / We broke even.” Lamar distorts his rhythm to make the phrases sound as though they all contain three syllables. In so doing, he creates an imperfect internal rhyme. Despite the bad trip he has when he smokes a laced joint, Kendrick is abusing drugs – tweaking – the next weekend. The regular beat combined with Lamar’s syncopated delivery emphasizes Kendrick’s lack of control. The parallelism of the phrases emphasizes Kendrick’s feeling that he is trapped

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<sup>16</sup> “A Bird in the Hand” is on Ice Cube’s controversial 1991 album *Death Certificate*.

<sup>17</sup> “Chains and Things” is on King’s 1970 album *Indianola Mississippi Seeds*.

<sup>18</sup> “We Major” is on West’s 2005 album *Late Registration*.

in Compton (*Genius*, “Kendrick on ‘I was straight tweakin the next weekend we broke even’.”). He feels as though he cannot escape because he is locked into the project life and the cycle of violence and retribution that accompanies it.

Lamar’s final verse on “M.A.A.D City” is a highly distorted spoken word. At the start, his voice is at the same raised pitch as his former verses. His voice is lowered to a deep baritone and is then raised to an unnaturally high pitch. Both voices sound inhuman to represent Kendrick’s lack of empathy as he commits violent crimes. At a distorted high pitch Lamar asks the disturbing question, “If I told you I killed a nigga at sixteen, would you believe me?” He takes on the tone of a monstrous adolescent and asks whether his audience thinks his rage over discrimination and oppression could be pitched to such a degree that he kills a man.<sup>19</sup> He does not allow his audience to believe, on the basis of the story of his achievement, that the “next generation... sleep[s] / With dreams of being a lawyer or doctor / Instead of a boy with a chopper.” Instead, Lamar impels his audience to see all of the youth who cannot escape from crime and violence, who die before they reach adulthood. Like the Children of the Corn<sup>20</sup> who are sacrificed at age nineteen so their culture can continue perpetually, the deaths of youth by gang violence perpetuates a cycle of retaliation that sustains gang culture indefinitely. Lamar forces his audience to confront the reality that he was caught up in the city’s madness, like many good kids who cannot resist their community’s negativity.

On “Swimming Pools (Drank),” Lamar returns to the topic of substance abuse that he explores on “A.D.H.D.” Rather than discuss drug use, he describes binge drinking as his generation’s preferred method for numbing pain. Given the song’s party setting, the substance

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<sup>19</sup> bell hooks refers to this emotion as *killing rage* in her 1996 book of the same title.

<sup>20</sup> In the third verse of “M.A.A.D City,” Lamar refers to the 1977 short story “Children of the Corn” by Stephen King.

abuse Lamar describes with a high pitched, adolescent voice over a melodic chorus does not seem as immediately problematic as his friend's recreational consumption of Vicodin on "A.D.H.D." However, the melody and high voice on the chorus is juxtaposed with the ominously heavy bass and monstrous baritone on the song's hook. The drinking practices described on the hook change from social to abusive, as the drinker goes from taking shots at a party to drinking with the intention of passing out. The juxtaposed sounds of "Swimming Pools (Drank)" are similar to those of "P&P 1.5" from *Overly Dedicated*. "P&P 1.5" initially sounds like a party anthem about how sex and alcohol are all Lamar needs for happiness. However, the upbeat sound of the chorus is at odds with Lamar's lyrical descriptions of the racism and violence that have limited his potential. The sound shifts to a dark, thumping bass and a distorted baritone voice that says, "All I need in this lifetime: pussy and Patron." Lamar can find only momentary satisfaction through sex and alcohol because he is denied opportunities for positive personal development.

On "Swimming Pools (Drank)," Kendrick drinks heavily because he seeks "the freedom [that] is granted as soon as the damage of vodka arrive." He seeks freedom from his feelings of inadequacy so he mimics the behaviour of those around him to "fit in with the popular" rather than confront his feelings head on. Like his friends on "A.D.H.D.," Kendrick abuses substances so he can numb his pain rather than work through it. He admits, "All I have in life is my new appetite for failure." His own low monotone vocals back his foremost vocals, to chant the phrase in tandem. His chant turns the phrase into a mantra of failure. Kendrick's appetite for failure is indicative of his generation's inability to work through their problems to create societal change; instead, they are resigned to their situations. In the midst of Kendrick's alcohol binge comes the distorted, robotic voice of his conscience: "I'm in your conscience / If you do not hear me then

you will be history, Kendrick.” His conscience implores him to stop drinking because his excessive alcohol consumption could prove fatal. Though he is unwilling to admit it to himself, he is subconsciously aware that his drinking is a form of self-abuse. Kendrick’s conscience implicitly urges him to be the good kid he knows he can be, but he chooses to ignore the voice and abuse his limit. The skit at the end of “Swimming Pools (Drank)” depicts the consequences of a generation that no longer aspire to be good kids, who are instead participants in a negative culture. Kendrick and his friends retaliate against Sherane’s cousins for their earlier attack on Kendrick; rather than enact the vengeance they seek, their friend Dave is killed. The cycle of violence and retaliation only comes to an end after the spiritual intervention of one of their community’s elders on “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst.”

*Good Kid M.A.A.D City*’s climax is a twelve minute long two-part track, “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst.” Rather than offer a critique of the gang violence he dramatizes in the previous skit, Lamar raps as different characters in a fictionalized narrative about the impact of abuse, poverty and violence on males and females of his generation. “Sing About Me” is narrated from three perspectives: Dave’s brother’s, Keisha’s sister’s and Lamar’s in response to his unnamed friends’ words. The characters represent youth who have been impacted by prevalent social issues in Compton, along with domestic issues of their own. Dave’s brother contacts Kendrick after Dave’s death because he realizes that so long as he continues to partake in gang violence, he could be killed at any time. He thinks many young men in Compton join gangs as “a reaction [to] what we consider madness” of life in the ghetto. Gang violence is normalized to the extent that it is “quite a routine,” the inevitable consequence of growing up in Compton. He refers to Compton as an “orphanage we call a ghetto” because many youth of his generation are without parental guidance; instead, they are influenced by their peers. The

previous generations are unable to act as positive role models because they struggle with or have been consumed by the same social issues that threaten their children. As a result of a lack of positive guidance, youth are caught up in the same routine of criminality as previous generations and grow up with the belief that “niggas like me never prosper.” Dave’s brother has been part of the Pirus for so long, he does not believe he can escape from gang violence or from Compton. Though he cannot serve as a positive role model, he asks Kendrick, “Just promise me you’ll tell this story when you make it big” so the next generation can learn from his mistakes.

In the verse from Lamar’s perspective, he responds to his friends’ narratives. He shares their stories because he wants to “speak of something that’s realer than the TV screen.” By including the stories of Dave’s brother and Keisha’s sister on his album, Lamar speaks of hardships that his generation faces rather than telling the glamourized stories of ghetto life that are portrayed in music and film. Looking at his friends’ lives, he realizes “Exactly what’d happen if I ain’t continue rappin’.” If he had not achieved legitimate success as a rapper, he too would live a life of crime that would kill him either swiftly or slowly. Having grown up in a neighbourhood where so many die young, Lamar is “infatuated with death.” He is infatuated with death as a means to enact vengeance. If he kills his enemies, he achieves the short-lived satisfaction of fulfilling his revenge fantasy. Additionally, he is infatuated with death, suicide in particular, as an escape from his present situation. Though he contemplates suicide on “Good Kid,” he fears that he will not receive spiritual redemption when he dies. If he dies today, he hopes he hears a “Cry out from heaven so loud it can water down a demon / With the holy ghost ’till it drown in the blood of Jesus.” “The blood of Jesus” is an allusion to the biblical story of the Last Supper. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus offered wine to his disciples as a symbol of his blood. In Jesus’ death, his blood was poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of all people

(Matthew 26:28). Lamar asks for the blood of Jesus to quell his demons and forgive his sins. Dave's brother's metaphorizes his vengefulness as "a demon glued to my back whispering, 'Get 'em'." Similarly, Lamar sees the workings of the Devil in his own inability to stay on the path to righteousness. In response to violence and crime, "a pervasive spiritual impoverishment grows" (West 9). When violence becomes a norm in a community, its residents no longer look for positive alternatives. Consequently, even those who do not participate in crimes are implicated by association. Their complicity represents a spiritual despair because they can no longer imagine a better future. In failing to act as the good kid in Compton, Lamar feels as though he has fallen under the Devil's influence to the extent that he believes only divine intervention can save him.

On the second half of the song, "I'm Dying of Thirst," Lamar reconfigures his focus from good and evil to morality and sinfulness; the "Good Kid"- "M.A.A.D City" relationship takes on a spiritual dimension. In considering his own past actions, Lamar wonders, "How many sins? I lost count" ("I'm Dying of Thirst"). He figures himself as "the student / That never learned to live righteous but how to shoot it." Lamar's generation is the miseducated youth who have not been taught to channel their anger to make positive change. Anger as a response to injustice is a form of spiritual depravity when it causes one to seek vengeance, which will perpetuate a culture of negativity, rather than justice, which will foster positive change within a community. When anger causes them to enact violence against those in their communities and against themselves, youth literally die from their spiritual lack. Lamar addresses his sinfulness through the metaphor of thirst. Thirst is a physiological response to dehydration, which follows Kendrick's excessive alcohol consumption on "Swimming Pools (Drank)," and the running he tires of in the opening line of "I'm Dying of Thirst." Thirst is also a metaphor for spiritual depravity, which is

manifested in Kendrick's drinking with the intent to self-harm. Thirst as a metaphor has its basis in the Old Testament of the Bible. When the Israelites doubted their spiritual leaders and did not trust in God, they wandered through the desert without water. When they trusted in the Lord and his servants, their thirst was quenched (Numbers 20: 2-11, Isaiah 48:21). Moments away from drowning in alcohol in "Swimming Pools (Drank)," Kendrick's last supplication is, "In God I trust." Kendrick's thirst can only be satiated by his trust in God.

