

ABSTRACT

The Poetics of Disclosure: An Analysis of Kendrick Lamar's Rap Music

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In this thesis I analyze in depth Kendrick Lamar's albums *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and *DAMN*. Through a close reading of these albums, I examine the ways in which Lamar uses his music as a platform for prophetic music making. Lamar's prophetic music making comes to bear three general points, corresponding to each album: first, that vices are inadequate to deal with death-anxieties and it is only Jesus Christ that gives meaning to death and life. Second, that capitalism is a tool of American Anti-Blackness and this relationship is undergirded by satanic forces. Third, that God is both a God of salvation and of damnation, so it is important to relate to God with due humility. Through these three points, I argue that Lamar's prophetic music making can teach us something about the nature of the prophetic, that the prophet is a Divine-World discloser.

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THE POETICS OF DISCLOSURE: AN ANALYSIS OF
KENDRICK LAMAR'S RAP MUSIC

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Dedication	xi
Epigraph	xii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 Rap Music Origins	1
1.2 Compton, California and the Duckworth Family	10
1.3 What Exactly Are We Talking About When We Talk About Hip-Hop: Social Commentary and Representation	15
1.4 Who Exactly Are We Talking With When We Talk About Rap Music, and How Do We Do It	21
1.5 The Argument of this Thesis	27
Chapter Two: Death-Anxiety, Prophetic Music, and Divine Disclosure in Kendrick Lamar’s <i>good kid, m.A.A.d city</i>	28
2.1 Confronting Death-Anxiety in <i>good kid, m.A.A.d city</i>	29
2.1.1 Insufficiency of Wealth in “Money Trees”	32
2.1.2 Insufficiency of Violence and Retaliation in “m.A.A.d city” and “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst)”	34
2.1.3 Insufficiency of Substance Abuse in “good kid” and “Swimming Pools (Drank)”	36

2.1.4 Insufficiency of Promiscuity in “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” and “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst)”	40
2.2.5 Ghettoized Formulae Are Different Than Affluent Formulae	43
2.2 Music’s Religious Value, Black Music, and the Prophetic	48
2.2.1 Music’s Religious Significance	49
2.2.2 James Cone’s The Spirituals and the Blues	54
2.2.3 Prophetic Imagining within Musical Contexts	59
2.3 Lamar’s Prophetic Message in <i>good kid, m.A.A.d city</i>	65
2.3.1 Situatedness in Adolescent Becoming	66
2.3.2 Realness	68
2.3.3 God-as-Black-woman: The Disclosive Event	69
2.3.4 New Understanding of Self-Worth Located in the Self-revelation of God-as-Black-woman	72
2.3.5 Communal Morality, Not Law	73
Conclusion	75
Chapter Three: Kendrick Lamar’s Spiritual-Economic Critique of American Anti-Blackness and the Prophet as Divine-World Discloser in <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i>	
3.1 Kendrick Lamar’s Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness	80
3.1.1 An Initial Analysis of the Poem “To Pimp a Butterfly”	82
3.1.2 Uncle Sam	85

Wesley’s Theory, 86; For Free? (Interlude), 88; King Kunta, 89;
Institutionalized, 90; These Walls, 91; u, 92; Alright, 93

3.1.3 Kendrick Lamar’s Similarity to the Black Radical Tradition:
Economic Focus and the “Revolutionary Consciousness 96
HiiiPoWeR, 101

3.1.4 Lucy 106
Alright, 106; For Sale? (Interlude), 107; Momma, 108;
Hood Politics, 110; How Much a Dollar Cost?, 112

3.1.5 Dis-Unity as Lucy’s Diabolical Work; Divinely Empowered
Unification as Remedy 113
Complexion (A Zulu Love), 114; The Blacker the Berry, 114;
You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said), 116; i, 116; Mortal Man, 117

3.1.6 “Mortal Man” : *To Pimp a Butterfly’s* Eschatological Vision. 118
I : Class, 120; II : Class Distinctions, 121;
III : The Centrality of God and Hustle, 122;
IV : The Necessity for Fighting Back, 122;
V : The Suppression of Black Energy, 123;
VI : The Subsequent Disdain and Coming Revolution, 124;
VII : The Importance of Music to Bring About This Revolution, 124

3.1.7 Tension and Resolution of Kendrick Lamar’s
Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness 125

3.2 Lamar’s Prophetic Message in <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i>	128
3.2.1 Prophetic Work: Identifying and Exposing . . .	129
3.2.2 Creating an Alternative Consciousness in Relation to Reality .	130
3.2.3 Revolution as Second Coming	130
3.2.4 Divine-World Disclosure: God-as-homeless-Black-man . . .	131
3.2.5 Prophetic Work as Subsequent Divine-World Disclosure . . .	132
Conclusion	134
Chapter Four: Wickedness or Weakness: Pride and Humility in <i>DAMN</i> .	137
4.1 The Proudful Prophet: Analysis of the narrative of <i>DAMN</i> .	138
4.1.1 Vocational Crisis: <i>untitled unmastered</i> .	139
<i>untitled 01</i> 08.18.2014., 140;	
<i>untitled 02</i> 06.23.2014 - <i>untitled 08</i> 09.06.2014., 142	
4.1.2 The <i>DAMN</i> . Analysis: BLOOD. - LOYALTY. (feat. Rhianna)	146
BLOOD., 147; DNA., 148; YAH., 151; ELEMENT., 153;	
FEEL., 156; LOYALTY., 157	
A Brief Rest and Reflection	157
4.1.3 The <i>DAMN</i> . Analysis: PRIDE. - LOVE.	158
PRIDE., 158; HUMBLE., 160; LUST., 160; LOVE., 164	
4.1.4 The <i>DAMN</i> . Analysis: XXX. - DUCKWORTH.	165
XXX., 166; FEAR., 169; GOD., 173; DUCKWORTH., 174	
4.1.5 <i>DAMN. COLLECTOR’S EDITION</i> .	178
4.2 Kendrick Lamar’s Prophetic Message in <i>DAMN</i> .	178

4.2.1 Wickedness and Weakness	179
4.2.2 Hatred and the Candyman: Condemnation of American Anti-Blackness	183
Conclusion	186
Chapter Five: Conclusion	189
Bibliography	195

PREFACE

When I entered college in 2017, Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.* had just been released a few months prior. I had never listened to any sort of rap music before (besides the Lecrae features in Family Force Five songs), and never intended to spend any great amount of time listening to it. However, as I began attending parties, and meeting people from outside of the Bible Belt, Kendrick Lamar was everywhere. I remember standing in the corner at a party listening to the lyrics of "DNA.," "HUMBLE.," and "Sing About Me (I'm Dying of Thirst)." I was always amused when that last one played at parties. But after seeing a house of people screaming the lyrics of a rap song, word for word, line by line, I was hooked.

I asked myself, how can it be that Kendrick is so deep and yet so popular? That was one of my first misconceptions that was promptly dispelled. Rap music is not what it is often portrayed as, mind-numbing, degenerate, and a danger to the youth. Granted, rap has its rough parts, but the genre also contains beauty, a deep longing for justice, lamentations about friends and family members dying in the streets, and anger at the racist system that makes that a reality, not to mention a deep commitment to spirituality. A friend of mine, Gunner Pinkerton, was especially excited about *DAMN.*, and made me listen to it countless times my freshman year. Because he would always talk about this, I

began listening to rap music. It was not until I took a course with Dr. Gavin Hopps at St. Andrews that I gained an appreciation for Lamar's theological thought in an academic context. He analyzed "Faith" for the class, and that is when I knew that I could join two interests: popular music and theology. Then, as I approached Dr. Natalie Carnes to be my thesis advisor, she was completely supportive and encouraging of my goal. Likewise, Dr. Jonathan Tran taught a class called Race/Racism/Religion in the Fall of 2020 which was based on his upcoming book *Yellow Christianity*. Much of my third chapter on To Pimp a Butterfly is indebted to the things I learned from that course.

For this project, I limited myself to three main things: taking Lamar at his word, explaining his thought, and drawing conclusions about how we might understand his work theologically. This thesis has given me a deep appreciation for rap music, hip-hop culture, and has assisted my understanding of Black voices and the consuming reality of racism in America. As I mention in the Introduction, I was loathed to fall into the trap of twisting an artist to say exactly what I want. I also wanted to try and bring in the voice of a popular musician into academic discourse, particularly around the prophetic, disclosure, Black Radicalism, and others. I hope to have succeeded in my aims.

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First and foremost, Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.

I would like to thank Kendrick Lamar for his depth, intelligence, honesty, purity of heart, and humility. Your music has changed my life, and the lives of countless others.

I would like to thank Dr. Natalie Carnes for sticking with me when I said that I wanted to write a thesis on rap music, and again for sticking with me as it grew to almost 200 pages. Your guidance, comments, corrections, and candor have made me a better student, theologian, thinker, and person.

I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Tran for admitting me into his Race/Racism/Religion class after it was filled up. You have fundamentally changed the way I see race, racism, and religion. I thank you for being patient with me as you shattered my previous worldview and built it back up from the ashes.

I would like to thank my Thesis defense committee, Dr. Carnes, Dr. Tran, and Dr. Elise Edwards for taking the time to read this thesis and engage with my work. I would like to especially thank Dr. Edwards for your valuable feedback.

I would like to thank Dr. Gavin Hopps for showing me that popular music has religious value. Your Theology and Literature course gave my academic pursuits much needed direction.

I would like to thank Christian Pedigo for that night in Cambridge when we stayed up until the early morning talking about Kendrick and Walter Brueggemann. You have been a constant encouragement and invaluable resource, intellectually, and a great friend.

I would like to thank my friend and roommate Caleb Maness for constantly showing me new rap music and helping me listen through the classic albums for the past two years.

I would like to thank Gunner Pinkerton for forcing me to listen to *DAMN.* and write a two-page analysis. Every time we have a conversation you teach me something new and help me look at things in a new way. You gave me the first exposure to thinking seriously about rap music those few years ago.

I would like to thank my fiancée Elizabeth Dowker for putting up with me talking about Kendrick every day since we met. I know it had to get old at times, but your encouragement and support gave me the energy to complete this project.

To Christian

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me
Malcolm X put a hex on my future someone catch me
I'm falling victim to a revolutionary song

Kendrick Lamar, "HiiiPoWeR"

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In this chapter I will first give a summary of rap music's origins. Second, I will give an introduction of Compton, CA.'s history and the Duckworth family's history. Third, I will explain what we are talking about when we talk about rap and hip hop. I will introduce the culture called hip-hop, and how rap as a lyrical art form has developed. Fourth, I will explain who we are talking with, how we do it, and how we are able to do it with any legitimacy. Finally, I will give an overview of this thesis and explain what I will be arguing, and why.