In the skit that concludes "I'm Dying of Thirst," Maya Angelou plays the role of one of Compton's elders. In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos, Angelou recounts a conversation she had with Tupac Shakur when she was on the set of *Poetic Justice*.<sup>21</sup> She stopped his argument to remind him of his value as a young black man ("Maya Angelou's Conversation with Tupac Shakur"). Angelou plays a similar role on "I'm Dying of Thirst."<sup>22</sup> She responds to the despair of Kendrick and his friends to enlighten them about their potential to enact positive change: "See, you young men are dying of thirst. Do you know what that means? That means you need water, holy water. You need to be baptized with the spirit of the Lord." They are dying of thirst because in addition to acting sinfully, Kendrick and his friends have given up their hope of making positive change for themselves and their community. They no longer recognize their potential to lead because they believe "[o]nly one in a million will ever see better days" ("Black Boy Fly"). Angelou proposes that their thirst can only be quenched by holy water, which is a metonym for spirituality. In the Christian sacrament of baptism, holy water is used to symbolize spiritual cleansing. With Angelou as their guide, Kendrick and his friends

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<sup>21</sup> *Poetic Justice* is a 1993 film starring Tupac Shakur and Janet Jackson. The film is referenced in Lamar's *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* track "Poetic Justice," which samples Jackson's "Any Time, Any Place."

<sup>22</sup> Angelou's first collection of poetry, released in 1971, is called *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*. In the collection, she discusses race and love.

renew their baptismal promise and “receive God as [their] personal saviour.” Following the prayer Kendrick and his friends make in Jesus’ name, Angelou declares that they have achieved “the start of a new life, [their] real life.” Kendrick’s renewed commitment to his faith amounts to a spiritual conversion, in which he repents his sins and decides he will live morally. Following his conversion, Kendrick is able to act upon his potential.

*Good Kid M.A.A.D City* is a short film or, more accurately, a complete narrative. Accordingly, Kendrick as an album character acts on his potential in such a way that the narrative about his adolescence reaches a point of neat, positive conclusion. The narrative concludes on the uncritically positive, celebratory track “Now Or Never.” At the time of the album’s release, only the iTunes bonus edition contained a track after “Now Or Never.” Lamar narrates “Collect Calls” in the character of his friend Dante, who is in prison making collect calls, and Dante’s mother, who explains in the song’s final verse that she refuses to take his calls until he betters himself and finds God. Lamar’s perspective is absent from the song. Dante is positioned as Kendrick’s foil, as a youth who has not recognized his positive potential and has not turned towards God. Dante’s incarceration makes Kendrick’s success seem all the more perfect by contrast. Kendrick is positioned as the quintessential example of what youth can achieve when they act on their positive potential. It’s only on *To Pimp a Butterfly* that Lamar critically addresses his musical success, imperfectly achieved and his positive potential, unsteadily acted upon. Given that Lamar does not problematize his ability to act upon his potential until his next album, I will refer to Kendrick’s success in the same way Lamar refers to it within the context of the *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* narrative: as success ultimately achieved and positive potential fully realized.



Kendrick's positive potential is realized in the songs that follow "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst." Kendrick's mother tells him that he is invited into the Top Dawg Entertainment studio to record his music ("Real"). The mention of Lamar's current label alludes to his present day musical success, which enables him to achieve his dream of leaving the negativity of Compton. The promise of Kendrick's future success brings *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* to a narrative conclusion that justifies the braggadocious, Dr. Dre-supported tracks "Compton" and "The Recipe." On "Compton," Lamar attributes his success to "the new faith of Kendrick Lamar," but the rest of the track is without moral orientation. As the concluding track on the regular edition of the album, "[Compton]" can't help but be a small deflation" after the empathetic denouement of "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" (Greene). With the exception of Lamar's passing reference to his new faith, "Compton" takes for granted the spiritual conversion that enables Kendrick to achieve his adult success. The track that precedes "Compton," however, is in keeping with the articulation of faith that concludes "I'm Dying of Thirst," and Angelou's conviction that having renewed their baptismal promises, Kendrick and his friends can embark upon their real lives.

"Real" is the moral resolution to *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. The song's chorus, "I'm real," is based on Angelou's declaration that Kendrick and his friends can start their real life following their religious conversion. After he renews his commitment to his faith, Kendrick realizes that his materialistic fantasies will never help him to achieve lasting happiness. He says of the fame, fortune and sex he aspired to have on "Backseat Freestyle," "None of that shit make me real." Instead, realness comes from loving himself and others, and encouraging those around him to act upon their positive potential. For Lamar, loving those around him means "making the right decision[s] for them, and making the right decisions for these kids out here" (*Genius*, "Kendrick

on ‘What love got to do with it when you don’t love yourself’”). Rather than allow his friends and family to become consumed by Compton’s negativity, he decides he will lead by example to improve his community. It is more important to Lamar that he instills positivity in his community than it is that he achieves success. In the skit that closes “Real,” Kendrick’s mother articulates her hope for her son: “Come back a man, tell your story to these black and brown kids in Compton. Let ’em know you was just like them, but you still rose from that dark place of violence, becoming a positive person. But when you do make it, give back, with your words of encouragement. And that’s the best way to give back, to your city.” *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* is Lamar’s story about how he overcame the limitations he faced in his youth to achieve success and become a positive person. He uses his words to challenge the obstacles he faced in his adolescence and to enact his positive potential. He tells his story for the youth in Compton and for oppressed youth everywhere in the hope that they too will recognize that their potential is not limited by their past or by their community. Those who remain good kids, who stay true to themselves and live according to their faith, can make it out of the mad city.

‘If I Respect You, We Unify and Stop the Enemy from Killing Us’: Mobilizing the Pain of  
Racism to Make Social Change Through Love

The conclusion of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* suggests that those who want to initiate positive change in their own lives and in their society can do so regardless of the limitations they have faced. Lamar’s success, however, is not without its pitfalls. On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar realizes that he has changed his own life but he has not changed his society or his perception of himself. On this album, his focus is no longer on Compton as a microcosm for the impact of racism on African-American communities; instead, he focuses on racism in the world as it relates to a history of apartheid and discrimination. Though he has achieved musical success, Lamar continues to struggle with self-loathing and feelings of inadequacy. His feelings are as indicative of internalized racist sentiments in African-American communities, as they are of Lamar’s own feelings that his success is largely undeserved.

On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar advances the plot of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* and supplements it with the social criticism he began on *Section.80* about the implications of racism in America and how they impact his generation. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is Lamar’s “take on what it means to be young and black in America today – and more specifically, what it means to be Kendrick Lamar, navigating success, expectation and his own self-doubt” (Eells 45). He interrogates his own guilt and resentment while tracing racism through its American origins in chattel slavery to South African apartheid, from colourism in African-American communities to the shooting death of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013. Lamar makes an implicit criticism of racism through his narrative about his self-doubt and deepening depression; his narrative culminates in an explicit criticism of racism in which Lamar names discrimination as the source of his self-loathing. He suggests that the way to combat the enemy, racism and hatred,

is by seeking unity through love. My analysis of *To Pimp a Butterfly* will culminate with a proposal of a love ethic as a means to combat discrimination, by revalorizing those who have been the target of centuries of discrimination and then revalorizing all people.

“Wesley’s Theory” opens with a sample from Jamaican soul artist Boris Gardiner’s “Every Nigger is a Star.”<sup>23</sup> The sound crackles into clarity, as though it plays from a turntable rather than from an electronically amplified MP3. The sample plays in its original vinyl format, in recognition of the era in which the album was produced and in tribute to the soul artists of the Seventies. The turntable crackle invokes the material dimension of music. The album is grounded in the materiality of vinyl instead of the intangibility of digital music to imply that the album and Gardiner’s voice have permanent, physical presence. Alexis Petridis compares *To Pimp a Butterfly* to the socially conscious albums released by prominent African-American artists in the Seventies: “*To Pimp a Butterfly* is a black musician’s anguished reaction to the turbulent period in US history, although it’s a far angrier piece of work than any of [his predecessors]... [Marvin] Gaye noted that the evils of the world made him want to holler; Lamar goes right ahead and screams his head off” (Petridis). The turntable crackle aligns Lamar’s work with those of his socially critical musical predecessors, and invokes the urgency of their confrontation with contemporary social issues. His musical predecessors wanted to holler their anger at the world’s evils and hatred; instead, they used music to make their voices heard. Lamar shares his predecessors’ anger and urgency, and shares music as a means of expression. He does not need to holler to make his own voice heard because his fame amplifies his voice. However, he screams for those who are still in positions of marginality, to resist a discriminatory society that tries to silence black voices that speak against racism (Rose, *Black Noise* 72).

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<sup>23</sup> “Every Nigger is a Star” is from Gardiner’s 1973 album of the same name.

Lyricaly, the sample of Gardiner's song represents the ethos that surrounds *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Gardiner's chorus, "Every nigger is a star," celebrates the positive potential of black people of all nationalities and demographics, rather than culturally differentiating them. Gardiner alludes to a shared history of discrimination that taught him what it meant "[t]o be hated and despised," before he realized his people "[ha]ve got a right place in the sun / Where there's love for everyone." Lamar comes to a similar realization over the course of his album. American society's discriminatory attitude towards African-Americans manifests itself in Lamar's self-loathing and deepening depression, which he describes on his extended oral poem and on "u." He overcomes his depression when he recognizes his need to love himself and all black people in spite of their cultural difference; he emphasizes the need for black people to love themselves and each other in "i." Gardiner use of the word 'nigger' is a détournement, in which he takes back a word that had been used to devalorize him. He subverts the racist connotation of nigger by equating the word with stars. Whether star refers to celebrities, talented people or celestial bodies, the word connotes positive recognition. In saying that every black person is worthy of recognition, Gardiner revalorizes black people of all nationalities. They are all stars, whether or they have been recognized as such by those around them. Lamar too subverts the negativity of 'nigger' in the skit at the conclusion of "i," in which he relates the word to the royal title *negus* in the Ethiopian Semitic languages. He, too, uses nigger to revalorize black people.

The volume of Gardiner's words increases until the beat changes and Josef Leimberg's spoken track announces *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s commencement. Leimberg's words introduce the need for introspection in order to determine one's relationship to society: "[T]ake a deep look inside / Are you really who they idolize? / To pimp a butterfly." Leimberg's question underlies Lamar's exploration of the impact of his actions on his society in *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. In

particular, on “Real,” Lamar emphasizes the importance of recognizing one’s past without letting it limit or define one’s future. To move beyond a negative situation, such as the environment Lamar faced as a youth in Compton, one must appreciate one’s own inherent worth and see oneself as deserving of opportunity and success. ‘To pimp a butterfly’ is comparable to ‘to gild a lily.’ To take the phrases within the context of Gardiner’s declaration, all black people are butterflies, lilies or stars – that is to say, beautiful, natural, and deserving of valorization as such. They are inherently valuable and should not need to gild or pimp themselves to be recognized for their full worth. Leimberg implicitly interrogates the authenticity of those who have achieved success, and asks whether they have stayed true to themselves and their origins or whether they have changed or exploited themselves to receive recognition from white America. This question informs Lamar’s interrogation of his actions as a reflection of his values, and informs his *To Pimp a Butterfly* project as whole, as a story he tells with the intention of inspiring youth in Compton so they will appreciate their own value.

On “Wesley’s Theory,” Lamar addresses the complacency of black artists who have achieved their desired level of financial success, as well as the exploitation of black artists by white record executives. In so doing, he implicitly addresses the exploitation of black people by white America throughout American history. The rapper pimps himself to achieve fame and fortune, even though he gains it at the expense of his own integrity. He is overcome by his fantasies of wealth, to the extent that he does not think critically about his financial situation and is consequently manipulated by those who can offer him the money he desires. The record executive, who names himself as Uncle Sam, attempts to make the artist financially dependent on his label, to increase his control over the artist. He tells the rapper to “Pay me later” for the extravagance of alligator shoes. In so doing, he puts the rapper into his debt so he will have no

choice but to submit to the executive's will so he can make the money he has already spent.

While the rapper celebrates his own ascension into wealth – or near ascension, since he has yet to be signed – from a life of poverty in the hood, he has fallen victim to the record executive's manipulation.

The record executive pimps the rapper for his own financial gain and in so doing, appropriates black music. Rose refers to a history of white cultural appropriation of black music: “[E]xtensive white participation in black culture has also always involved white appropriation and attempts an ideological recuperation of black cultural resistance” (*Black Noise* 5). The executives attempted to – and often did – profit from their distribution of black culture, without offering compensation to the artists whose culture they were profiting from. The irony of white appropriation of hip hop, gangsta rap in particular, is that the genre's pioneers used their music as a medium to speak out against white injustice, as N.W.A. did on *Straight Outta Compton*. That the record executive is identified as Uncle Sam, the personification of the American federal government, implies the government's complicity in the exploitation of African-Americans for the sake of white financial gain. Uncle Sam's exploitation of the rapper is reminiscent of the legalized exploitation of black people during American slavery. On “King Kunta,” Lamar responds to the greed of the boastful rapper and the manipulative record executive: “And if I got to brown nose for some gold then I'd rather be a bum than a motherfuckin' baller.” Unlike the artists who are manipulated by their greed, Lamar will not sacrifice his integrity to achieve fame and wealth. His appreciation of his own worth is such that he would rather go unrecognized by others than pimp himself for popularity.

Lamar continues his use of economic metaphors on “For Free? (Interlude).” He asserts his worth in a spoken word addressed to a woman who seeks to financially exploit him. The

woman, played by Darlene Tibbs, insists that Lamar “ain’t shit” because she has not profited from their relationship. In response, he tells her, “This dick ain’t free.” He articulates his discontent through his overemphasis of the harsh /k/ sound at the end of dick. Lamar’s exaggerated delivery and use of double entendres, as well as Tibbs’ dramatization of a stereotypical gold digger and hyperbolized condemnations of her man, turn the exploitative relationship to a source of comedy. However, the relationship is a metaphor for the exploitative relationship between African-Americans and the United States. Lamar says: “Livin’ in captivity raised my cap salary.” Captivity refers to the lack of freedom Lamar has in his relationship with an overly demanding woman, and alludes to the captive condition of Africans who were forced to work as slaves in America from approximately 1640 to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Though the exploitation of Lamar by his lover and of his enslaved ancestors by their masters implies that they are subordinate to those who exploit them, Lamar recognizes his own worth and raises his cap salary. He revalorizes himself in spite of the devalorization that his ancestors faced and that he faces, living in a social system that has its origins in chattel slavery. The alliteration on captivity and cap salary emphasizes that he still confronts the history of African-American captivity and its impact on his social position today. He renegotiates his position by confronting slavery rather than ignoring its psychic consequences on black subjectivity.

As a consequence of Lamar’s revalorization, he “need[s] forty acres and a mule / Not forty ounces and a pitbull.” Forty acres and a mule were promised to emancipated slaves<sup>24</sup> as recompense for their unpaid labour, so they could farm their own land and establish themselves as freed people (Gates 1). However, the order was overturned and the land that had been

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<sup>24</sup> This order was issued by Union general William T. Sherman in his Special Field Order No. 15 on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865.



distributed to freedmen was returned to its owners. In his book on the ways in which racism underlies American social policies, Charles Mills writes, “If there is such a backlash against affirmative action, what would the response be to the demand for the interest on the unpaid forty acres and a mule?” (39). Affirmative action is action taken to provide equal opportunities to those who have been disadvantaged by discrimination (Finkelman). The forty acres and a mule policy is an early example of affirmative action. Lamar’s parallel phrase structure emphasizes the disparity between land and a mule, which are associated with broken promises of post-emancipation prosperity, and a bottle of alcohol and a vicious dog, which represent the stunted potential of those who live in the ghetto. He figures himself as an emancipated former slave: “Oh American, you bad bitch / I picked cotton and made you rich / Now my dick ain’t free.” By figuring himself in this way, he holds the government accountable for denying opportunities to underprivileged African-Americans, both historically and in present day. In the same way that denying freed slaves the land they had tilled for generations hurt an already disadvantaged group, denying African-Americans opportunities through affirmative actions perpetuates poverty and negativity in communities most in need of support.

Lamar addresses the topic of slavery on “King Kunta,” with the intention of subverting tropes that suggest African-Americans are powerless to improve their futures. Having achieved success in the music industry, he says, “Now I run the game, got the whole world talkin’.” Run is a double entendre. In spite of the disadvantages Lamar has faced, he has accelerated from a walk to a run, and is now in control of the hip hop industry. The song’s title refers to the character Kunta Kinte from Alex Haley’s 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and its 1977 television adaptation, *Roots*. According to Haley’s story, set during American slavery, enslaved Kinte is given his choice of two punishments after he runs away from his master’s plantation:

castration or amputation of his right foot. Kinte chooses to lose his foot rather than face physical emasculation at the hand of a slave owner. In moving from a walk to a run, Lamar revises Kinte's history and grants him the power his slave owner denied. Even though he remains a slave for the rest of his life, Kinte continues to honour his Gambian roots and resists full assimilation into his master's culture. Within the context of "King Kunta," Kinte represents African-American resistance to white supremacist culture and ideology. Lamar enacts his own resistance through his tribute to his roots in Compton and South Africa.

In addition to Lamar's lyrical mentions of walking, the rhythm of "King Kunta" is the rhythm of a walk. Scott Poulson-Bryant writes on the importance of the walk in African-American history in his article on the use of rhythm to convey a message. For black artists whose music featured prominent 'walking' rhythms:

The music was the message: African American history, it could be argued, is laden with the legacy of the 'Walk,' from the dangerous walks to freedom during chattel slavery to the decision to walk to work and school and church during the year-long Montgomery bus boycott to the walk across Alabama's Edmund Pettus bridge from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. Walking has long been a means toward liberty for African Americans, in the trek from embattled political, social, and economic marginalization to the aspiration of better jobs, educations, lives, the pursuit, as it were, of the so-called American Dream. (217)

The walk is an assertion of agency, a physical mobilization of will to make change. The walks to freedom during slavery refer to the walks many enslaved people made along the Underground Railroad into Canada. The walks of enslaved people signified a rejection of the subjugated

conditions they were forced into. Rather than wait to have freedom bestowed upon them, they created for themselves the freedom that should have been theirs by right (LaRoche 104). Similarly, the Montgomery walks were organized in resistance to the oppressive conditions under Jim Crow law. Rather than ride segregated buses, black people boycotted the buses and walked or shared transportation instead. Martin Luther King Jr. said that the protest continued because, “We came to see that, in the long run, it is more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation” (*Stride Toward Freedom* 169). The Montgomery walks were an assertion of collective dignity and an act of revalorization. Though Lamar does not refer directly to the events Poulson-Bryant mentions, he references Kunta Kinte and his walks to escape slavery. In addition, on “Mortal Man” he mentions Martin Luther King Jr., who led the walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. On *Section.80*, he mentions Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her bus seat started the Montgomery bus boycott. The rhythm of “King Kunta” reinforces the importance of the walk as a means towards freedom. The song’s tempo is andante, which is known as the tempo of a walking pace. Andante is the present participle of the Italian word *andare*, which means ‘to walk.’ Through his lyrics and metrical delivery, Lamar reinforces the importance of moving forward to achieve one’s goals rather than allowing externally imposed limitations to stagnate one’s progress.

Though Lamar’s message on “King Kunta” emphasizes one’s ability to make positive progress in spite of limitations,<sup>25</sup> the setting on “Institutionalized” is the regressive ghetto environment Kendrick sought to escape on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. Even though Lamar has physically distanced himself from Compton, he is mentally “trapped inside the ghetto.” He feels

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<sup>25</sup> In the same way that the positivity of “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe” is at odds with the narrative of *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, Lamar does not return to the positivity of “King Kunta” until the penultimate track on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, “i.” Not coincidentally, all three songs are album singles.

as though he is “[i]nstitutionalized, I keep runnin’ back for a visit... / Institutionalized, I could still kill me a nigga.” He is enticed by the negativity of the ghetto, despite his knowledge that it will bring out his worst side. Having fallen into a “murderous rhythm” in his adolescence (“Sing About Me”), he realizes that the ghetto’s influence can arouse him to violence. The term ‘institutionalized’ has two meanings within Lamar’s context. Institutionalize means to put in the care of an institution, and to cause something to become an established practice so it is accepted and abided by many people (OED). In accordance with the first definition, institutionalized refers to those who are trapped in prisons, with prisons as correctional institutions. Lamar employs institutionalized to this effect on “Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice)” to refer to his incarcerated uncles. Within the context of “Institutionalized,” ghettos as government-subsidized neighbourhoods are another kind of physical institution; Lamar is institutionalized in the ghetto because he cannot escape its influence, even if he physically distances himself from Compton. In accordance with the second definition of institutionalized, the social issues in Compton – among them: poverty, addiction, crime and violence – are normalized to the extent that they are accepted as an institution, as an inevitable part of life in a ghetto. Lamar accepts the negative influence of Compton. Though he knows his situation will not improve until he takes action to improve it – or, as Bilal sings, “Shit [w]on’t change until you get up and wash your ass” – he returns to the ghetto to indulge in the negativity that he purportedly wants to escape. “You can take your boy out the hood but you can’t take the hood out the homie” is Snoop Dogg’s half-hearted apology for Lamar’s negative actions. It represents the belief that those who are raised in environments where poverty and crime are pervasive cannot improve their situations.