Rap Music Origins

The genre of rap/hip-hop is incredibly diverse and culturally significant. Rap can be heard around the world in a multitude of languages, but before it became one of the most popular musical genres in the world it had a humble beginning. Rap's contemporary form was born in the Bronx in the mid 1970's. Since then, it has been on a trajectory to take over the musical world. Though modern-day rap emerged in the 1970's, it came from a form of oral poetry from the early 1900's which was called "signifying."¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr. recounts in his foreword to the *Anthology of Rap* that the first person he

¹ Bradley, Adam., Andrew DuBois, Henry Louis Gates, Chuck D., and Common. *The Anthology of Rap*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. xxiv

had heard signify was his father who was born in 1913. Signifying is a term that was coined by Black veterans of World War I. These are “narratives...recited in rhyme [which] told the tale of defiant heroes.”² Gates humorously observes that “they were linguistically articulate, they were funny and spirited, and they were astonishingly profane.”³ Gates informs us that “all of these subgenres [of rap] emerged out of the African American rhetorical practice of signifying.”⁴

Long before artists like Africa Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow, Grandmaster Flash, N.W.A., Slick Rick, Common, Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliot, KRS-One, Lil’ Kim, and the artist of our interest, Kendrick Lamar, these artists’ predecessors “practiced their arts in ritual settings such as the street corner or the barbershop, sometimes engaging in verbal duels with contenders like a linguistic boxing match.”⁵ The ancestral threads which define the art of rapping today can be recognized in signifying. Modern rap duels and free-styling, as well as self-expression, social commentary and expressions of political frustration, and more, all comprised the topical scope of signifying. These oral poetic performances “were, first and foremost, forms of art, and everyone on the street or sitting around the barbershop knew this. Rapping was a performance, rappers were to be judged,

² The Anthology of Rap, xxii

³ *ibid*, xxii

⁴ *ibid*, xxiii, also called “toasts,” “playing the dozens”

⁵ *ibid*, xxiii

and the judges were the people on the corner or in every shop. Everyone...was literate in the fine arts of signification.”⁶

Most everyone was also cognizant of the great tradition of signifiers, a familiarity with previous artists that holds true even today. Gates puts it succinctly, “Rap is...a multifarious, multifaceted tradition imbedded within an African American oral culture that itself shares in the rich history of human expression throughout the ages.”⁷ In the words of Kendrick Lamar speaking in an interview with fellow Compton rap group N.W.A., “anything I do, it comes from what y’all done.”⁸ Rap music often contains “samples,” which are short recordings from previous generations of music that the lyrics are rapped over. (Kanye West is an example of how songs can be built on and rely on samples. Sometimes one can listen to a Kanye song and can’t help but notice that there has not been more than a few seconds without an obscure drum beat or gospel song snippet. Sampling is an art in and of itself.) Additionally, rappers throughout the generations have quoted lines from other rappers from the generation before them. Chuck D recounts in his Afterward for the *Anthology of Rap* how “a range of lyrical influences and interests...helps that art to thrive and come into its own.”⁹ He explains how his song “Rebel Without a Pause” was inspired by Biz Markie, and his flow was a combination of

⁶ The Anthology of Rap, xxiii

⁷ *ibid*, xxv

⁸ David Ritz. “Billboard Cover: Kendrick Lamar Interviews N.W.A. About Coming ‘Straight Outta Compton’ and Changing the World.” *Billboard*, September 13, 2015. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/cover-story/6663160/kendrick-lamar-nwa-interview-straight-outta-compton-movie-eazy-e-legacy>

⁹ The Anthology of Rap, 790

KRS-One and Rakim's. Chuck D writes that "Although the craft is difficult, the options are many and the limits are few. There are many styles to attend to and numerous ways to integrate them into your own art, transforming yourself and those styles along the way."¹⁰ As we will see in the chapters ahead, it is not only these artists mentioned who do this, but Kendrick Lamar, the King of the West Coast, relies heavily on interacting with this tradition, letting it inform him and developing the tradition as he goes along.¹¹

This long and significant tradition of performed oral poetry was mainly confined to the Black community until very recently.¹² It has historically been viewed as the lowest of low art, being popular music that is aggressive, profane, and viewed as morally depraved—not to mention condescension because of its nature as an art form created by Black people in America. Consider this Sir Roger Scruton quote, questioning the moral implications of those who listen to hip-hop: "From the dance of the Israelites around the golden calf, to the orgies of Hip-Hop, the musical distractions of ordinary people have called down the maledictions of their priestly guardians."¹³ Relying on Plato, he writes that "bad character in music encourages bad character in its lovers."¹⁴ This thesis will not be an apologia for why gangsta rap should be played in a mass, however critics of hip-

¹⁰ The Anthology of Rap, 790-791

¹¹ In good kid, m.A.A.d city Lamar raps with MC Eiht and Dr. Dre, in To Pimp a Butterfly Lamar is heavily influenced by jazz and frames a posthumous interview with Tupac, in DAMN., Lamar reverses a plethora of samples ranging from disco to FOX News excerpts.

¹² The Beastie Boys and Eminem are the two most commercially successful white rap/hip-hop groups before the Millennium, and hispanic rappers have had marginal success since the beginning

¹³ From Sir Roger Scruton's website. Untitled entry accessed 29 March 2021. <https://www.roger-scruton.com/about/music/understanding-music/182-music-and-morality>

¹⁴ *ibid*

hop and rap too often dismiss it as base before analyzing the claims and purposes within the music. Even today this broad stroked view is commonly held, although popular opinion of the genre has been shifting for decades and academia has finally only become interested in it in the past ten or so years. With the *Anthology of Rap* being published in 2010, and rap being used in the classroom to help minority children relate to the content discussed so they can understand poetic devices, it seems that the tides are slowly but surely turning.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there is a stark difference between the poetic and cultural value of this music and the way it has been (and still is) received by academics and whites. Much of the poor reception is due to record labels throughout the 70's-90's that would not fund rap groups who did not fit the "gangsta" stereotype.¹⁶ Another reason for this poor reception is that rap music very often exposed the systems of injustice imposed on the Black community by white America. For example, H. Rap Brown's raps inspired many in the Black Power movement,¹⁷ and mostly all rap music has been extremely critical of the government and militant police forces since the late 1960's. As Ice Cube says on *Hip Hop Evolution*, rap artists were "using our voice as a weapon against

¹⁵ See Kelly, Lauren Leigh. *Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom*. As well as Dover, Alison D and Pozdol, Tony. *Teaching Good Kids in a m.A.A.d World: Using Hip-Hop to Reflect, Reframe, and Respond to Complex Realities*. As well as the section "Hip Hop is Education" in the chapter "Rap Poetry 201" in Book of Rhymes where Bradley shares his experience teaching school children in an AP English class with his Anthology of Rap.

¹⁶ See: Nadia Angel. "Nadia Angel Writes About the Commercialization of Rap and How It Has Created Stereotypes Around Hip Hop Artists." rebelessex.com, University of Essex Student Union. Accessed 29 March 2021. Also see: Kyle Coward. "When Hip-Hop First Went Corporate." *The Atlantic*. 21 April 2015. Accessed 29 March 2021. Also see: David Ritz. "Billboard Cover: Kendrick Lamar Interviews N.W.A. About Coming 'Straight Outta Compton' and Changing the World."

¹⁷ The Anthology of Rap, xxiii

oppression.”¹⁸ This history of social commentary is one of rap’s most significant aspects for the discussion at hand. Namely, how this music exposes exploitation and how it is a form of expression for the oppressed Black community.

The *Anthology of Rap* tells us that “*Rap* and *hip-hop* are not synonymous, though they are so closely associated that some use the terms interchangeably.”¹⁹ Rap is the individual art of lyric poetry, whereas hip-hop is “an umbrella term to describe [a] multifaceted culture.”²⁰ The *Anthology of Rap* quotes KRS-One’s song “HipHop Knowledge” as a succinct example: “Rap music is something we do, but hip hop is something we live.”²¹ With that in mind, we can understand how artists from great gangsta rappers like N.W.A. and KRS-One to groovy funk musician Bootsy and the Motown sub-genre can all be labeled as hip-hop music. Indeed, this diverse genre of hip-hop of which rap is a sub-genre “draws not only from the folk idioms of the African diaspora but from the legacy of Western verse and the musical traditions of jazz, blues, funk, gospel, and reggae.”²² Indeed the references go even farther back than that. When Adam Bradley breaks down Kendrick Lamar’s song “FEAR.” from Lamar’s Pulitzer Prize winning album *DAMN.*, he notices how Lamar’s rhyme scheme uses assonance and

¹⁸ Hip Hop Evolution. Directed by Shad. Banger Films, 2016. Season one, episode four. Netflix, 35:40

¹⁹ The Anthology of Rap, xxix

²⁰ *ibid*, xxix

²¹ *ibid*, xxix

²² *ibid*, xxx

anaphora, poetic devices that have been used since antiquity, likely from Lamar's knowledge of Biblical Old Testament poetry.²³

The history of commercialized rap in America has seen the hub of the genre shift from various regions every five to ten years. Normally, there are a handful of rappers from the same city or record label that capture the attention of rap's listeners. Beginning in the South Bronx, New York, rap quickly spread to places like Chicago, L.A., and became an immediate way for disenfranchised and suffering Black communities to express their grief, frustration, skill, and imagination. From its beginning in New York with artists like KRS-One in the 70's, the focus shifted to N.W.A. in L.A. Then, there was the East Coast/West Coast rivalry between Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G. throughout the 80's and 90's (which ended tragically with both rappers being shot to death). After this tragedy, rap significantly changed and lost mainstream relevance. The topics changed from depicting ghetto life and serious social commentary in favor of party songs and rap suited for clubs.²⁴ The genre had to take a break from the serious discussions and blow off some steam. During this time, more artists started coming from Atlanta, Georgia, during the mid to late 90's and early 2000's. These Southern rappers and Puff Daddy from New York (who was a protege of Biggie) took over until the 2010's.

It was not until Kendrick Lamar rose out of Compton in 2012 with *good kid, m.A.A.d city* that rap started to return to its thematic roots of social commentary, self-

²³ Tia Hill, Delisa Shannon, and Adam Bradley. "An English Professor Breaks Down Kendrick Lamar's 'FEAR.'," Genius, January 23, 2020.

reflection and its complicated relationship with religion, as well as its musical roots of the Black musical tradition with influences from jazz, blues, rock and roll, as well as references to the Black musical tradition in samples²⁵ and quotes. Chance the Rapper and Kanye West also come to mind.

Interestingly, some artists also went the other way, into bizarre territory. Primarily due to the music sharing platform Soundcloud and other social media platforms, there was an explosion of amateur rappers around the same time period. From this phenomenon came humorous and satirical rappers like Ugly God (whose music is incredibly profane. One of his more famous songs is about masturbation), Childish Gambino (which is the stage name for Black entertainer Donald Glover),²⁶ Lil' Dicky (a white man from Jewish descent whose name is a play on the "Lil'" prefix, but in his case he is making a joke about his small, white man's penis), and Yung Gravy (a white man whose music relies heavily on references to having sex with middle aged white women). Despite these rappers' divergence from serious subject matter, their lyrical genius cannot be understated. Also due to music sharing platforms and increased investment from the industry, rap has gone global. Rappers from all over the world make music in their native languages. Rap is now made in Spanish, German, Russian, French, Chinese, and others,

²⁵ The earliest form of sampling can be heard in MCs' performances like DJ Hollywood from the late disco era. However, samples were technically used as early as turntables were accessible. MCs would loop parts of songs on vinyl to make beats that people could dance to. This, in turn, made its way into music in the form of a sample.

²⁶ Donald Glover is a standup comic, writer, Emmy awarded director and actor. See his song "This is America" for an example of how he also uses his music for social commentary in addition to his other satirical and comedic enterprises.

in nearly every country. As Adam Bradley says before recounting the day he received a Polish translation of his book *The Anthology of Rap*, “we live on a hip-hop planet.”²⁷

Even though hip hop can at times feel like the air we breathe, it is difficult to do an academic study of it because of the lack of scholarly secondary sources. Thankfully, with Kendrick Lamar’s recent attention (and with hip hop’s growing attention as a whole) there has not been an insurmountable lack of academic sources concerning rap’s cultural and poetic significance. But besides Routledge’s studies of hip hop and religion, which only contains four books in the series, there are not very many titles that apply directly to this intersection of the Black experience, rap, and religion, despite Black music being incredibly important to the way Black individuals express themselves. This is why much of the materials I will be using are going to be the primary source, the scant academic material or academic material that will be fitted to these needs, and, more often than not, popular media. This poses a problem, though only initially. It should be kept in mind that these popular materials, though not written by people with PhD’s, are likely written by people with closer ties to the primary source and so it is of incredible importance to consider the ways in which this music touches them and how they think about it.

Finally, it is important for the reader of this thesis to understand that rap is first and foremost a living art form. That is, it is meant to be experienced fully in the company of other people. This is an art form that is meant to be a performance. While the study of lyrics can be greatly rewarding, and the study of these lyrics are important to understand the deep themes and expressions of lived experiences, there is naturally something lost

²⁷ Bradley, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (Boulder: Basic Books, 2009), xxv.

when the reader cannot hear the voice of the performer, the beat he/she is rapping to, the energy of the crowd and the charisma of a live setting. These are things that a thesis like this cannot replicate, and it is up to the reader of this thesis to return to and listen to these songs and albums after being exposed to the complex themes, images, and contexts of this specific rapper's wordsmithy. It is not enough to understand these ideas. One must live with the music, the often times incredibly vulnerable and moving expressions of an artist from a world that many of us are estranged from.

Compton, California and the Duckworth Family

To understand the social and economic forces that led to Kendrick Lamar's rise, we first need to understand the city he came from. Initially, Compton was an agricultural center, known as "Hub City" because of its placement in the center of Los Angeles County.²⁸ "The territory was settled in 1867 by a band of 30 pioneering families, who were led to the area by Griffith Dickenson Compton. These families had wagon-trained south from Stockton, California in search of ways to earn a living other than in the rapidly depleting gold fields."²⁹ It wasn't until 1868 until these settlers built a schoolhouse, which functioned as a church and a civic center. The town was incorporated in 1888 with a population of 500 people.³⁰

²⁸ "History of the City," City of Compton. <http://www.comptoncity.org/visitors/history.asp>

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

It grew as an agricultural town throughout the first twenty years of the twentieth century. “By the 1920s, the city was booming, with factories sprouting across the city,” though it only had one Black resident by the 1930’s.³¹ This was due to intentional efforts to keep Black people out of white residential neighborhoods. As Josh Sides says in his interview with a local news station, “white[s had] paranoia about that decline [in property value], even when whites did not think of themselves as racists. In fact in L.A., they really distanced themselves from that sort of malicious Southern racism, but, of course, whether they were racists or not was sort of immaterial because they entered into agreements that kept blacks out of their neighborhoods, and they defended those agreements very vehemently.”³²

This was soon to change, and “after restrictive housing covenants [used to restrict the sale of real estate based on race, particularly affecting African Americans in the U.S.] were struck down in the 1940s, demographics in Compton began to move away from being predominantly white.”³³ It was in the 1950’s that Centennial High School was built, the same high school that Kendrick Lamar attended. Although in the 1960’s Compton’s first Black mayor was elected, race relations were tense to say the least. Interestingly, the first gangs in Compton were white gangs, upset over the increase of

³¹ Glen Creason “CityDig: This Map is Straight Outta Compton,” Los Angeles Magazine, August 19, 2015. <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/citydig-this-1926-map-is-straight-outta-compton/>

³² Zach Behrens “Before the 1950’s the Whiteness of Compton was Defended Vehemently,” KCET, January 11, 2011. <https://www.kcet.org/social-focus/before-the-1950s-the-whiteness-of-compton-was-defended-vehemently>

³³ Carson Bear. “Recognizing Compton’s Historic Legacy,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, February 21, 2018. https://savingplaces.org/stories/recognizing-comptons-historic-legacy#.XyNIBS2z0_U

minorities moving to the city. The most famous white gang was called the Spook Hunters, and they terrorized the Black and Hispanic community in Compton and surrounding areas.

Until the mid 1960's, there was still a large number of white residents in Compton. "By 1965, the African American population had reached 40%, but it wasn't until the Watts riots [a historic rebellion in response to police brutality in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles] that white residents started to leave Compton in droves. And when they left, they took their tax base and businesses, and that left Compton with a large income gap."³⁴ While Camille Elston, a resident of Compton a few years younger than Kendrick Lamar, says in an interview that she had "never felt unsafe in the city," and that "the city didn't have a reputation for being dark and dangerous until groups like N.W.A. created a lot of negative media attention," this is not the picture that the artists coming from Compton paint, though experiences can differ greatly among people.³⁵ For example, it is "infamous as the birthplace of gangsta rap and the backdrop of the rivalry between the Crips and the Bloods" in the nineteen eighties.³⁶ Indeed, Compton, and more so Los Angeles, was war torn for a period of eight years leading up to the 1992 peace treaty signed by the Crips and Bloods.³⁷

³⁴ Carson Bear. "Recognizing Compton's Historic Legacy"

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Glen Creason, "CityDig"

³⁷ "Truce That Ended 30 Years of LA Warfare," BBC News, April 15, 2015.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-32250743>

The Crips had their beginning in 1969, founded by Raymond Washington. It is an acronym, standing for ‘Community Resources for Independent People’³⁸ or “Community Revolution in Progress.”³⁹ This type of organization, along with the Black Panthers, was fairly common within Black communities at this time in America when the Black community needed protection from a racist police force and lack of public assistance. Though these types of organizations began with the intention to help the community, they quickly devolved into violent, tribalistic, and terrorizing criminal organizations because of predatory police practices. With government intervention and shady dealings, many Black community leaders were imprisoned, murdered, or vanished along with an inordinate number of Black men. It is ironic that conservative pundits blame liberals for the moral breakdown of the Black family when it was racist politics that weaponized the prison system to destroy Black communities. The following poverty of the Black community situated in ghettos in southern California lended itself to forms of escapism via a cheap drug, secretly peddled by the American government, crack cocaine. With Black men in jail, community leaders out of the picture, and drugs introduced to numb the pain, the gangs which previously provided a protective service quickly turned askew.

Crips are known for targeting at-risk youth, beating them until they join the gang. It is believed that a crew of Crips rolled into Centennial High in 1971 and targeted a

³⁸ Gary Brown, “Los Angeles Gangs: The Bloods and the Crips,” Socialist Alternative. <https://www.socialistalternative.org/panther-black-rebellion/los-angeles-gangs-bloods-crips/>

³⁹ Celeste Freon, “Behind the Crips Mythos,” The Los Angeles Times, November 20, 2007. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-nov-20-et-book20-story.html>
Though, there is a multitude of myths surrounding the name and origin of the gang.

group of sixteen high school boys. But, as the narrative goes, these boys had strong family groups that supported them. This caused the community to band together and create their own defense network, taking the name of ‘Piru’ after the name of the street that many of the founders and their fathers lived on. Then, as the story goes, the boys’ fathers trained them in the art of war (many of them being WWII veterans) and they protected their community. As a Piru-sympathetic online website says, “this wasn’t a gang. It was a counter-movement aimed at survival.”⁴⁰ As news spread of a small band of fathers and sons fending off a nationwide gang, cities all over California and the United States ravished by the Crips began to rise up in opposition to survive, creating the ‘Blood’ affiliation. However, this survival meant all-out war between the Bloods and the Crips.

It was not until April 28, 1992 that there was a peace agreement signed between the Bloods and Crips in Los Angeles and the surrounding towns. It is important to note that this was the day before the L.A. Riots. As MC Eiht says on the Netflix Docuseries Hip Hop Evolution, “it was a war zone even for the innocent. You don’t know who’s finna shoot, you don’t know where the shots are coming from. It’s a blessing just to make it back home.”⁴¹ With the growing chaos of Compton and L.A., the music changed from party music to gangsta rap. Kid Frost said in the same docuseries, “the streets weren’t free no more, the music wasn’t so happy no more.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Michael Douglas Carlin, “Piru Origins, Precursor to the Bloods,” Century City News, November 6, 2019. <https://centurycity.news/piru-origins-precursor-to-the-bloods-p1557-176.htm>

⁴¹ Hip Hop Evolution, S1E4

⁴² *ibid*

Kenny and Paula Duckworth “moved to Compton from Chicago in 1984 to escape Mr. Duckworth’s involvement in the Southside Gangster Disciples,” an affiliate of Folk Nation.⁴³ It is an interesting coincidence that both the Folk Nation and the Black Hebrew Israelites, which Lamar will mention in *DAMN.*, identify with the image of the star of David. According to Cole Cushna, “with \$500 in their pockets they stuffed their belongings into two black garbage bags and boarded the train to California. The two slept in cars motels and park benches until they had enough money to afford an apartment, at which point they had Kendrick the oldest of four children. Supplemented on welfare and food stamps Paula cut hair and Kenny worked at KFC when he wasn’t in the streets.”⁴⁴ This origin story will be told on the last track of the album *DAMN.* This is the setting where Kendrick Lamar saw Tupac filming the music video for “California Love” when he was a young boy, and that was his first glimpse of his future.

*What Exactly Are We Talking About When We Talk About Hip-Hop:
Social Commentary and Representation*

Tricia Rose is the author of *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* and *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters*. These books, written in the early 1990’s and late 2000’s, respectively, are incredible resources for the cultural study of hip-hop. Her first book, *Black Noise*, “is a scholarly book that explored the cultural and political origins of

⁴³ Cole Cushna, Dissect season one episode one. Spotify Studios, podcast audio. April 30, 2018.

⁴⁴ *ibid*

rap music and hip-hop culture.”⁴⁵ Written before a marked shift in the themes and images of rap music, she studied and analyzed “the value and importance of hip hop and emphasized the possibilities [she] felt the music and culture represented.”⁴⁶ Having grown up in the Bronx in the 1970’s, Rose is a fan of hip-hop and much of her academic work revolves around hip-hop.

In her second book, Rose exposes the forces that make discussions about hip-hop almost impossible in contemporary dialogues. She outlines in *The Hip Hop Wars* two opposing camps: the first, those who are uncritically critical of hip hop, the second, those who are uncritically supportive of hip-hop. With these mutually opposed camps, “the quality of the public conversation [about rap and hip hop] has contracted “to an almost asinine back and forth between people who cannot engage the real problematic areas of hip hop and the wider culture that created it.”⁴⁷ Rose identifies a few major problematic areas that she argues plagues hip hop. She identifies how “the most commercially promoted and financially successful hip-hop...has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangstas, pimps, and hoes. Hyper-sexism has increased dramatically, and homophobia along with distorted, antisocial, self-destructive, and violent portrayals of black masculinity have become rap’s calling cards....[attaining mainstream success by] pandering to America’s racist and sexist lowest common denominator.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars : What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), ix.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, ix

⁴⁷ *ibid*, x

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 1-2

This shift is in contrast with the rich heritage of rap music and hip hop culture that preceded the rise of gangsta caricatures in the mainstream. “In the 1980’s, when rap’s commercial value began to develop steam, gangsta rappers were only part of a much larger iconic tapestry.”⁴⁹ There were many subgenres, “gangsta as well as party, political, afrocentric, and avant-garde, each with multiple sub styles as well.”⁵⁰ Then, corporate labels came onto the scene and things fell apart.

Not only were many styles of rap driven out of the corporate promoted mainstream, but since the middle to late 1990’s, most of the social, artistic, and political significance of figures like the gangsta and street hustler substantially devolved into apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes. Indeed, by the late 1990’s, most of the affirming, creative stories and characters that had stood at the defining core of hip hop had been gutted.⁵¹

Rose notes how corporate involvement in the production of rap music did not create the character of a gangsta or hustler because they were already part of the culture. However, the way these characters were organically expressed was more nuanced and culturally complex. For example, “Some early West Coast gangsta rappers—N.W.A., and W.C. and the Maad Circle, for example—featured stories that emphasized being trapped by gang life and spoke about why street crime had become a ‘line of work’ in the context of chronic black joblessness. Thwarted desires for safe communities and meaningful work were often embedded in street hustling tales.”⁵² But by the late 1990’s, this complex and nuanced presentation of Black life didn’t get the industry dollars. Thus, the gangsta,

⁴⁹ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 2

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 2

⁵¹ *ibid*, 2

⁵² *ibid*, 2

hustler, and the hoe were the only images of Black life that were displayed in mainstream rap. It was this one-dimensional presentation of Black identity which was, and is, marketed to an ever-growing white audience.⁵³ Rose notes, “hip hop has become a breeding ground for the most explicitly exploitative and increasingly one-dimensional narratives of black ghetto life. The gangsta life and all its attendant violence, criminality, sexual ‘deviance,’ and misogyny have...stood at the heart of what appeared to be ever-increasing hip hop record sales.”⁵⁴

The first camp, those who are critical of rap music and hip-hop culture, use this simplification to argue for greater monitoring and silencing of Black artists. This was most obviously seen in the court case *Skywalker Records v. Navarro (1990)* where rap music received opposition for the explicit nature of its lyrics.⁵⁵ Sheriff Nick Navarro was the most obvious racist manifestation of this, seeking to suppress Black voices and expression by targeting their music. One of the most recent claims by those in this camp was when FOX News hosts criticized rap music for being more destructive than racism to

⁵³ John Gill notes this in his research on underground rap. See: Gill, Jon Ivan. “The World Creates God: A Process Aesthetic Religion as Lived Out by Underground Rap Culture”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2016. However, I think that he over-idealizes the underground and falls into the second camp that Rose finds problem with.