Societal acceptance of the social issues in the ghetto is the consequence of another institution: the institution of racism. hooks says of the history of African-American oppression:

“In the beginning black folks were most effectively colonized via a structure of ownership. Once slavery ended, white supremacy could be effectively maintained by institutionalization of social apartheid and by creating a philosophy of racial inferiority that would be taught to everyone” (hooks, *Killing Rage* 109). In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, slavery was accepted and justified in white communities on the basis of black inferiority. In the present day, the notion of racial inferiority is maintained through institutionalized racism. Institutionalized racism is a form of discrimination that is accepted as an inevitable part of society or, as an institution. As a consequence of institutionalized racism, social issues continue perpetually. Compton’s social issues are symptoms of a society that denies opportunities to African-Americans on the basis of an institutionalized notion of black inferiority. Denying opportunities to youth – as opposed to offering them opportunities based on a policy of affirmative action – is an example of covert racism. In his returns to the negativity of the ghetto, Lamar internalizes the racist belief that crime and violence are inevitable parts of underprivileged black communities.

On his previous album, Lamar examines his relationship to his society through the dichotomy of the “Good Kid” and the “M.A.A.D City.” On *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he examines this relationship through the dichotomy of “u” and “i.”<sup>26</sup> The irony of the “u” and “i” dichotomy is that Lamar uses both pronouns to refer to the same subject: himself. George writes of hip hop artists’ use of the pronoun ‘I’: “‘I’ is a powerful word in the vocabulary of the African-American male... [A] powerful autobiographical impulse demands the exploration of the ‘I’ of me” (51). An artist manifests his pride through his use of ‘I.’ He asserts his subjectivity and claims his story and words as his own. Rather than articulate his pride, Lamar uses ‘I’ to condemn himself for his past mistakes: “I place blame on you still, place shame on you still.” The repeated chorus,

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<sup>26</sup> Though “u” precedes “i” on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, “i” was released as the album’s first single.

“Loving you is complicated” represents Lamar’s tumultuous relationship with himself. Through his use of the pronoun ‘you’ in place of the expected first person pronoun, Lamar denies his autobiographical impulse and silences his subjective telling. He seeks to distance himself from the self he berates. He believes he “shoulda killed yo’ ass a long time ago,” with a phrasing that differentiates between speaker and addressee. However, through his alcohol abuse, he seeks to eradicate the speaking ‘I’ in addition to the berated ‘you.’ He admits, “I’m fucked up, but I’m not as fucked up as you.” With his vocals, Lamar dramatizes the drinking problem he alludes to on “Swimming Pools (Drank).” His excessive drinking is a form of self-abuse that is symptomatic of his self-loathing. In the song’s final line, he implicitly acknowledges that you and I are one and the same. No matter how much recognition he receives, “[M]oney can’t stop a suicidal weakness.” In his desire to kill ‘you,’ Lamar reveals his own suicidal thoughts.

Lamar’s choked delivery in the first half of the song is in keeping with its dark jazz accompaniment. Both his vocals and the instruments that back them are marked by dissonance; the chords “cascade around and through an ever-elusive tonal cent[re]” (Peretz). In the second half of “u,” Lamar is at his most desperate, overcome by self-loathing and thoughts of suicide. He articulates his desperation through sobs and chugs of alcohol. His imprecise delivery and rhythmic discord are auditory representations of his alcohol abuse. However, the sound of a tenor saxophone is at odds with Lamar’s lyrics and delivery. Kamasi Washington’s saxophone makes an almost comical romp through chords, punctuated with short bursts. In contrast with Lamar’s sustained criticism and harsh delivery, Washington moves indolently through sequences of major chords. He plays with a calculated irregularity; the saxophone’s play mocks the imprecise voice of Lamar’s depression. The contrast between Lamar’s delivery and its musical accompaniment is itself an abuse, denying Lamar the full descent into his self-loathing that in his drunken misery

he desires. Washington's saxophone continues its play as "u" transitions into the up-tempo of "Alright."

In his *Rolling Stone* interview, Lamar says "u" represents "[a]ll my insecurities and selfishness and letdowns" (qtd. in Eels 44). In the song, he condemns himself for the fact that money has "made you more complacent" with the evils of society. Though he no longer commits the crimes of his adolescence, he believes he is guilty for witnessing his community's ills without initiating the positive change he speaks of on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. Instead, he accuses himself of selfishly focusing on "the road, bottles and bitches." He no longer believes that he can make himself and his society better, so he contemplates suicide. Lamar's suicidal thoughts are akin to his desire to numb his pain on "A.D.H.D."; his self-loathing is so great, he believes only self-harm can ease his pain. In both instances, his desire to self-harm is indicative of his nihilistic belief that his situation cannot improve. Lamar's nihilistic attitude is in accordance with West's definition of the word: "Nihilism is... the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness" (West 14). Lovelessness refers to a lack of love within communities, as well as a lack of self-love. Lamar's lack of self-love is the basis for his nihilistic despair. Unloving communities are indicative of "[t]he denigration of love in black experience across classes [which] has become the breeding ground for nihilism, for despair" (hooks, *Salvation* xxiii). In communities devastated by pervasive crime and violence, love is disparaged as a sentimental notion because social bonds have been fragmented by violence and incarceration. As a result of fragmented social bonds, individuals feel alienated from their communities where once they would have felt connection based on love. Lamar's representation of self-loathing on "u" is as indicative of his own depression as it is of lovelessness within underprivileged communities at large.

On “Alright,” Lamar attempts to work past his self-doubt to assure himself that he and his community will be alright. Though the song’s tempo and refrain suggest that Lamar overcomes his depression, he does so by denying his problems rather than confronting them: “My knees getting’ weak and my gun might blow / But we gon’ be alright.” He has not overcome his suicidal despair or the murderous rage he alludes to on “Institutionalized.” That his gun might blow suggests that he is no longer in control of his own violence; the gun is the sentence subject and inflicting agent. Lamar takes Vicodin to ease his pain on “A.D.H.D.,” but he realizes “[p]ainkillers only put me in a twilight,” which dulls his pain temporarily (“Alright”). Drug abuse suspends one in twilight, a metaphor for the space between life, day, and death, night. Though he no longer turns to painkillers, Lamar denies his problems in an attempt to numb his pain rather than work through it. He admits to “lookin’ at the world like, ‘Where do we go, nigga?’” His uncertainty represents an underlying hopelessness, which is as indicative of nihilism as the despair he describes on “u.” In the outro, he reprises the chorus of “u”: “Lovin’ me is complicated.” Through he tries to make himself feel alright, his ambivalent words of reassurance echo with the self-loathing of the previous song.

In the second verse of “Alright,” Lamar repeats Uncle Sam’s offers of material wealth on “Wesley’s Theory” with one variation: he names Lucy as the speaker. Formerly, the character that offers Lamar wealth is Uncle Sam qua record executive. Though the record executive uses language to manipulate the unwitting rapper he addresses, his self-naming as Uncle Sam dispels the sense that there are sinister forces at work. The presence of Uncle Sam connotes that using money to manipulate is customary in an American culture that prizes commodities. The presence of Lucy, unintroduced, obscures the connotation of the offer. In the subsequent lines in his oral poem, Lamar makes the nature of her offer explicit: “the evils of Lucy was all around me / So I



went runnin' for answers." In spite of her offer of forty acres and a mule, Lucy's intention is not to empower Lamar through affirmative action; her intention is to control him with fake friendship and Faustian promises of wealth.

Doo-wop vocals open "For Sale? (Interlude)." "For Sale?" is paired with the album's other interlude, "For Free?" Gone, however, is Lamar's self-assured, emphatic delivery. Instead, "For Sale?" is made up of melodic choruses, distorted vocals and Lamar's woozy delivery. The first spoken lines of "For Sale?" warn Lamar of the power of the feminized Lucifer over a hypnotic melody, with smooth, manipulated vocals. The seductive sounds are at odds with the sinister words: "They say if you scared, go to church / But remember / He knows the Bible too." In spite of the belief he articulates in "Alright," "[I]f God got us then we gon' be alright," the voice implies that his blind faith will be used to harm him. The Devil will come after him even though "Lucy know you love your father." The exaggerated, melodic delivery on the refrain, "I want you," and SZA<sup>27</sup>'s controlled line, "I want you more than you know" are at odds with Lamar's inconsistent delivery and high pitch as he dramatizes his conversation with Lucy. While Lamar's rising intonation at the end of the refrain "This dick ain't free" attests to his vocal control, his rising intonation on the long /e/ sounds of *baby*<sup>28</sup> and *crazy*<sup>29</sup> emphasize his lack of situational control against the evils of Lucy. By contrast, he represents Lucy's voice with an even, lisping patter. On "For Free?" Lamar is critical of those who are driven by wealth; on "For Sale?" he is seduced by the Faustian bargain that would force him to sacrifice his artistic freedom and integrity for fame and fortune. As Lucy's patter unfolds, Lamar is enveloped by seductive voice of the Devil incarnate. Only the final verse line rings with an undistorted voice:

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<sup>27</sup> SZA is the pseudonym of Lamar's Top Dawg Entertainment labelmate Solana Rowe.

<sup>28</sup> "I remember you took me to the mall last week, baby."

<sup>29</sup> "I said, 'You crazy?'"