⁵⁴ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 3

⁵⁵ Sheriff Navarro brought charges against the group 2 Live Crew, officially, for their obscene lyrics, but with the intent to harass and suppress the Black community in Miami. “A federal district court judge declared the artists' record *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* obscene in *Skywalker Records v. Navarro (1990)*, applying the Miller Test from the U.S. Supreme Court's decision *Miller v. California (1973)*. However, the plaintiffs appealed to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which reversed in *Luke Records v. Navarro (1992)*. The appeals court explained that the plaintiffs had submitted expert testimony that the album contained serious artistic value – a contention not refuted by the sheriff by any expert testimony or other evidence other than a tape recording of the album.” From: David L. Hudson Jr., “Rap Music and the First Amendment,” *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, 2009. <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1582/rap-music-and-the-first-amendment>

today's Black youth.⁵⁶ We see that Rose could be onto something when she writes, “[the] conversation [about hip hop] has never been *just* about hip hop.”⁵⁷ She writes, “the increased profitability of the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity has enflamed already riled critics who perceive hip hop as the cause of many social ills.”⁵⁸ This is an ironic position, considering

its refusal to consider the culpability of the larger social and political context. To many hot-headed critics of hip hop, structural forms of deep racism, corporate influence, and the long-term effects of economic, social, and political disempowerment are not meaningfully related to rappers' alienated, angry stories about life in the ghetto; rather, they are seen as ‘proof’ that black behavior creates ghetto conditions.⁵⁹

Rose writes sardonically, “As hip hop’s conservative critics would have it, hip hop is primarily responsible for every decline and crisis world-wide except the war in Iraq and global warming.”⁶⁰

The second camp, those who deflect criticism about problematic representations of Black life and identity onto the underground and marginal artists, claim that rap and hip hop does not have a problem. When hip hop is criticized for presenting women in an offensive manner, they point to female rappers and socially conscious male rappers as proof that hip hop and rap is not misogynistic—despite the fact that they are likely one of only a few thousand people who have heard of the artists they reference. The existence of

⁵⁶ This statement will be challenged by Kendrick Lamar in *DAMN*.

⁵⁷ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 4-5

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 5

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 5

⁶⁰ *ibid*, 6

a handful of good rappers in the underground does not mean that there is not a serious problem in the rap industry. Rose recounts another response from this camp, “the most aggravating defense of commercial hip hop’s fixation on demeaning Black women for sport— ‘well, there *are* bitches and hoes.’”⁶¹ She asks, “what do fans, artists, and writers mean when they defend an escalating, highly visible, and extensive form of misogyny against black women by claiming that there are bitches and hoes? And how have they gotten away with this level of hateful labeling of black women for so long?”⁶² The profitability of hip hop “has encouraged embattled defenders to tout hip hop’s organic connection to black youth and to venerate its market successes as examples of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.”⁶³ And listeners who take these lyrics uncritically believe that “all expression in commercialized hip hop, despite its heavy manipulation by the record industry, is the unadulterated truth and literal personal experience of fill-in-the-black rapper; it reflects reality in the ghetto; its lyrics *are the result of poverty itself*.”⁶⁴

While both camps have evidence to back their statements up, just like the news becoming ever one-sided on either end of the political spectrum, they make conversation between the two impossible. “The hyperbolic and polarized public conversation about hip hop that has emerged over the past decade discourages progressive and nuanced consumption, participation, and critique, thereby contributing to the very crisis that is

⁶¹ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 6

⁶² *ibid*, 6

⁶³ *ibid*, 5

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 6

facing hip hop. Even more important, this conversation has become a powerful vehicle for the channeling of broader public discussion about race, class, and the value of black culture's role in society."⁶⁵ Although "developing a thoughtful, serious, and educated position in this climate is not easy task," we are fortunate enough to by analyzing a rapper who is doing this for us: questioning the violent and machismo masculinity, the misogyny, corporate influence, genuine self-expression, the relation to higher significances such as the Black community and God, and contemplating his role in all of it as an artist.⁶⁶

*Who exactly are we talking with when we talk about rap music,
and how do we do it*

When doing any work regarding rap music and hip-hop culture we are presented with a few problems. These issues can be broken down into two categories: the first category includes the natural complications when speaking about art that is inextricably linked to and arises from a lived experience. This type of art necessitates a familiarity with a particular culture, empathy and understanding to analyze with a sympathetic reading. Arguably, the most important consideration in this circumstance is avoiding exploiting the artist's words to advance the author's agenda. It complicates matters further when the certain lived experience in question has a historical and current history

⁶⁵ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 5

⁶⁶ However, it is important to note that Lamar does have a problem, either surface level or deeper, with misogynistically portraying women. In many instances, he does this to illustrate the problems with holding these views about women. However, to the casual listener this nuance may not be obvious. In other cases, it is vague whether or not his offensive remarks are illustrative or genuine.

of oppression by white supremacy. Furthermore, these complications become almost insurmountable when the one writing about the art that is created from a certain lived experience of oppression by whites is himself a white man. We seem to have a fundamental requirement of non-engagement on our hands, and I seem to be embarking on an impossible task. I would like to acknowledge that I do not take on this project lightly, and state that there will obviously be misunderstandings and blindspots in my own analysis. However, if art is what Heidegger says that it is, and if there is any hope of reaching an understanding of Kendrick Lamar and his life through the art he creates, then we cannot take the easy way out and disregard his art because of our inability to understand his experience.

I argue that it is because I cannot relate to a person's lived experience that I have the duty to engage with their art. Heidegger writes in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* included in the book *Language, Poetry, and Thought*,

the work...itself, in its own work-being, is something that sets up... Towering within itself, the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force. To be a work means to set up a world... A stone is wordless. Plants and animals likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked. The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings, of the things that are. Her equipment, in its reliability, gives to this world a necessity and nearness of its own. By the opening up of the world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits.⁶⁷

Thus, a work of art is brought forth out of a medium and "holds open the Open of the world." This means that, through this work of art, something is opened up to the

⁶⁷ Martin Heidegger, trans. Albert Hofstadter *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 43-44.

beholder by the art work's disclosure of a world. However, Heidegger does not stop there. He continues,

To work-being there belongs the setting up of a world, Thinking of it within this perspective, what is the nature of that in the work which is usually called the work material? Because it is determined by usefulness and serviceability, equipment takes into its service that of which it consists: matter. In fabricating equipment—e.g., an ax—stone is used, and used up. It disappears into usefulness...By contrast, the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak.⁶⁸

Thus, from this dual feature of an art work, opening up and setting forth a world, human beings can inhabit, or understand with an aspect of entering the world's Open, this art work's world. Heidegger goes on to put succinctly what this world is: "the self-disclosing openness of broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people...The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. The opposition of world and earth is a striving...In essential striving...the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures."⁶⁹

This striving against one another, the art that intends to make meaning and invite people into a reality, and the earth that tries to keep this reality concealed, is where the pursuit of truth comes. "The unconcealedness of beings (Being) puts us into such a

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 44-45

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 47

condition of being that in our representation we always remain installed within and in attendance upon unconcealedness.”⁷⁰ In other words, *aletheia* (or unconcealedness, the Greek word for truth) is what happens in the art work. “This does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipment being of the shoes, that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—attains to unconcealedness.”⁷¹ In Heidegger’s example of Van Gogh’s painting “Peasant’s shoes” he describes how the meaning of these shoes can be conferred and understood by the art work’s beholder, though admittedly imperfectly. Indeed, this art work invites us into it in order to understand it. He writes,

It transport[s] us into this openness and thus at the same time transport us out of the realm of the ordinary. To submit to this displacement means: to transform our accustomed ties to the world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work.⁷²

When this truth, this unconcealing, in the work is inviting us to dwell in the Open of someone else’s world, it allows us to understand the world which they are putting forth. Thus, when this world is one distinctly other than ours, we, imperfectly, are able to perceive it. The longer that we are able to dwell in the unconcealedness of the world, the more accustomed to it we are. Thus, we are able to understand. Indeed, this “brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work.”⁷³ Thus, because I do not understand

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 50

⁷¹ *ibid*, 54

⁷² *ibid*, 64

⁷³ *ibid Thought*, 66

Lamar's world does not mean that I should ignore it—much the opposite. It means that I ought to engage with it if I have any intention of attempting to understand his life and have a role in the pursuit of justice and truth.

Now, I do realize the irony of using a lapsed Catholic who was a member of the Nazi party to create the framework through which I justify drawing conclusions about a Black man's experience. One could argue that under no circumstance could a white man analyze and draw conclusions about a Black man's poetry because of the history of white supremacy in America. However, I do not believe that to be the case, and more importantly, neither does Kendrick Lamar.⁷⁴ So for the purposes of this thesis, I will be operating under the assumption that art can be a vehicle for understanding, and deep enough of an understanding that can motivate significant justice and reconciliation.

The second category of problems which arise when studying rap music include navigating the tensions between the separate cultural and academic discourses about rap music. The cultural discourse takes place on chat rooms, in blogs and periodicals, at live

⁷⁴ Lamar interviewed N.W.A. for *Billboard*: “We presented it in a way that they [white suburban kids] could digest it, they can comprehend it, and they could sympathize with what we was going through, and this is great music. This is great art.” (Cube) “And if we would've did it any softer than what we what did then it wouldn't've gotten as much attention as what it did...it definitely wouldn't've worked.” (Dre) Lamar agrees with their approach. Lamar, and the great rap artists that preceded him, acknowledge that a large portion of their listeners are white, and thus use their music to educate White America and stand up against Anti-Blackness. David Ritz, “Billboard Cover: Kendrick Lamar Interviews N.W.A. About Coming Straight Outta Compton and Changing the World,” *Billboard*, August 13, 2015. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/cover-story/6663160/kendrick-lamar-nwa-interview-straight-outta-compton-movie-eazy-e-legacy>

Lamar says in an interview with the *Rolling Stone*, “That's always been my thing. Always listen to people's history and their background. It may not be like mine, it may not be like yours. It was taking his perspective on the world and life as a people and putting it to where people can listen to it and make their own perspective from it, whether you agree or you don't agree. That's what I think music is for. It's a mouthpiece.” Brian Hiatt, “Kendrick Lamar: The *Rolling Stone* Interview,” *The Rolling Stone*, August 9, 2017.

concerts and friends playing mixtapes of new artists in their car. The academic discourse on rap music and hip hop culture is more convoluted, and much more sparse. Much is written about Black gospels, not much about the blues. Much is written about historical inequality and liberation, but not much about hip hop. Even though rap music is the second most popular genre worldwide with a growing share every day, there is a mere handful of books (not even peer reviewed or academic books) written on the subject. And what is written is often deeply problematic. More often than not, this includes those from the first category who commit the cardinal sin of rap study: when whites, either conservative or progressive, take a rapper's words and twist them to fit the author's agenda. This is, at its most benign, a misunderstanding. At its most malicious, this is another instance of supremacist elites contorting the expression of Black folks: exploiting their art in such a way that the artist becomes nothing more than a thing to be used and then later discarded. This happens in academia and in the tabloids, and it is often difficult to navigate these texts. However, there is still work to be done.⁷⁵

An effective workaround for this problem is, before anything, treating rap like the art form that it is: oral poetry set to music meant to be performed in order to unify people of the same experience, and secondly to educate others about this experience. This is why song analysis will be a central part of this thesis. We must begin with the primary text, understand its claims, recognize its references, and appreciate it for its beauty and skill. Only then can we examine its claims, realize the culture revealed within its lyrics, and

⁷⁵ The RAP LAB in Colorado is doing really great work. The Routledge studies on Hip Hop and Religion is also interesting, though at times fails to close the gap between the academy and the streets.

finally understand its full meaning when before we were completely ignorant. Hopefully, this understanding will have two results. First, that rap's artistry can be celebrated on par with the greatest texts of the western tradition, standing on its own merits. Second, it can inform our pursuit of social justice.

The Argument of this Thesis

In this thesis I will be analyzing in depth Kendrick Lamar's three masterpiece albums, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and *DAMN*. I will take a long time to investigate and explain the content of these albums. Primarily, in each of these chapters, I will be arguing for a certain reading of each album. I will explain the main message of each album, and this will lead to an investigation of Lamar's theological framework particular to each album. Since Lamar is a spiritual leader in his community, to the extent that he calls himself a prophet on *untitled unmastered*. and *DAMN*., I will also investigate how it is possible and in what way Lamar can speak prophetically through his rap music. A few things will be evident early on: these albums are offensively vulgar, heartbreakingly real, and, paradoxically, theologically rich. So, with this in mind, I am not only attempting to understand and probe into the depths of Lamar's prophetic rap music. I am also, inherently, arguing that his music is worthy of academic study and consideration. I will also offer a way of understanding the prophetic that conjoins the significance of Black music, as a means for Black solidarity and social action, and the Heideggerian concept of world-disclosure.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Anxiety, Prophetic Music, and Divine Disclosure

in Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city*

In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Kendrick Lamar tells the story of how he was delivered from a life of gang violence into a life of prophetic music making. Lamar was delivered from this life by, at the moment where every destructive method of coping with death-anxiety failed him, recognizing his self-worth in an event of divine disclosure. At his lowest moment, an old Black woman evangelizes Lamar and his friends, suggesting that Lamar's newfound intention to effect positive change in his community is empowered by his experience with the divine. However, it runs deeper than divine energization: it is first in the event of God-as-Black-woman's revealing of herself that Lamar locates his self-worth and prophetic purpose. Second, this event grounds his schema of coping with death-anxieties in a positive way, creating an alternative self-consciousness that finds its fulfillment in opposing the destructive gang-ideal which is a false understanding of "realness."

In this album, Lamar's hope is that his prophetic music can influence other Compton residents to identify and alter the violent actions which are doing harm to themselves and their city by reversing the sense of unworthiness which undergirds these destructive actions. In this chapter, I will first engage with Zygmunt Bauman to

summarize how sex, money, violence, and substances fail the young Kendrick Lamar in coping with death-anxieties. Second, I will synthesize how musical openness to the divine paired with its affective quality is part of the power of Black music, namely James Cone's understanding of the blues, and how Lamar shows himself to be operating in a space which Walter Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination. I will argue that music provides a basis for healthy coping with death-anxieties in Lamar's case because music has an inherent religious quality which lends itself to empowering the oppressed. Third, I will locate Lamar's sense of self-worth in the event of God-as-Black-woman's disclosure. Making this the grounding for his understanding of his self-worth, Lamar represents this event as catalyst for delivering him from the destructive cycles of the gang-ideal and redirects him toward prophetic music making.

Confronting Death-Anxiety in good kid, m.A.A.d city

In this section I will give a brief understanding of Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of coping with death-anxieties. I will then show how Lamar and his friends turn to greed, violence, substance abuse, and promiscuity as attempts to stave off this death-anxiety. Lamar recounts how, in each instance, these four are insufficient. I will then draw a distinction between Bauman's fitness and Lamar's vices due to significant differences in circumstances.

Death-anxiety is a central theme of *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Death is pervasive and inescapable. To cope with this reality, Lamar identifies four destructive mechanisms to occupy the mind in order to escape confronting the presence of death. The sociologist

Zygmunt Bauman writes at length about death and culture's role to cope with death-anxieties. In this section, I will turn to Bauman in order to understand how individuals cope with death-anxiety in the West. This will help frame Lamar's four coping mechanisms. In the third sub-section, I will put Lamar in conversations with Bauman to provide a more robust understanding of how individuals in different socio-economic circumstances cope with death-anxieties differently. He writes in *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*, that

there is hardly a thought more offensive than that of death; or, rather, of the inevitability of dying; of the transience of our being-in-the-world. After all, this part of our knowledge defies, radically and irrevocably, our intellectual faculties. Death is the ultimate defeat of reason, since reason cannot 'think' death — not what we know death to be like; the thought of death is -- and is bound to remain — *a contradiction in terms*. 'Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as *my* experiences', observed Merleau-Ponty. 'I can only grasp myself as "already born" and "still living" — grasping my birth and death only as pre-personal horizons. 'Sigmund Freud is of a similar view: 'It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. 'Edgar Morin concluded in his pioneering study of the anthropological status of death that 'the idea of death is an idea without content'; or, to put it another way, it is 'the hollowest of the hollow ideas', since its content 'is unthinkable, inexplicable, a conceptual *je ne sais quoi*'. The horror of death is the horror of void, of the ultimate absence, of 'non-being'. The conscience of death is, and is bound to remain, *traumatic*."¹

This existential trauma is naturally dealt with in a variety of ways. However, for individuals, "we fall back easily into the state of consciousness from which the thought of our own death (that is, of the terminal point of that state of consciousness) is simply absent."² In other words, we try to ignore it. And "disbelief performs its protective

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and other Life strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1992), 12-13.

² *ibid*, 17

service reasonably well only as long as it stays unexamined and is not looked at closely and attentively...What the social sanction of disbelief amounts to is permission not to look, and to refrain from asking for reasons.³ It is on this social sanction that Masa Higo argues “the fundamental role of culture is thus to invent *formulae* by which we survive the death-anxieties that are inherently lurking in our unconsciousness.”⁴

Higo summarizes Bauman’s argument, that

today, we suppress and thus survive death-anxieties mainly by preoccupying ourselves with ceaseless pursuit of the sensation of *fitness* of the body. Liquid modern culture has structurally cast us essentially as solitary consumers addictively pursuing the consumer sensation of bodily fitness. This is a structurally addictive situation since, by definition, *fitness* is a sensation which one is never able to fully attain and permanently maintain. We as the agency of this cultural formula, we perpetually keep death-anxieties away from our daily consciousness by habitually extolling this seemingly trivial daily-life pursuit as the principle object of our lifetime.⁵

Higo mentions the limitation of Bauman’s argument, the Freudian idea that “the suppression of death-anxieties [is] a necessary demand of modern civilization.”⁶

However, there is a more important limitation to this view in the context of Kendrick Lamar and Compton life.

Bauman’s conception of society’s role in the suppression of death-anxieties is not directly applicable to the type of death present in the ghetto. Bauman’s general premise

³ Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and other Life strategies*, 17

⁴ Masa Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties in Liquid Modern Times: Examining Zygmunt Bauman’s Cultural Theory of Death and Dying,” *OMEGA* 65 no.3 (2012), 222.

⁵ *ibid*, 223

⁶ *ibid*, 223

still stands, but the formulae are different. Instead of fixating on fitness, Lamar reveals that he fixates on money, violence, illicit substances, and especially sexual encounters to stave off death-anxiety and trauma. However, Lamar shows that these are ultimately self-defeating.

Insufficiency of Wealth in “Money Trees”

First, in the song “Money Trees,” Lamar argues that the pursuit of wealth to stave off death-anxiety and death related emotional trauma is inadequate. In most rap music, as well as the so-called American Dream, attaining lots of money is the main goal because it separates people from hardship. This is the idea that Lamar is questioning in this song because in his experience, money can only be attained by means which carries with it the heightened possibility of bodily harm and death. The lyrical focus point in this song is the assertion and response between the end of the chorus and the beginning of the refrain.

Lamar raps at the end of the chorus,

Money trees is the perfect place for shade
And that’s just how I feel

This implies that an exorbitant amount of money will shield an individual from the hardships of life, or shade from the sun. It is notable that this is in the same vein as the parched theme that has run throughout the album. The shade will keep one from becoming hot and thirsty, and the chorus suggests that money will play that role. We see that the first line of the chorus, “it go Halle Berry or hallelujah,” that the choice for

riches, or Halle Berry, is prominent in the chorus' claim, whereas hallelujah is the prominent refrain theme. Lamar raps in response to the chorus,

Nah, nah

And cites the multitude of ways that money is destructive. He raps,

A dollar might just fuck your main bitch
That's just how I feel
A dollar might say fuck them n—as you came with
That's just how I feel

But, in standard fashion, Lamar does not leave this dichotomy simple. In the second half of the refrain he adds,

A dollar might just make that lane switch
That's just how I feel
A dollar might turn to a million and we all rich
That's just how I feel

While Lamar recognizes that money can have ill consequences when one forsakes one's friends and loved ones for material wealth, he leaves room to allow that the right use of money can have transformational benefits, such as changing one's life and being able to give it to the less fortunate. Lamar's commentary on money is not that it is totally evil, but that individuals need to steward it rightly and not be sucked into a materialist system. Money comes with strings attached.⁷ Nevertheless, pursuing wealth is a tempting temporary fixation. Lamar raps,

Back to reality, we poor
Another casualty at war
Two bullets in my Uncle Tony head
A Louis belt will never ease that pain

⁷ Wealth will be a main theme in *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

But I'ma purchase when that day is jerkin'
They say your hood is a pot of gold
And we gon' crash it when nobody's home.

Lamar shows here the futility of coping with death-anxieties through the pursuit of wealth. First, wealth is unable to “ease the pain” of his Uncle being shot. Second, this formula creates a self-perpetuating cycle of violence. Presumably, Uncle Tony was shot due to gang activity with the goal of acquiring a shift in the balance of power and, by extension, money. This shows that his Uncle was killed because a rival gang thought that Lamar's hood was a pot of gold ready to be pillaged. Thus, with both sides perceiving financial opportunity in the other's territory, they both go to war to take what they both have. This violent pursuit of wealth reveals a legitimate perception of scarcity economics; however, it is questionable if violence has any benefit in improving the situation. The illusion of wealth's efficacy, or “dreams of me gettin' shaded under a money tree,” is a dream that is unattainable. What is more likely is getting jumped and murdered, like the young Kendrick is doing that that time in the album's narrative.

Insufficiency of Violence and Retaliation in “m.A.A.d city” and “Sing About Me (I'm Dying of Thirst)”

Second, in the songs “m.A.A.d city,” and “Sing About Me (I'm Dying of Thirst),” Lamar argues that gang violence and retaliation are ultimately self-defeating. Much like his critique of wealth being gained by violence, Lamar critiques gang war and retaliatory killings. Lamar first critiques gang war in “m.A.A.d city,” and retaliatory killings in “Sing About Me (I'm Dying of Thirst).”

Lamar presents the vicious setting of Compton's gang rivalry in the first verse of "m.A.A.d city." He raps,

Uh, warriors and Conans
Hope euphoria can slow dance with society
The driver seat the first one to get killed
Seen a light-skinned n—a with his brains blown out
At the same burger stand where [crips] hang out
Now this is not a tape recording saying that he did it
But ever since that day, I was lookin' at him different
That was back when I was nine
Joey packed the nine
Pakistan on every porch is fine
We adapt to crime, pack a van with four guns at a time
With the sliding door, fuck is up?
Fuck you shootin' for if you ain't walkin up you fuckin' punk?
Pickin' up the fuckin' pump
Pickin' off you suckers, suck a dick or die or sucker punch
A wall of bullets comin' from
AK's, AR's, "Aye y'all. Duck"
That's what momma said when we was eatin' that free lunch
Aw man, God damn, all hell broke loose
You killed my cousin back in '94, fuck yo' truce
Now crawl yo' head in that noose
You wind up dead on the news
Ain't no peace treaty, just piecin'
BGs up to pre-approve, bodies on top of bodies
IV's on top of IV's

Lamar presents the cyclical and perpetual nature of gang violence. Death is pervasive and inescapable. While violence may be a means for self-preservation, there is really no benefit for acting against others because death in this circumstance is random. While some may attempt to avenge death in order to rationalize "the scandal, the ultimate

humiliation of reason,” this only begins the cycle again,⁸ as Lamar shows in “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst).” Lamar is beaten up by (presumably) Demetrius, Sherane’s cousin. Lamar’s friends then retaliate for Lamar’s beating when Dave is shot and killed. Part two of the song begins with a skit that takes place after Dave gets killed, giving us a glimpse into the way the young men respond to his death. One or two of them call other people, trying to retaliate yet again. The young Kendrick is silent, Dave’s brother finally has an outburst. He cries, “Fuck! I’m tired of this shit! I’m tired of fuckin’ runnin’, I’m tired of this shit! My brother, homie!” Lamar is showing that retaliation is not a beneficial way to cope with death because it can only result in more death.