“And now you all grown up, then sign this contract if that’s possible.” Lamar’s vocal representation of Lucy shifts. Lucifer no longer speaks with a seductive female voice. He is in complete control of the situation and has Lamar poised before his trap. Thus, he no longer needs his feminized disguise. He reveals his true form and asks Lamar to sell himself in a deal with the Devil.

Following his encounter with Lucy, Lamar “went running for answers / Until I came home.” In the first three verses of “Momma,” Lamar thematizes his returns home. Home is his familial home in Compton, his ancestral home in Africa and his pre-fame self, in which Lamar is most mentally at home. Similarly, ‘momma’ refers to both his biological mother and his ancestral mother. Through his exploration of differing concepts of home, Lamar implicitly describes his experience of fame, which Robert Christgau describes as an experience “too obvious to go on about, not to mention enjoy.” His experience of fame is one of disconnection. In spite of his adolescent desire to make it out of Compton, the further Lamar moves from his home, the more disconnected he becomes from his true self. Lamar refers to his early, pre-fame years with Top Dawg Entertainment, when there were “[t]en of us with no tentative tactic that cracked.” Lamar reflects upon the days before he and his cohort had broken into the mainstream music industry, before he became the “master that mastered it.” Through his continued work with the Compton-based TDE production team, he returns to his musical origins each time he makes new music, as well to his physical place of origin. However, the success he achieves distances him from his pre-fame self. He indulges in his success with the clichéd images of “cars, clothes, hoes and money,” because he believes he is “[w]innin’ in every decision.” His pride increases to the extent that he believes, “I know everything, I know myself / I know morality, spirituality, good and bad health.” In a display of hubris, he lists all that he knows, each time

insisting, “I know everything.” Lamar’s insistence that he knows morality and spirituality relates to his renewed baptismal promise at the end of “I’m Dying of Thirst,” and the uncritical success story that follows it on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. Despite the trajectory of the album’s concluding narrative, Lamar’s success story is fraught with self-doubt and compromises of his integrity and new faith. At the close of the verse on “Momma,” he articulates the same uncertainty he felt on “u”: “I realized I didn’t know shit / The day I came home.” In spite of the musical success he has achieved, he has come no closer to self-actualization; he no longer knows himself. This realization forces Lamar to return to his pre-fame self-awareness, to rectify his displaced selfhood.

In the third verse of “Momma,” Lamar describes his travel to his ancestral country, South Africa,<sup>30</sup> where he meets a boy who reminds Lamar of himself as a youth. Through the boy’s voice – and in a play on his *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* hit “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe” – Lamar implicitly addresses his denial of his society’s problems and their origins on “Alright.” The boy attempts to teach Lamar of their shared ancestry but he stops himself and mockingly says, “Oh I forgot, ‘Don’t kill my vibe,’ that’s right you’re famous.” Lamar’s success is “a privilege that’s also a temptation” because it distances him from his past struggles, for better and for worse (Christgau). His hubris in success has distanced him from his past in Compton, as well as from his historical past in Africa. He has moved beyond the criminal mindset of Compton, but he has lost the critical focus that his past hardships provided. The boy reminds Lamar of the need to reconnect with his past in order to understand his relationship to his society in the present:

It’s just a new trip, take a glimpse of your family’s ancestor

Make a new list, of everything you thought was progress

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<sup>30</sup> Though Lamar does not explicitly refer to South Africa in “Momma,” much of *To Pimp a Butterfly* is based on a 2014 trip Lamar made to South Africa (Eells 45).

And that was bullshit, I mean your life is full of turmoil

You spoiled by fantasies of who you are

Lamar no longer criticizes Compton's social ills because he has mentally and physically distanced himself from the community. Instead, he looks upon his society with the complacency he berates himself for on "u." Rather than confront his mounting uncertainty and the toll his success has taken on his sense of self, Lamar tries to indulge in the fantasy that his identity is consistent with the braggadocious persona he adopts on "Compton" and "The Recipe." The boy says what Lamar is unwilling to admit: his life and success are full of turmoil. To better understand himself and his story, he must look back at his ancestral history and confront the pain and terror he tries to ignore, of slavery in America, and colonialism and apartheid in South Africa.

As a result of the enlightenment Lamar gains from the boy, his uncertainty reaches a point of crisis. Following the last line of his regular delivery, the melody shifts and the rhythm accelerates. Lamar "pushes ahead of the beat on the double-timed fourth verse... [and] increases the tension surrounding his confusion about women, money and mankind" (Peretz). His frantic flow is indicative of his mounting anxiety. He does not name his verse's addressee. Instead, he addresses it in the second person: "I been lookin' for you my whole life, an appetite / For the feeling I can barely describe, where you reside? / Is it in a woman, is it in money or mankind?" Lamar's pronouns shift from you to it. His use of the third person singular, as opposed to the second person supplication he initially makes, suggests that he addresses an abstract concept – of personal fulfillment or of the meaning of life. He wonders if he can find fulfillment in the trappings of success, or if the meaning of life can be found in his relationship to mankind. His language is reminiscent of the questions he asks and the abstract concept he addresses on "Kush

& Corinthians.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Lamar’s use of the second person to address himself on “u” suggests that he seeks self-knowledge to rectify his fractured sense of self. He is unable to reconceptualize his identity in light of the wisdom the boy in South Africa imparts about their shared ancestry. The absence of a clear sense of identity has “got me losing my mind / You make me want to jump.” In the same way that his relationship to himself brings him to the brink of suicide on “u,” his uncertainty on “Kush & Corinthians”<sup>32</sup> and on “Momma” makes him want to jump off the edge. A baritone voice whispers, “Let’s talk about love,” in a creeping reminder of Lamar’s conflicted, complicated practice of self-love. In the second iteration of the verse, Lamar’s anxiety reaches its highest pitch as he is overcome by self-doubt and self-loathing. His addressee shifts from an abstract concept of fulfillment or meaning to the Devil inside his society’s evils: “I thought I found you back in the ghetto / When I was seventeen with the .38 special.” He sees the workings of the Devil in the violence of the ghetto, as well as in his own violent retaliations. In the song’s final verses, he articulates the uncertainties he expressed on his previous songs, as he wonders if in money he will find fulfillment or evil. Regardless of what he finds when he interrogates his relationship to society, he admits, “I’m suicidal anyway.” His voice breaks and fades away until the narrative voice is extinguished.

Lamar’s frantic, high-pitched voice gives way to the plodding rhythm of the introductory skit for “Hood Politics.” In part, “Hood Politics” is a boast about Lamar’s skills as a rapper, in opposition to his friends’ criticism that he makes “weirdo rap shit” now that he moves away from the gangsta rap subject matter that makes up *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*. Lamar insists he has been

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<sup>31</sup> On “Kush & Corinthians” he asks, “To the meaning of life, what’s my purpose?”

<sup>32</sup> “I’m right on the edge of Everest and I might jump tonight.”

“A-1 since day one,” and calls out his peers for their inauthenticity by calling them ‘boo boo,’ the hood slang for shit. In an auditory representation of his superiority, “he leans farther and farther back behind the beat with each ‘boo boo,’ [in] a confidence bordering on bravado” (Peretz). Despite Lamar’s bravado, he insists “Hood Politics” is not a diss track. He does not care to start conflicts within the hip hop community because “I don’t give a fuck about no politics in rap.” He realizes that the only things rap conflicts bring about are violence and pain; retaliation cannot bring back “the dead homies.” He suggests that he and his peers should pay tribute to their dead friends through music rather than through retributory violence. Though he calls his peer on their inauthenticity, he does so in the hope that they can unify against a greater evil: the evil of corrupt law enforcement.

Lamar returns to the issue of police brutality in African-American communities that he refers to on “Good Kid.” In his *Rolling Stone* interview, he describes his own experiences of police brutality, which occurred with frustrating frequency in this youth: “To be someone with a good heart, and to still be harassed as a kid, it took a toll on me. Soon you’re just saying, ‘Fuck everything’” (qtd. in Eells 44). Lamar’s nihilistic response to police brutality is indicative of pervasive fear and frustration in African-American communities where the police are better known for their infliction of injustice than their enforcement of justice. Mills writes, “To understand the bloody history of police brutality against blacks in the United States... one has to recognize it is not as excesses by individual racists but as an organic part of this political enterprise” (84). Police brutality is indicative of racism that underlies American political policies. When discriminatory practices such as racial profiling go unchallenged, the racism that underlies them becomes institutionalized. Lamar and his peers face “a new gang in town... DemoCrips and ReBloodicans.” With his portmanteaus of Democrat and Crip, Republican and

Blood, Lamar alludes to the same idea he implicitly suggests on “Good Kid”: racist political practices are as harmful to black communities as gang violence. Racist political practice perpetuates the cycle of poverty by denying youth opportunities for positive development on the pretense that all youth are gang members and drug dealers. The denial of opportunities to underprivileged youth has forced many to turn to crime, such as drug dealing and violence, as a means to financially support themselves in the absence of legitimate means by which to do so (Kelley 118). Accordingly, gang violence is a symptom of discriminatory public policies. When hip hop artists start conflicts amongst themselves, their “priorities are fucked up, [they] put energy in wrong shit.” Rather than fight against each other, Lamar and his peers must unite against discriminatory practices and fight against institutionalized racism.

On “How Much a Dollar Cost,” Lamar continues the story of his travel through South Africa with a dialogue-based narrative and an ambivalent self-criticism. In the song, Lamar measures his worth based on the value of his possessions. He feels as “big as Mutombo<sup>33</sup>” because he can afford to drive a luxury car. When a beggar outside of a gas station asks him for ten rand, he refuses, judging him as a crack addict. Lamar’s judgment is indicative of a superiority complex, which masks his growing sense of insecurity. Though he figures himself as a powerful man, his conception of his self-worth is unstable because it is based on impermanent material wealth. The beggar insists he is not a drug addict because “temptation is one thing that I’ve defeated.” Unlike Lamar, who is tempted by the wealth and fame Lucy offers him on “For Sale? (Interlude),” the man is no longer tempted by material pleasures. The conversation has Lamar “guilt trippin’ and feelin’ resentment.” His guilt is indicative of his realization that his greed is immoral. Rather than act upon his realization to make change within himself, he directs

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<sup>33</sup> Dikembe Mutombo is a 7’2 former NBA All-Star from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

his resentment towards the beggar to justify his selfishness. He attempts to appease the guilt he feels for denying the beggar a dollar by accusing him of sinful indulgence in drugs and alcohol. However, he realizes, “My selfishness is what got me here, who the fuck I’m kiddin’?” His resentment is the consequence of his own greed and self-loathing. Rather than act upon his burgeoning self-awareness, he tries to distance himself from the man instead of empathizing with him. He denies the man a third time because he believes, “Every nickel is mine’s to keep.” Though Lamar wonders on “Momma” if he can find fulfillment “in a dollar bill,” he realizes he cannot find happiness in money. His wealth breeds selfishness. His recognition of his selfishness results in hatred towards himself and his society.