Insufficiency of Substance Abuse in “good kid” and “Swimming Pools (Drank)”

Third, in the songs “good kid” and “Swimming Pools (Drank),” Lamar argues that using illicit substances to stave off death-anxiety is inadequate. Lamar presents the issue, that there is no safe place, even for a good kid trying to beat the system. In the third verse of “good kid,” Lamar shows the response that most individuals make to this environment, and a response that he too was tempted by. He raps, “All I see in this room: 20’s, Xannies and these ‘shrooms/Grown up candy for pain, can we live in a sane/Society? It’s entirely stressful on my brain.” “20’s” are twenty dollars worth of marijuana, “Xannies” are Xanax. These are drugs that reduce anxiety. “shrooms” are hallucinogenic mushrooms that create psychedelic illusions. Lamar, after his mugging and abuse by the police,

⁸ Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and other Life strategies*, 15

returns to a room where drugs are present to be used in order to numb the pain of his reality. In the song “Swimming Pools (Drank),” Lamar presents a similar argument.

In “Swimming Pools (Drank),” Lamar argues that alcohol is a poor coping mechanism. He raps about how alcoholism is prevalent throughout the poor Black community and within his own family. He attempts to explain why this is so pervasive, rapping,

Some people like the way it feels
Some people wanna kill their sorrows
Some people wanna fit in with the popular, that was my problem

Lamar is blurring the lines between a healthy drinking culture and one that uses the substance to cope with their pain. Even a party, which is supposed to be a happy, care-free way to enjoy life, is not separated from the danger of alcohol poisoning. Lamar raps these next hypnotic lines which lead into the chorus,

I was in a dark room, loud tunes
Lookin’ to make a vow soon
That I’ma get fucked up, fillin’ my cup I see the crowd mood
Changin’ by the minute and the record on repeat
Took a sip, then another sip, then somebody said to me

Lamar repeats what a fellow partygoer told him,

N—a, why you babysittin’ only two or three shots?
I’ma show you how to turn it up a notch
First you get a swimming pool full of liquor, then you dive in it
Pool full of liquor, then you dive in it.
I wave a few bottles, then I watch ‘em all flock
All the girls wanna play Baywatch
I got a swimming pool full of liquor and they dive in it
Pool full of liquor, I’ma dive in it

Lamar then narrates what is going through his mind, using a different tone of voice, implying a different character. The verse is somewhat comical, it is Lamar's "conscious" coming to him after he has had too much to drink. His conscious says,

I know that you're nauseous right now
And I'm hopin' to lead you to victory Kendrick

Ironically, the young Kendrick knows that he is "abusin' [his] limit," but he takes more. Lamar then narrates how the alcohol makes him perceive a girl gazing upon him lustily, and he thinks that, due to their inebriated state, a sexual encounter may be in the cards with his conscious telling him to go do it. His conscious is not a very good one. Indeed, Lamar's conscience gets him into trouble. The interlude begins with a female voice saying a drawn out name, "Sherane." Lamar's detuned voice says lethargically, "Aw man...where is she takin' me? // Where is she taking' me?" The "she" likely refers to both Sherane, taking him somewhere where she can have sex with him, and the alcohol, implying that the young Kendrick has never been this intoxicated before.⁹

The third verse occurs as Sherane is taking the young Kendrick somewhere in her car, likely back to her house. Lamar raps first about his life and then about the specific situation he is in. He is grafted into his family tree of alcohol and marijuana abuse and speaks to his listener:

All I have in life is my new appetite for failure
And I got hunger pain that grow insane

⁹ "Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter's Daughter" recounts how Sherane is likely years older than the teenaged Kendrick. She had a stripping career in Atlanta before arriving in Compton. However, is it ambiguous about what their relationship status is at the interaction in this song, but it would not be surprising if they had known each other for a while. This is not a sexual abuse image, but an alcohol abuse image.

Tell me, do that sound familiar?
If it do, then you're like me
Makin' excuse that your relief
Is in the bottom of the bottle and the greenest Indo leaf

Then he returns to the car with Sherane:

As the window open I release
Everything that corrode inside of me
I see you jokin', why you laugh?
Don't you feel bad? I probably sleep
And never ever wake up, never ever wake up,
Never ever wake up
In God I trust, but just when I thought I had enough...

We see that Lamar has had enough alcohol to be dangerous to his health, and as he throws up out of a car window, or a bedroom window, Sherane only makes fun of him.

The mood of this song is not care-free. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The young Kendrick is in a very bad situation.

Lamar's commentary on substance abuse is very similar in every instance. Substance abuse destroys you. Lamar presents drugs as things which, although help cope with reality, take an individual out of reality. In this state, nothing constructive can be done. Lamar presents alcohol as something that, although helps blow off steam, can easily turn into an addiction and end up harming the individual more than it helps. This theme is present in "m.A.A.d city" as well, when Lamar takes a joint which is laced with cocaine, causing him to overdose. Lamar's last lines on the song are "I // Live inside the belly of the rough, Compton USA // Made me an Angel on Angel Dust." This is a reference to an instance where Lamar smoked a marijuana joint laced with cocaine, which left him with an aversion to using drugs. He raps,

Projects tore up, gang signs get thrown up
Cocaine laced in marijuana
And they wonder why I rarely smoke now
Imagine if your first blunt had you foaming at the mouth

Imagine the incredible feeling of helplessness that this would have imparted on Lamar. He is using drugs to take the edge off of his experience, and the drugs have the opposite effect: even the substances that he is using to escape the harsh reality of his life are pitted against his survival. We can apply the outburst on the track “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst),” how “I’m tired of this shit,” can also take on the meaning of drugs and alcohol.

Insufficiency of Promiscuity in “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” and “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst)”

Finally, in the songs “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” and “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst),” Lamar argues that engaging in sexual encounters to stave off death-anxiety and insecurity is inadequate. Lamar uses the image of “dryness” to convey the ultimate spiritual inadequacy of engaging in pleasurable acts as a coping mechanism for death-anxiety. While in the index I interpret Lamar’s message on “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” as a narrative of fornication, there are hints at their using each other’s bodies for release from anxiety.

Lamar explains the tools he brings with him for his sexual conquest. He brings a fifth of liquor “hopin’ to get her loose.” This is a sexual conquest, not an act of love. Lamar further divulges

I was in heat like a cactus
My tactics of bein' thirsty probably could hurt me
But fuck it, I got some heart

Lamar then narrates how he takes his mother's keys "down Rosecrans in a Caravan," low on fuel but his desire for sex makes him ignore the possibility of running out of gas.

Up unto this point in the verse, Lamar skillfully foreshadows the events which are about to unfold and maintains the images of being in the desert alluding to his sex drive that will not bend to reason. He connects sexual and moral images of Sherane being like an Arabian camel that he would like to ride, using this image of sexual enticement as being morally dry without the living water of Jesus. He then connects this dryness to Demetrius and gangbanging as the result of the terrible conditions of their upbringing. This is a cultural condition that dryness is experienced by everyone who is born into this life. Lamar experiences this dryness being "in heat like a cactus" and driving his mother's Caravan minivan with an almost dry gas tank. The only fluid he has with him is liquor, but it is a substance that is intended to aid him in his sexual exploits. He drives this theme home with his statement, "love or lust, regardless we'll fuck."¹⁰ Lamar also foreshadows the danger that he is in. This moral dilemma reveals the physical danger that he is in, as if sin has direct, physical consequences. And as the verse concludes, we see that the young Lamar's decisions are about to have a terrible consequence. He raps,

I'm two blocks away, two hundred and fifty feet
And six steps from where she stay, she wavin' me 'cross the street
I pulled up, a smile on my face, and then I see

¹⁰ This is different than on Ab-Soul's outro. This sexual encounter is not singly a method of escapism, as he is also engaging in fornication.

Two n—as, two black hoodies, I froze as my phone rang

We see that Lamar is about to get jumped by members of a rival gang. This decision results in the opposite of what Lamar intended. We see that he divulges how he and Sherane turn to sex to escape the harsh realities of their lives. Lamar raps,

...the trife is in us
It's deep rooted, the music of bein' young and dumb
Is never muted, in fact its much louder where I'm from
We know a lot about each other, her mother was a crack addict
She live with her granny and her younger two brothers

We see that this dryness is attempted to be quenched by liquor in Lamar's "heat" on this song, and with a "pool full of liquor" on "Swimming Pools (Drank)." However, in both instances, it doesn't do any good. However, in "Sing About Me (I'm Dying of Thirst)," the old woman who ministers to the boys leads them to the water that redeems and restores. She says, "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. Do you want to receive God as your personal savior?" After this, she leads the young men in a moving scene. Her elderly, grandmotherly voice, shaky and slow, leads their broken, young voices in the sinner's prayer. Then she concludes saying, "alright now, remember this day, the start of a new life, your *real* life."¹¹ In the fifth and final verse of "Sing About Me (I'm Dying of Thirst)," Lamar references "Backseat Freestyle" with the line "say 'fuck the world,' my sex slave // Money, pussy, and greed—what's my next crave? // Whatever it is, know its my next grave." Lamar has taken his listener on a journey, breaking down everything that he previously held as acceptable behavior. He has

¹¹ emphasis added

showed how lust, violence, substance abuse, and greed are destructive. So now with everything broken, Lamar raps,

My momma say, 'See, a pastor give me a promise
What if today was the rapture and you completely tarnished?
The truth will set you free, so to me be completely honest
You dyin' of thirst, you dyin 'of thirst
So hop in that water, and pray that it works

From this, Lamar proceeds into his “real life,” one marked by positivity and prophesy.

Ghettoized Formulae Are Different Than Affluent Formulae

This is a needful thing on two accounts. The first is that Lamar is challenging the destructive ways of coping with death-anxiety. That we have already seen. The second is that in Lamar’s particular circumstance, death is not generally capable of being ignored like it is in modern, affluent contexts. The existential threat for the poor, and especially for Black people in Compton, is immediate and continuous. Because of this, it has to be confronted with differently than in affluent circumstances. Upper class Americans generally only experience death-anxiety at the doctor’s office. For the impoverished in Compton and elsewhere, death is an everyday reality. More similar to pre-modern experience, “thoughts and sights of death were a relatively integral part of life.”¹² Out of this reality, came the practice of “taming death.’ The notion of *death-taming* refers to the habitual practice of rendering the experience of dying less fearful primarily by openly anticipating and preparing oneself for death.”¹³ Higo writes, summarizing Bauman, that

¹² Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties,” 225

¹³ *ibid*, 225 quoting Aries (1979/1974, p.2)

pre-modern culture had structured individuals' view of death as the 'sole significant, sense-giving moment of [their] life,' at which individuals were to enter 'the beginning of their genuine existence' (Bauman, 1998a, p. 217). Pre-modern individuals as the agency of this cultural formula perpetuated this view of death by placing a greater significance on afterlife than on this life per se and by actively filling out their earthly life spans with concerns about preparing themselves for an eternal and spiritual existence in afterlife.¹⁴

However, in the 17th centuries, death became a taboo. It was something to be thrust out of everyday experience and consciousness. "Bauman interprets the sequestration of death from public view during the early stage of modern times primarily as the result of the work of early modern culture to cope with death-anxieties. Through sequestration, the structural force of early modern culture had removed thoughts and sights of death in order to hide any object reminiscent of mortality from the range of legitimate concerns of individuals' daily life affairs."¹⁵ Two ways that these death-anxieties were coped with are the "regime of health"¹⁶ and "immortality-by-proxy."¹⁷ Higo informs us that "with the first method, individuals took it as their lifetime duty to maintain their physical health—not only for the purpose of avoiding physical disabilities but also to remain culturally acceptable and normal within society. The second method was to symbolically survive into afterlife by remaining in the memories of others through their zestful contributions to