The narrative of “How Much a Dollar Cost” concludes as an allegory. In response to the song’s main question, the beggar says, “I’ll tell you just how much a dollar cost / The price of having a spot in heaven, embrace your loss, I am God.” Though Lamar insists on “Momma,” “I know the price of life / I know how much it’s worth,” the beggar forces him to reevaluate his judgments and see in others the face of God. In pursuing wealth above all else, he sacrifices his virtue and loses his place in heaven. Ronald Isley<sup>34</sup> plays the role of a sinner who tries to “wash [his] hands” of the problems of others. Isley’s phrasing alludes to the biblical passage in which Pontius Pilate washes his hands before the crucifixion of Jesus to attenuate his guilt (Matthew 27:24). In the same way that Pilate is guilty because he does not stop the injustice of Jesus’ execution, Isley and Lamar are guilty for refusing to alleviate the suffering of those in need. In recognition of his sinfulness, Isley asks for God’s redemption: “Turn this page, help me change, to right my wrongs.” Lamar’s recognition of his sinfulness represents a narrative turning point on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Isley sings, “Shades of grey will never change if I condone.” Lamar cannot

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald Isley is a member of the Isley Brothers. On “M.A.A.D City,” Lamar references their 1983 album *Between the Sheets*: “Obviously the coroner between the sheets like the Isleys.”



change his society while he condones his own sinfulness, whether it is his adolescent criminality or his adult indifference towards those who continue to struggle with oppressive poverty. He cannot change his own life until he accepts responsibility for his fellow human.

In “Complexion (A Zulu Love),” Lamar makes multiple moments in African and African-American history simultaneously present. His engagement with history is in keeping with Baker’s concept of the blue matrix. The blues matrix is “the ‘always already’ of Afro-American culture. It is the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (Baker 4). The blues matrix represents an amalgam of historical events and cultural practices, and the language and musical traditions born out of them. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes that the process of making meaning in African-American culture is based upon “an extraordinarily self-reflexive tradition, a tradition exceptionally conscious of its history and of the simultaneity of its canonical texts, which tend to be taken as verbal models of the Afro-American social condition, to be revised” (xxiv). Events of the past are evoked in related contexts, their significations revised, as a way of making them resonate with meaning in the present. Lamar evokes past events and their surrounding cultural politics as a way of interpreting the present-day issue of colourism in African-American communities. He addresses a history of discrimination shared by Africans and African-Americans, based in Eurocentric colonial practices. Lamar’s engagement relates to the blues matrix because through his music, he reinterprets ancestral experiences of discrimination as a way of understanding the pain caused by racism in the present. He connects his narratives about his experience of discrimination in Compton to his ancestors’ experiences of discrimination as slaves in America and as victims of the structures imposed by European colonization, from apartheid in racially divided South Africa

to political segregation of the indigenous population in Rwanda. In so doing, he remediates the damage racism has inflicted upon African-American perception, starting with colourism.

Colourism is the discriminatory practice in which people with lighter skin are thought to be superior to those with darker skin and are consequently treated more favourably. Lighter skin is thought to be more beautiful because it is closer to white skin, based on the racist belief that white is superior to black. Though colourism can be witnessed in discriminatory practices of white people towards black people, colourism is also prevalent in African-American communities. According to hooks, “Teaching black folks to hate dark skin was one way to ensure that whether white oppressors were present or not, the values of white supremacy would still rule the day” (*Salvation* 59). In African-American communities, colourism is the consequence of internalized racism. The result is an overtly discriminatory belief that people – women, in particular – with dark skin are less attractive, as well as the covertly discriminatory practice of skin preference, in which one prefers lighter skin without openly discriminating against those with darker skin. Lamar attempts to undo the inherited valuation of complexions because he believes, “Complexion don’t mean a thing.” Skin tone is not inherently meaningful. Rather, the meanings associated with differing shades are based on historical practices that demarcated light and dark complexions.

Lamar tacitly addresses the historical contexts on which colourism is based: “I know what the Germans done.” Within the well-known context of the Second World War, ‘Germans’ is a metonym for Nazism, and an allusion to the National Socialist Party’s extermination of European Jews in a genocide that is referred to as the Holocaust. The Nazis justified the extermination of Jews based upon their belief that Jews were culturally inferior, in spite of the cultural practices and national origins the Jews shared with their persecutors. Given the Pan-

African cultural context Lamar evokes in “Complexion (A Zulu Love),” however, he alludes more specifically to the German colonization of Rwanda. During their colonization of Rwanda, the Germans and their colonial successors the Belgians regarded the culturally similar Hutu and Tutsi as distinct races. The colonizers “took the Tutsi’s political dominance – as well as their typically tall, thin stature – as an indication of Tutsi racial superiority” (Appiah and Gates). The preferential treatment of the Tutsi was a source of resentment among the Hutu, who were treated as second-class citizens. Following Rwandan independence, the tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi escalated to the point of civil war in 1990, which culminated in the 1994 massacre of over half a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu. In his allusion to “what the Germans [had] done,” Lamar suggests that the German colonizers are complicit in the Rwandan genocide because they enforced discriminatory policies that were based on racial difference. The ambiguous reference to the Germans imparts the same gravity to the Rwandan genocide as it does to the Holocaust. In the same way that the racial tensions between people of the same nationality were the result of white colonial dominance, so too is the tension caused by colourism the result of an inherited white supremacist mentality.

Lamar also alludes to the origins of colourism in American slavery. He brings slavery into the present because he and his ancestors are always already facing the repercussions of slavery. He represents the experience of living in both the ‘time of slavery’ and the ‘afterlife of slavery’ (Hartman 6, Sharpe 60). The time of slavery is the period in which chattel slavery was legal in America. By addressing the time of slavery, Lamar implicitly addresses the pain and terror experienced by enslaved people, as well as by freed people who were still confronted by a social system that maintained the legal subjection of black people. The afterlife of slavery relates to experiences of discrimination after the abolition of slavery, in the recent past, and in present-

day America. Situating present-day discrimination within the aftermath of slavery is necessary because “[i]n theorizing the black everyday in the wake of the slave ship and the hold, we would recognize their continued existence” (Sharpe 61). The discrimination practiced in the time of slavery continues in experiences of pain and terror caused by racism in the present.

In contrast to his self-representation as a freedman on “For Free? (Interlude),” on *Complexion (A Zulu Love)* Lamar speaks as a slave on a cotton plantation. He says to his lover, “Sneak me through the back window, I’m a good field nigga / I made a flower for you outta cotton just to chill with you.” On plantations, slaves were kept as ‘field Negroes,’ who worked in fields picking cotton, or as ‘house Negroes,’ who attended to the care of the master’s house. Lamar explains how skin colour determined a slave’s role on his eponymous 2009 EP: “The blacker you are, farther you’re from the white man’s home.” Typically, those who had lighter skin were given the role of house Negroes and were accorded preferential treatment, in an early instance of colourism. Consequently, some house Negroes looked with contempt upon the field Negroes, and field Negroes with resentment upon the house Negroes. In refusing to take skin colour into account, Lamar hopes to “[l]et the Willie Lynch theory reversal a million time.” The Willie Lynch theory<sup>35</sup> proposes that slaves can be most effectively managed by the exploitation of differences. In offering preferential treatment to slaves based on differences, slave masters instigated discord among slaves (“The Slave Consultant’s Narrative”). Rather than allow difference to become a source of tension within African-American communities, Lamar revalorizes black people of all skin tones because “Beauty is what you make it”; there is beauty in every complexion. He represents differing skin tones through the similes, “Dark as the

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<sup>35</sup> The Willie Lynch theory is based upon a speech attributed to an American slave owner named William Lynch in 1712. Given inconsistencies within the document, the origins of the speech are likely fictitious. Though the document was likely written in the twentieth century, it is a historically accurate representation of the way difference was exploited by slave masters.

midnight hour or bright as the mornin' sun." The midnight hour represents dark skin, while the morning sun represents light skin. Lamar acknowledges physical difference but concludes that it does not matter: "Give a fuck about your complexion." The rhetorical move is similar to the one he makes on "Fuck Your Ethnicity." In both songs, Lamar suggests that common humanity is more important than physical difference. Common humanity in "Complexion (A Zulu Love)" relates to a history of discrimination shared among African-Americans of all complexions, who are forced to live within the afterlife of slavery. In the context of "Fuck Your Ethnicity," common humanity is represented in the desire of people of all ethnicities to make social change, to eliminate discrimination while acknowledging the pain it has caused African-Americans throughout American history. The final verse of "Complexion (A Zulu Love)" concludes with Rapsody's affirmation: "We all on the same team / Blues and Pirus, no, colours ain't a thing." She plays on the song's focus on colourism and suggests that gang violence is another form of discrimination based on colour. In both instances, common humanity is more important than the skin tone or gang colour.