¹⁴ Higo, "Surviving Death-Anxieties," 225

¹⁵ *ibid*" 226

¹⁶ *ibid*, 226 (quoting Bauman, Z. (1998a). Postmodern adventures of life and death. In S. Graham & P. Higgs (Eds.), *Modernity, medicine and health: Medical sociology towards 2000* (pp. 216-231). London, UK: Routledge. p. 224)

¹⁷ *ibid*, 226 (quoting Bauman, Z. (2006). *Liquid fear*. Oxford, UK: Polity. p. 36)

securing the perpetuity of two major institutions of the early modern times: nationhood and the family.”¹⁸

We see that Lamar alludes to these two institutions in their reincarnation, the city and the gang. Lamar raps, “everybody gon’ respect the shooter // but the one in front of the gun live forever.”¹⁹ So it is death understood within the framework of gang affiliation that gives some individuals confidence in life because they are dying for an institution that is greater than their own life. Their lives are sacrifices to perpetuate the institution of the gang. Likewise, Lamar perceives himself as “Compton’s human sacrifice,” a complex image to be sure, but part of its meaning here applies thus that his life’s purpose is contextualized as a service to his city, unto death if so required.²⁰

Following Bauman’s path from solid modern times into the liquid modernity, we see discrepancies between the affluent liquid modernity and the impoverished semi-liquid modernity. Marx and Engels argue that “modernity as a whole emerged with the rise of industrial capitalism by melting ‘all that is solid into air’ (p. 6) with the spirit of the ‘bourgeois epoch’ (Marx & Engels, 1992/1848) constantly sweeping away pre-modern economic and socio-cultural foundations.”²¹ Bauman views it similarly, “that modernity arose as a social force to melt away the socio-cultural foundations of pre-modern times,”

¹⁸ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties,” 226-227

¹⁹ Kendrick Lamar, “Money Trees” track #5 on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Aftermath/Interscope Records, 2013, Spotify.

²⁰ Kendrick Lamar, “m.A.A.d city” track #8 on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Aftermath/Interscope Records, 2013, Spotify.

²¹ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties,” 227

with the caveat that “the melting forces of modernity—in its *early* stage—sought to replace those earlier foundations with *solid* ones thought to be permanently lasting—such as the aforementioned institutions of nationhood and the family.”²²

In the case of American slavery and its consequences, affluent white life follows Bauman’s trajectory into liquid modernity while the socio-economic exploitation of Black people created solid structures of race and labor exploitation. It is at this point that Bauman’s analysis begins to break down in our specific context because his analysis is focused “particularly in affluent Western societies.”²³ In the affluent Western society, “unlike in the early, solid modern stage, culture in liquid modernity seems to be ‘inherently transgressive, boundary-breaking, [and] all-eroding’ (Bauman, p. 6)—perpetually *liquefying* the previous socio-cultural foundations without seeking new, lasting foundations to alternately solidify.”²⁴ This happens in three ways, each of which do not occur in ghettoized communities without qualification: globalization, accelerated individualism, and consumer societies. Higo summarizes how

Globalization has steadily been dismantling “the legs of economic, military and cultural self-sufficiency and near autarchy” (Bauman, 2004c, p. 7) of the nation-state, through which during solid modernity capital, management, and labor were all envisioned to be mutually engaged for a long duration to come. *Accelerated individualization* has largely emancipated individuals from many ascribed social bonds and determinations offered through solid modern collectivities such as nationhood and the family. This trend has simultaneously increased the volume of personal responsibilities for coping with the consequences of the dissolved bonds and determinations, through which solid modernity had long provided individuals with sources of stability and predictability in their social lives....[consumer

²² Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties” 227

²³ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties” 227

²⁴ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties” 228

societies] Casting individuals as solitary consumers with “de jure autonomy” (Bauman, 2000, p. 38), liquid modern culture has formulated contemporary affluent Western societies essentially as “liquid modern societies of consumers” (Bauman, 2003, p. 48).

However, in the ghetto, we see that there is a creation of the gang power structure that intend to be self-governing and autonomous as a response to police interference.

Likewise, we see that although it is no scandal to comment on the dissolution of personal bonds within ghetto life, such as the family, this is not a consequence of affluence but of weaponizing policing power, ripping fathers out of Black families and imprisoning them for minor drug offenses. While white America consumes the products of Black individuals, especially music and sports, Black life is fungible insofar as the Black presence in the consumer society is primarily as exploited objects.

These considerations apply to the way that Lamar copes with death-anxiety because one cannot cope with death-anxiety to any benefit in a culture based on being the recipient of oppression by “pursuing an unattainable sensation of bodily fitness,” or pleasure.²⁵ “Bauman argues that to continually cope with death-anxieties, liquid modern culture has developed a new formula for the thoroughly individualized members of liquid modern societies of consumers...As the most prevalent cultural formula for surviving death-anxieties, contemporary individuals have reinforced the liquid modern devaluation of immortality by obsessively preoccupying themselves with a never-ending pursuit of the *unattainable consumer sensation of fitness of the body* (Bauman, 1999, 2006, 2009b,

²⁵ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties” 229

2011).”²⁶ What Lamar suggests, however, is that for his community in Compton to continually cope with death-anxieties, they cannot rely on being “engaged in addictive sensation gatherings.”²⁷ While money, retaliation, illicit substances, and sex are pleasurable, when taken out of moderation (and moderation is key), they actually work against the possibility of improving living standards and internal Compton reconciliation and unity. There must, then, be another way to cope with death-anxieties after identifying the destructive formulae. I argue that Lamar is using prophetic music to cope with death anxieties, on the one hand, to destroy the idealization of these false copings which turn into a positive affirmation, what I call the gang-ideal, and on the other hand, locate his prophetic power to do this in the disclosive event of God-as-Black-woman. In the next section, we will investigate the qualities of music that have religious value, James Cone’s thoughts on the Black secular spiritual, the blues, and Walter Brueggemann’s prophetic imagination in order to ground an understanding of how Lamar’s prophetic music making functions

Music’s Religious Value, Black Music, and the Prophetic

Through these scenes, we see how engagement with the divine provides a basis for Lamar’s coping with death-anxieties by being an inspiration for his prophetic music. Higo summarizes that “death-anxieties are the ‘ultimate condition of perpetual power and creativity of culture’ (p. 153) since the fundamental power of culture lies in its role to

²⁶ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties,” 229

²⁷ *ibid*, 229

continuously ‘*recast the horror of death into a moving force of life*’ for mortal individuals (Bauman, 1999, p. 3, *Italic in original*).”²⁸ Instead of trying to ignore death-anxieties, Lamar uses it as a motivation for positive change. In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, it is engagement with the divine and coping with death-anxieties through music that defeats the culture of self-destruction, coping with death-anxieties by wealth, retaliation, substance abuse, and sex. The power of music to function as this formula is compounded by Lamar’s prophetic energy. First, I will show the religious value of music, engaging with David Brown’s and Gavin Hopps’ book *The Extravagance of Music*. Second, I will engage with James Cone’s *The Spirituals and the Blues*, to show how music is used in Black communities to express feelings of discontentment, confront death-anxiety, and be a source of life within these communities. Third, I will summarize Walter Brueggemann’s understanding of the prophetic in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, and argue that Lamar is at the intersection of all three of these.

Music’s Religious Significance

Music, in and of itself, has the power to lead individuals toward engagement with the divine. As David Brown writes in the foreword to *The Extravagance of Music*, “spiritual realities can come to awareness in and through music in ways unavailable to verbal formulation, often in nominally secular contexts, and in modes that could sometimes require Christian theology to reconsider its primary terms, even its sense of

²⁸ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties” 225

possible ways of encountering God.”²⁹ While Brown’s engagement in this book is primarily with classical or instrumental music, he discusses how instrumental music inspires things in us, and can be well adapted to many forms, like soundtrack. He claims that the “embodied sentient self” completely interacts with music.³⁰ This type of interaction creates a “‘surplus’ of meaning” that can’t be boiled down into words. One has to listen to it, move to it, in order to experience its depth. ³¹ In this line of thinking, music is something one has to live into,³² marked by habits of making and listening, that cannot be divorced from or realized outside of the listening event.

Music has an affective capacity that can mobilize individuals to engage with the religious. Gavin Hopps writes in the Introduction, that “another [extravagance of music] is its commonly attested *affective* capacity to carry the listener ‘outside’ themselves, to transfigure our disposition towards that world, to engender an expanded state of contemplation or to draw the listener into communion with the divine.”³³ Hopps likens this affective capacity of music with the myth of Orpheus, who “so enchanting was his singing and playing of the lyre that it was able to tame wild beasts and even beguile trees and rocks into dancing.”³⁴ Indeed, this affective capacity of music was taken in by Plato,

²⁹ David Brown and Gavin Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018), xi.

³⁰ *ibid*, xiii

³¹ *ibid*, xiv

³² James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1991), 1. “black music must be lived.”

³³ Brown and Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music*, 18

³⁴ *ibid*, 18

“who focuses on the *ethos* of music but, as we have noted, calls attention to the ‘therapeutic’ ability of music both to arouse and soothe the soul.”³⁵ Hopps informs us that “Aristotle largely concurs with this, but he focuses less exclusively on music’s role in education or *paideia* and additionally sees value in music’s capacity to delight and relax, highlighting, in particular, the ability of ‘sacred melodies’ to ‘excite the soul to mystic frenzy.’”³⁶ Martin Luther also agrees on this “radical affectivity of music” which prompts Luther to say that what “‘makes it God’s best gift’ is ‘its ability to move the human heart.’”³⁷ If music can lead people towards an experience with God, then it might be possible that God works through music, extra-scripturally.

God does work through music, both to interact with the listener and to convey spiritual messages. Hopps argues that “the possibility of experience of God through music is not only entirely consonant with Christian belief but also with what might be expected of the kind of divine generosity that is evident in the incarnation and elsewhere.” God can work within music in order to bring about personal and communal engagement with the divine. However, Christian religion is not “a religion essentially of the word.”³⁸ This forgets rhythms and liturgies, chants and cultural songs. Indeed, music’s role is not merely illustrative whenever lyrics are set to a tune. Music, lyric, and

³⁵ Brown and Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music*, 18

³⁶ *ibid* 18 quoting *Politics*, Book VIII, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. Benjamin Jowett, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2129.

³⁷ *ibid*, 21

³⁸ *ibid*, 66

performance all come together to create the event of listening to music. It is on this event that God breaks through and engages with humanity in this instances' fullest expression.

Popular music affords a space where this can happen outside the strictures of Christian dogma. Hopps argues that popular music contains an "opening up of religious experience." He describes the ability of music to give excessively of itself, being surprised in how it is capable of "engendering profound effects."³⁹ Not only this, but music has a "participatory character," in which music is not merely something that one listens to.⁴⁰ The listener and the music have an interactive relationship and the listener's thoughts, moods, emotions, beliefs are shaped and molded by the participatory listening and creative event. These factors create a situation where the whole being of a person, the mind, body, and soul, can express themselves, and by extension express themselves to the divine. What this means is something akin to what William Dyrness describes as "poetic theology."⁴¹ The desire for creating meaningful music suggests that there is something about us that desires meaningful expressive outlets and a new thing created by that expression, that it could "allow a flourishing that fulfills something [we] long for."⁴² Dyrness claims that "the realization of God's loving embrace does nothing to undermine

³⁹ Brown and Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music*, 162

⁴⁰ Ibid, 164

⁴¹ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 32.

⁴² ibid, 32

the meaning and enjoyment of these embodied pleasures.”⁴³ Music creates a space where humans can create, long, and express, and God works within this space.