In the outro for "Complexion (A Zulu Love)," the accompanying music is silenced. Lamar's voice is amplified and echoed. His words forebode what is to come, both in his narrative and in his community: "I don't see Compton, I see something much worse / The land of the landmines, the hell that's on earth." The drone of the instrumental backing "The Black the Berry" commences, followed by the heaviest beat heard on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The droning instrumental on the verses is reminiscent of sirens; the beat keeps time to the sound of Lamar's rage. He murmurs the song's introductory lines so that the only thing that is heard distinctly is the epistrophe, black. Lalah Hathaway, too, sings indistinctly, in a melodic accompaniment to Lamar's words:

Everything black, I don't want black (They want us to bow down)

I want everything black, I ain't need black (Down to our knees)

Some white, some black, I ain't mean black (And pray to a God)

I want everything black (That we don't believe)

Everything black, want all things black

Don't need black, our eyes ain't black

I own black, own everything black

Hathaway's words represent those of Africans enslaved in America and Africans subjugated by European colonizers. They were forced to abandon their ancestral religious and cultural practices, and worship the Christian God of their masters and colonizers. Additionally, her words are those of African-Americans who are forced to submit to the American political enterprise that threatens to destroy them. Black denotes the darkness of Lamar's skin and eyes, as well as the darkness of his thoughts. The contradictory desires he expresses – for everything to be black, for himself to be anything other than black – are indicative of Lamar's conflicted relationship with himself and his people. Lamar's use of the word everything suggests that he wants his environment and the people around him to be black. He wants his environment to reflect the darkness of his thoughts. He wants the people around him to be black so they can share in his conflicted self-perception, his loving and loathing of his own blackness, and know the degradation he and his ancestors have suffered. At the same time, given the pain of racism Lamar and his ancestors have faced, he no longer wants black. He no longer wants to confront the aftermath of slavery and live with the pain and terror of racism. In saying that he owns black, he revises the history of slavery, in which black people were enslaved and owned by white people. He owns his own blackness.

Lamar's inner conflict is a symptom of what W.E.B. Du Bois refers to as double consciousness. Double consciousness is the psychological challenge African-Americans face as they attempt to rectify their African heritage with their Eurocentric upbringings. They are unable to cohere their African and American identities. Consequently, they feel as though they have "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" that are ever in conflict (Du Bois 3). While part of Lamar wants to celebrate his African heritage, another part of him wants to eradicate his blackness entirely to better fit within white American society. This desire is indicative of self-loathing caused by internalized racism. The side of Lamar's consciousness that was produced by a Eurocentric upbringing is indulged when his music is recognized by white America. White America's praise makes him complacent, and distances him from the side of his consciousness that rages over the injustices inflicted upon African-Americans. Following his return to his familial and ancestral homes, Lamar recognizes his double consciousness as a fractured selfhood, prompting an existential crisis. On "The Blacker the Berry," he rages at the pain he and his ancestors have suffered, living in a society that loathes them for their African heritage. Lamar might be called crazy or schizophrenic for his double consciousness but he says in response, "[H]omie, you made me." His double consciousness is produced by an American society that denies him the possibility of being both African and American in anything but name, by denying him the privileges that should be afforded to him as an American, without permitting him the freedom of African cultural practices.

The bridge sets the protest scene of "The Blacker the Berry." "Fire in the street" denotes the ghetto as hell, and connotes a history of African-Americans protesting and rioting against racial injustice. "Burn, baby, burn" was taken as a rally cry in the Watts riots of 1965, in which

African-Americans rioted against the brutality they faced at the hands of the Los Angeles police. Bayard Rustin said of the Watts riots,

While it is true that Negroes in the past have often turned the violence inflicted on them by society in upon themselves... The whole point of the outbreak in Watts was that it marked the first major rebellion of Negroes against their own masochism and was carried on with the express purpose of asserting that they would no longer quietly submit to the deprivation of slum life.

Passively allowing injustices to be inflicted upon one's community is a form of masochism; so too is turning society's contempt inward in self-loathing and hatred for one's people. In the same way that the black community in Watts refused to be placated after decades of police brutality and centuries of discrimination, the rioting Lamar alludes to is indicative of an African-American refusal to allow racial injustices to go unchallenged.

Lamar articulates his rage at America's racism and the ways it has damaged his community in the past and in the present. He sounds his rage with his irregular cadence on the verses. While the 4/4 time is consistent throughout the song, his articulation of the syllables varies with the lines. He articulates the thirteen syllables of "I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015" in four beats. His delivery is the staccato rhythm of angry speech. His delivery of "I'm African-American, I'm African" syncopates the words and the 4/4 beat. The complete phrase uses three beats instead of four. He delivers the eight syllables of "I'm African-American" on two beats and the four syllables of "I'm African" on one beat. The missing fourth beat emphasizes Lamar's self-identification as an African and his distancing from his American identity. His syncopation is indicative of his rage at American injustice. In the face of injustice, "Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action. By demanding that black people repress and annihilate our rage to



assimilate to... white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, white folks urge us to remain complicit with their efforts to colonize, oppress, and exploit” (hooks, *Killing Rage* 16)

The condemnation of riots and protests by mainstream media represent an attempt to silence black voices that speak out against injustice. By silencing those who demand social change, American society attempts to maintain the white supremacy that underlies discriminatory political policies. In “The Blacker the Berry,” Lamar resists the marginalization of black voice; he refuses to silence his rage. The sounds of his criticism are as indicative of his anger as the words he uses to make his criticism. His threat that he “might press the button” has a double meaning. He might pull the trigger of a gun in a killing rage that could be murderous or suicidal. Alternatively, he might press the button of a recording tape so American society can hear his rage and recognize that he will not be placated until his people have the rights and liberties they are owed as American citizens.

Lamar addresses society’s racism in the second person. In so doing, he directs his rage towards his listeners. He says to white America, “You never liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it.” Rather than assimilate into a white American culture that has never accepted him, Lamar denies it entirely, choosing instead to identify as an African. He addresses the evil of white supremacy directly: “You hate me don’t you? / You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture / You’re fucking evil.” Lamar suggests that racism represents an attempt to annihilate African-American culture – and people – altogether, in what amounts to cultural genocide. He refers to racism as a “plot [that] is bigger than me, it’s generational hatred / It’s genocism.” Racism is not an innate part of a society’s culture; instead, hatred is bred and taught in each passing generation. He alludes to a history of racism that has its origins in colonial domination, both in Africa and in America. The alliteration of generational and genocism

emphasizes that discrimination has been maintained for centuries, from the start of slavery in America to the present day. In his use of the word genocism, Lamar alludes to the Rwandan genocide, as he does on “Complexion (A Zulu Love).” He also alludes to cultural genocide, from the time of slavery when Africans were forced to abandon their ancestral traditions and adopt their masters’ and colonizers’ cultural and religious practices, to the present day when African-American culture, fashion and music are appropriated and marketed to white consumers while African-American innovators are condemned for their blackness.

Lamar refers to racism as a “sabotage [of] my community.” The racist social policies Lamar addresses throughout his discography, from the introduction of crack in black communities to thwart the Civil Rights Movement to the denial of affirmative action in underprivileged communities, amount to a sabotage of the efforts black leaders take to develop a more positive community. In a similar way, racism has sabotaged Lamar’s perception of himself; racism has “vandalize[d] [his] perception.” He is treated as if he is less valuable – “irrelevant to society” – and consequently, he doubts his own worth. The result of internalized racism is the self-loathing Lamar is overcome by on “u.” His hatred manifests itself in a murderous rage: “You make me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga.” Having been forced to repress his rage at injustice, his thoughts erupt into violence. Additionally, Lamar alludes to the way that mainstream media portrays African-American youth as violent criminals. Faced with his society’s racism, Lamar becomes the violent criminal white America fears.

Each of Lamar’s verses opens with: “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015.” He does not elaborate on the line within the body of the song. Consequently, the nature of his hypocrisy is enigmatic until the song’s final couplet: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street? / When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me? / Hypocrite!” Lamar refers

to the 2012 fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. Martin's death was the first of many high profile killings of unarmed black men at the hands of white authority in recent years. Following his death were nationwide protests and national debates on racial profiling. Lamar said that when he heard about Martin's death, "It just put a whole new anger inside me. It made me remember how it felt being harassed, my partners being killed" (Lamar qtd. in Eells 45). He then started thinking about his own criminality in his adolescence and "all the wrong I've done" (qtd. in Eells 45). He recognizes the hypocrisy of mourning Martin when his own past actions caused the deaths of young black men in his community. As a result of their anger and despair, Lamar's generation has taken to "hunting / [their] own kind," by killing rival gang members when the only difference between them is the colours they wear ("Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst"). Rather than allow his rage at injustice to escalate to the point that it turns to hatred for himself and his own people, Lamar and his community must unite in love for each other so they can defeat their common enemy: racism. Having confessed his hypocrisy, Lamar achieves catharsis. His aggressive breakbeat fades, and the instrumental drone is replaced by waltz-tempo jazz. Hathaway skats until the song's end.

Lamar's search for a solution to his community's social ills concludes on *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s penultimate track, "i." Lamar suggests a positive alternative to the self-loathing of "u" and the rage of "The Blacker the Berry." On "i," he suggests that the way to stop the destructive force of racism is to enact a love ethic. By loving himself and his people, Lamar asserts the worth of black lives and refuses to internalize racism. On the chorus of "u," Lamar's self-loathing as a consequence of internalized racism is at its most forceful, to the extent that he cannot love himself. He says, 'Loving you' rather than 'Loving myself,' to avoid the implication of self-love that the latter construction suggests. In contrast with the second person pronoun

usage on “u,” on “i” Lamar emphatically says, “I love myself.” The differing pronoun uses are intentional. Lamar admits that the chorus of “i” is “a psychological trick I wanted to play on myself” (Edwards). The chorus is an affirmation and reminder of Lamar’s self-love because he is forced to say, “I love myself” even when his depression is at its worst. By enacting a love ethic, Lamar rectifies his fractured selfhood. Additionally, as Ab-Soul notes in an interview with *Montreality*, to say the words of the chorus is to share in Lamar’s affirmation of love. Through “i” Lamar encourages his audience and his community to love themselves, and enacts the love ethic he speaks of.

With his love ethic on “i,” Lamar promotes positive change within his community starting with the revalorization of individuals. A love ethic is necessary because “[w]ithout love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination” (hooks, *Outlaw Culture* 243). One must first recognize personal worth, then the worth of those in one’s community to resist the hatred and devalorization that underlie racism. Otherwise, one will continue to submit to white supremacist domination based on the internalized belief that blacks are inferior. On “Real,” Lamar realizes that he cannot truly love those around him until he practices self-love. He says he loves his hood and his homies, but “[w]hat’s love got to do with it when I don’t love myself?” (“Real”). Without self-love, the negativity one feels towards oneself will be manifested – however unconsciously – in relationships with others. On the topic of self-love, Lamar concludes, “I can say I’m mad and I hate everything, but nothing really changes until I change myself” (Lamar qtd. in Eells 45). To change the negativity in one’s community, one must first change one’s self-perception.

“i” concludes with a skit in which Lamar directly confronts the negativity within his community and steps into his role as a leader. He attempts to silence an off-stage argument that disrupts his performance of “i.” He addresses the consequences of hatred within his community by asking his friends, “How many niggas we done lost?” to gang violence. Faced with a judicial system that is against them, they cannot waste time falling into a trap of criminality that is set for them in the absence of viable opportunities. Instead, Lamar asks his community to “appreciate the little bit of life we got left” so that little bit of positivity can grow. Of gang violence and intra-community conflicts, Lamar says, “[T]hat shit petty.” Lamar challenges the way his friends and neighbours relate to each other by addressing the word they use to signify their similarity: nigga. Having opened *To Pimp a Butterfly* with a sample of Gardiner’s “Every Nigger is a Star,” Lamar now addresses the meaning of “the infamous, sensitive n-word.” In so doing, he emphasizes the importance of using language intentionally to represent desired change, rather than to maintain a status quo. African-Americans have reclaimed the word ‘nigger’ so it is no longer a racial slur. However, many African-Americans elders – notably, Oprah Winfrey – believe the word still resonates with its racist connotation, in spite of attempts to employ it otherwise. From his friend Dave, whose death Lamar recounts on *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, he realizes that to say ‘Fuck, nigga’ is to invoke its homograph, ‘Fuck niggas.’ The differing interpretations of the word ‘fuck’ suggest that black people can be exploited or dismissed. Additionally, ‘fuck’ implies sex without love, as opposed to the love and intimacy Lamar encourages his audience to seek. Lamar revises the etymology of ‘niggas’ so the word has a connotation that supersedes its origin in slavery: “Well this is my explanation straight from Ethiopia / N-E-G-U-S, definition: royalty, king, royalty / N-E-G-U-S, description: black emperor, king, ruler.” Negus is a homophone for niggas. Through revised etymology, Lamar

makes the words synonymous. Rather than allow the word nigga to carry with it hatred and degradation, Lamar reappropriates the word so it speaks to African-American worth. For Lamar to refer to himself and his people as niggas, then, is to recognize their African ancestry and their excellence. In this way, his language will remind him of a love ethic and of his love for himself.

Lamar articulates his fears and hopes about his role as a leader in the conclusion of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, “Mortal Man.” “Mortal Man” is inspired by his trip to South Africa, during which Lamar went to Robben’s Island to see where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years. He considers his own mission to promote positivity within his community and thinks, “The ghost of Mandela, hope my flows they propel it.” He hopes that through his music, he can promote Mandela’s legacy so he and his audience become an army fighting for racial equality. He asks of his audience, “As I lead this army, make room for mistakes and depression.” Lamar admits that he will make mistakes and will struggle with feeling of self-loathing, but he asks that his army continue to trust in his leadership and his ability to overcome. Through his love ethic, “I freed you from being a slave in your mind, you’re very welcome.” By introducing his audience to the concept of self-love, he frees them from the self-loathing that was ingrained in African-Americans from the time of slavery. In return, Lamar asks his fans for their loyalty. His question of his audience’s loyalty makes up the chorus of “Mortal Man”: “When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?” He asks if his audience will still support him when he is at his worst, and will continue to “see [him] as K. Lamar,” even if there are conspiracies against him that are meant to degrade him in his audience’s eyes, in the way that there have been conspiracies against great African-American leaders and revolutionaries. Lamar invokes the names of leaders who came before him to align his mission with theirs. He speaks to their betrayal by those they led,

and the possibility that his followers might betray him in the same way. His questions of loyalty go unanswered because his future remains unknown.

In addition to asking if his audience will remain loyal to him, Lamar asks if they can enact his teachings on love: “You wanna love like Nelson, you wanna be like Nelson / You wanna walk in his shoes but you peace-making seldom.” He addresses the hypocrisy of those who preach love but continue to harbour resentment towards others. In particular, he addresses the hypocrisy of those who claim to love their community while they participate in violence against competing gangs and those who claim to love all black people when they judge another’s worth based on skin tone. He asks, too, that his audience judge whether the people around them are worthy of their trust and loyalty: “How clutch are the people that say they love you and who pretending?” In order to initiate positive change, one must surround oneself with people who are on a similar mission. Otherwise, those with the potential to lead will be cut down by those who cannot share in their vision.

Following the final iteration of the chorus, Lamar recites the oral poem he develops throughout *To Pimp a Butterfly* in its entirety. The poem is a summation of his thoughts throughout the album. First, he addresses those who achieved fame before him: “I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence.” Rather than use their fame to inspire positive change, the artists Lamar addresses became conflicted, unable to rectify their pre-fame identities with the identities the music industry expected of them. Lamar admits, “Sometimes I did the same.” Though he tried to use his newfound fame to foster positivity, he was stuck in the negative mindset of the ghetto (“Institutionalized”). Consequently, he was “full of resentment / Resentment that turned into a deep depression.” He internalized the negativity he saw in his society and became resentful; his resentment manifested itself in depression and self-loathing

("u"). First in his sinful actions and then in his suicidal thoughts, he recognized "the evils of Lucy" ("For Sale? (Interlude)"). He searched for an answer to his self-loathing, "until I came home." He returned to his familial home, his ancestral home, and to the self in which he is most at home, in an attempt to find lasting fulfillment ("Momma"). He tried to convince himself of his worth but he struggled to do so, faced with society's racism. He escaped the gang wars in Compton, but "while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city, I was entering a new one / A war based on apartheid and discrimination." Lamar, like his ancestors in Africa and America, is in a war against racism ("The Blacker the Berry"). He fights racism by refusing to let it affect his perception of himself and his people. In recompense for hatred that is the consequence of internalized racism, Lamar preaches love ("i"). Rather than inflict pain on his own people, he says, "Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets / If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us." When Lamar and his community unite in love, they will enable hope and stop the destructive force of racism.

Following Lamar's recitation of his "Mortal Man" poem, he refers to the poem as "something you probably could relate to." The second person he addresses is Tupac Shakur, the artist and leader whose mantle Lamar has inherited. Lamar speaks and Shakur responds. Lamar intersperses audio from a 1994 interview of Shakur that was conducted by Mats Nileskär with his own questions and comments, so it sounds like a dialogue between Lamar and Shakur. Lamar uses the voice of the deceased Shakur to invoke his presence on an album that is inspired by their shared mission to fight discrimination. Nileskär said of Lamar use of the interview, "It's like breaking the boundaries of life and death" (qtd. in Rys). The recordings of Shakur's voice allow his ideas to take on an afterlife, with which Lamar directly engages. Lamar reinterprets Shakur's ideas within the context of the discrimination he experiences more than twenty years after



Shakur's interview with Nileskär. Though Shakur is a mortal man whose life on earth has ended, through Lamar's engagement with his ideas, he is made immortal. Having articulated his struggle with fame throughout the album, Lamar asks Shakur how he managed to keep a level of sanity. Shakur responds, "By my faith in God, by my faith in the game, and by my faith in all good things come to those that stay true." Shakur believes that by staying true to himself despite the fame he has achieved, he can promote positivity in his life. In a similar way, Lamar renews his faith in God to overcome his depression and move to a place of positivity. In response to society's negativity, Shakur says, "I like to think that at every opportunity I've ever been threatened with resistance, it's been met with resistance. And not only me, but it goes down my family tree. You know what I'm saying, it's in my veins to fight back." Shakur refers to his own ancestry, as the child of members of the Black Panther Party, which instilled in him an urge to fight back against resistance. He speaks to the need for African-Americans to resist oppression by standing up for their right for political and social equality. In response, Lamar rearticulates the belief he expresses in the "Mortal Man" poem: "We fighting a war." Given the turmoil his generation faces today, Lamar concludes, "[O]nly hope that we kinda have left is music and vibrations, lotta people don't understand how important that is." Lamar asserts the importance of Shakur's mission and his own as an offspring of his creative legacy. Through their music, they confront their society's pervasive social issues in order to challenge them and promote positive change.

In the final verses on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar recites a summative poem describing his outlook on the world for Shakur to hear. In the poem, he unpacks the meaning of 'to pimp a butterfly,' starting with the butterfly's first phase as a caterpillar: "The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it. Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to

protect itself from this mad city.” The caterpillar represents youth who are born in underprivileged communities; the youth who cannot escape from their community’s negativity are metaphorically imprisoned in the ghettos. Like the caterpillar that consumes everything around it, many youth are forced to take what they can to manipulate the negativity of the ghetto to their own benefit or else they will be consumed by it. Within Lamar’s metaphor, “The butterfly represents the talent, thoughtfulness and the beauty within the caterpillar.” The caterpillar is unable to recognize its own potential because he is raised in an environment where he is devalored. Similarly, youth who have been victims of discrimination are unable to recognize their value. The caterpillar is envious of the butterfly and tries “to pimp it to his own benefits.” Those who are unable to conceive of success on their own exploit those who have achieved it. The caterpillar has internalized its environment’s negativity. Negativity becomes “the cocoon which institutionalizes him. He can no longer see past his own thoughts. He’s trapped.” The cocoon is a metaphor for internalized racism, which manifests itself in hatred and self-loathing. Those who are overcome by their own hatred are unable to envision positive change. While the caterpillar is in the cocoon, “certain ideas start to take roots, such as going home and bringing new concepts to this mad city.” The caterpillar begins to recognize its own value, as well as the value of those who are still in the mad city. As a result of the caterpillar’s revalorization of himself and those around him, “Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant.” The caterpillar has metamorphosed into a butterfly and is free to share what he has learned with his community. He has transcended his anger and hatred, “ending the eternal struggle.” In a similar way, those who embrace love instead of hatred are able to move past the limits of their perception to become positive people, effectively ending their struggle against internalized racism. In the closing lines of the poem, Lamar says, “Although the butterfly and the

caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same.” In recognizing his value and his potential to initiate change through love, Lamar is the caterpillar turned butterfly. He completes the poem and asks Shakur for his perspective. He calls out but receives no response. Pac’s name is the last word on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The spirit of Tupac Shakur has departed. Kendrick Lamar must lead in his wake.

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