Lamar engages with the divine in *good kid, m.A.A.d city* in such a way that within the musical event there is religious experience, his music affects the listener toward spiritual contemplation and engagement, and it challenges the way we perceive divine action in the world. This creates a participatory experience in which valid religious activity is situated outside of church walls. From the first song, we understand that this album is going to be situated in a discussion of religious experience. Although not how we would normally expect to find it, the album engages with temptation and vice in such a way that it can almost be interpreted as a homiletic work. The album is a musical liturgical narrative, one that by its plot explains the problem of sin and leads to find resolution in God.

By listening to this album, then, the listener is taken on a spiritual journey that examines vice, temptation, and death. Lamar leads the listener to witness the depravity, self-destruction, and community-destruction that he experienced and engaged in. Then, Lamar reveals to the listener what exactly he and his friends found security in when Dave was killed. This security was the redemptive power of Christ to liberate individuals from patterns of vice and self-destruction, turning the great commission into beats and bars. In this way, Lamar’s album affects the listener toward spiritual contemplation and engagement. The fact that this happens must challenge the ways in which we perceive divine action in the world. God’s power doesn’t just inhabit the whitewashed church, if it

⁴³ Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, 35

even does at all. God's power inhabits the streets, where the poor and disenfranchised fight for dignity and survival.

We have established that God works in the musical event, that music has a radical affective capacity, and that encountering God in musical contexts sometimes forces us to reconsider the ways we comprehend and speak about God. Furthermore, we have seen the participatory nature of music and how religious experience is opened up in popular music. Next, we will examine the role that the blues play in creating identity and engaging with the divine.

James Cone's The Spirituals and the Blues

Music, in and of itself, is a method of coping with death-anxieties. This is because it creates an identity, creates a community, and creates an ethos in spite of non-being.

James Cone writes in *The Spirituals and the Blues*, how

Through the power of human imagination, defined by the struggle against slavery and segregation, blacks treated a separate world for themselves—a world defined by justice and peace, where women, men, and their children can freely love and be loved. Music has been and continues to be the most significant creative art expression of African-Americans. Blacks sing and play music... as a way of coping with life's contradictions and is celebrating its triumphs.... singing is the medium through which we talk to each other and make known our perspectives on life to the world. It is our way of recording and reflecting on our experiences—the good and the bad, the personal in the political, the sacred and the secular. Most blacks do not acknowledge these dualisms. They believe that reality is one.... we must view them as to artistic expressions of the same black experience.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 129-130

Two expressions of the same Black experience is the Black spiritual and the blues, the secular spiritual. I will pay particular attention to the blues, because the blues exhibit a greater similarity to rap music. Cone writes that “to understand [the blues], it is necessary to view the blues as a *state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience*.”⁴⁵ Cone continues, “the blues are true because they combine art and life, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real. They are an artistic response to the chaos of life. And to sing the blues truthfully, it is necessary to experience the historical realities that created them.”⁴⁶

The blues creates an identity based on the Black experience. James Cone describes Black music as “an artistic affirmation of the meaningfulness of black experience.”⁴⁷ He says that Black music “created essential structures that defined my blackness. I affirmed the reality of the spirituals and blues as authentic expressions of my humanity, responding to them in the rhythms of dance. I, therefore, write about the spirituals and the blues, because *I am the blues* and my life *is a spiritual*. Without them, I cannot be.”⁴⁸ We see then that music is an attempt to cope with death-anxiety and social death.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 102

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 103

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 6

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 7

⁴⁹ This is not limited to individual death-anxiety, but the blues also express lamentation at what Orlando Patterson coined as social death, however we will discuss this in the next chapter. Also note, that Lamar is not interested in creating a normative Black identity with his music, with the Compton experience as an exclusive archetype. He is interested in creating unity music that takes into account the socio-

The blues creates a community based on the identity of Black suffering. It is this formula of coping with death-anxiety that creates the identity of the blues. We see explicitly that the blues recasts “*the horror of death into a moving force of life.*”⁵⁰ Cone makes four claims about Black music: that it is “unity music,”⁵¹ “functional,”⁵² a “living reality,”⁵³ and “social and political.”⁵⁴ Black music is unity music because “it unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope any despair of black people; and it moves the people toward the direction of total liberation. It shapes and defines black existence and *creates cultural structures for black expression.* Black music is unifying because it confronts the individual with the truth of black existence in affirms that black being is possible only in a communal context.”⁵⁵ For Lamar, we see that his music is how he expresses his thoughts, feelings, and stories. We see the complexity of hood images and scenes. *In good kid, m.A.A.d city, Lamar directs his listener towards liberation of the mind, a liberation that is situated in a community as a communal consciousness.* Black music is functional because “its purposes in aims are directly related to the consciousness

economic realities that lead to oppression in order to simultaneously empower those who live in the ghetto and unify all Black communities. The fact that he only describes his own experience as a Black man in Compton does not exclude other experiences from his liberative vision. This will be discussed at length in the next chapter as well.

⁵⁰ Higo, “Surviving Death-Anxieties,” 225

⁵¹ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 5

⁵² *ibid*, 5

⁵³ *ibid*, 5

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 5

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 5 italics mine

of the black community.”⁵⁶ Lamar’s work is for and about his community. Black music is a living reality because it contains contradictions, tensions, and lived experiences that are difficult to understand without having experienced them.⁵⁷ Although Cone is going to say that Black music is inaccessible to anyone from outside the Black experience,⁵⁸ Lamar assumes that through listening to his music his experience can be understood at least in part by people who are completely foreign to his experience. Finally, Black music is also social and political because “it is black and thus articulates the separateness of the black community. It is an artistic rebellion against the humiliating deadness of Western culture. Black music is political because its rejection of white cultural values, it affirms the political otherness of black people. Through song, a new political consciousness is continuously created, one antithetical to the values of white society.”⁵⁹ Lamar follows in this same vein of creating new consciousnesses.

The blues creates an ethos of Black resilience in spite of suffering. Cone argues that “the fact that black people keep making music means that we as a people refuse to be destroyed...Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, the spirituals and the blues are not songs of despair or of a defeated people. On the contrary, they are songs which represent

⁵⁶ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 5

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 5

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 3 “I am therefore convinced that it is not possible to render an authentic interpretation of black music without having shared and participated in the experience that created it. Black music must be *lived* before it can be understood.”

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 5-6

one of the great triumphs of the human spirit.”⁶⁰ As Dyrness writes in his book *Poetic Theology* about Roberto Goizeuta’s critique of Latinx liberation theology,

Activities that encourage and facilitate the empathetic connections within the community will do more in the long run to promote the health of that community than work done for the alleviation of poverty alone. One of Goizeuta’s most important contributions is his suggestion that the pursuit of liberation...was insufficiently comprehensive.⁶¹

Dyrness goes on to suggest three measures of a healthy community: playfulness, celebration, and ritual practice. On playfulness, he writes that “injustice is always in some way or other implicated in the inability to play.”⁶² On celebration, he writes that “all that reflects the brokenness and injustices is also that which impedes human celebration.”⁶³ Celebration “flows naturally from spirits liberated from care or pain.”⁶⁴ On ritual practice, he defines this as “a prescribed form of words and actions which embody the meaning of a community.”⁶⁵ While we could try to point to instances where there is not playfulness or celebration at points that coincide with the performance of rap music in order to try to use Dyrness’ category to disprove Cone’s claim (that Black music shows “one of the great triumphs of the human spirit”⁶⁶), that is ultimately a flawed move. The

⁶⁰ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 130

⁶¹ Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, 269

⁶² *ibid*, 272

⁶³ *ibid*, 273

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 273

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 274. John Ivan Gill writes at length about how underground rap music functions as a ritual practice in his doctoral dissertation, *The World Creates God: A Process Aesthetic Religion As Lived Out By Underground Rap Culture*

⁶⁶ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 130

fact that Black culture, at least in the instance of the ghetto, revolves around playing and celebrating to the rhythms and lyricisms of rap music that may not seem lightheartedly playful, it is very clear that the ritual practice of community building in rap music is central to this experience. We need to have an understanding that Black music is central to the experience of oppression and exploitation as a large middle finger to the oppressors. In the face of extreme oppression and exploitation, music is the thing that keeps the spirit alive.

We have thus far established that God works in the musical event, that music has a radical affective capacity, and that encountering God in musical contexts sometimes forces us to reconsider the ways we comprehend and speak about God. Furthermore, we have seen the participatory nature of music and how religious experience is opened up in popular music. Then we have learned from Cone how Black music has historically been a space where Black people could express their death-anxieties and have the community rally behind each other. Besides the ability of meeting the divine in music, and Black music being defined as an affirmation of being and attempt to cope with death-anxieties, Lamar's music takes on yet another factor that makes his music so powerful.

Prophetic Imagining within Musical Contexts

Prophetic imagining can take place within music. The prophetic imagination, as Walter Brueggemann describes it, is an “alternative constructive task of imagination.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2001, 2nd ed.), 41.

This alternative consciousness empowers the oppressed and exploited with a divine empowerment to reject the ‘royal consciousness’ that maintains oppressive political and cultural structures.⁶⁸ We can equate the royal consciousness to the Marxist concept of ideology. Using Brueggemann’s illustrative example, “Moses was mainly concerned with the formation of a countercommunity with a counterconsciousness...He was not engaged in a struggle to transform a regime; rather, his concern was with the consciousness that undergirded and made such a regime possible.”⁶⁹ Once the royal consciousness is subverted, then people are opened to God’s justice and “the politics of justice and compassion” can be carried out to correct oppressive socioeconomic structures.⁷⁰ But this opening must begin in one’s perception of reality and themselves.

The prophetic imagination has a precedent in poetic expressions. Walter Brueggemann notes in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, that the Old Testament prophets were lyricists. He argues that “as David Noel Freedman has observed, the characteristic way of a prophet in Israel is that of poetry and lyric.”⁷¹ By this, we see that music is implemented in order to affect the people of Israel in order to “[engage] in futuring fantasy.”⁷² This implementation goes against our concepts of practicality. Brueggemann argues that before any practical work may be carried out, a vision must be

⁶⁸ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 21-37

⁶⁹ *ibid*, 20

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 7

⁷¹ *ibid*, 40

⁷² *ibid*, 40

understood and accepted. He writes, “the prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined.”⁷³ *Poesis* must come before *praxis*. And this is not necessarily to be done at first on a large scale. Brueggemann warns that “when we think ‘prophetic’ we need not always think grandly about public tasks.”⁷⁴ Significant prophetic imagining begins on the small, individual scale because before anything can be done, the people must believe. In other words, before there can be a fight for social justice, people must understand what that is and that they have the dignity to deserve it.

Prophetic imagining is critical of the culture around it. Brueggemann argues that “real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right.”⁷⁵ Brueggemann notes “how the language [of Exodus 5:7-10] is shaped to evoke anger and bring to expression the deep resentment at [the enslaved] system.”⁷⁶ Indeed, through this criticism, “the assured and alleged power of the dominant culture is now shown to be fraudulent. Criticism is not carping and denouncing. It is asserting that false claims to authority and power cannot keep their promises, which they could not in the face of the free God.”⁷⁷ This grieving happens first in the state of things as oppressed people. Second, it reimagines the ways that these

⁷³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 40

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 11

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 10

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 11

people respond to their position. It redirects their grievances into a pointed, imaginative, legitimate, and energized idea.

The alternative consciousness energizes people by providing a new hope when the old consciousness has been proven to be inadequate. Brueggemann argues that “this narrative [creates] the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon just when the old realities had left us hopeless. It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order.”⁷⁸ Brueggemann observes that “energizing is closely linked to hope.”⁷⁹ First, “energy comes from the embrace of the inscrutable darkness,”⁸⁰ the hope that things are going to change. Second, energy comes from the belief that God is “not the comfortable god of the empire, so fat and well fed as to be neutral and inattentive.”⁸¹ Rather, it is the God who is alert to the realities, who does not flinch from taking sides” against the oppressors in order to bring about providence in the form of real liberation.⁸²

This prophetic energy is dependent upon doxology. Returning to Brueggemann’s example of Moses, he identifies how “the energy of Moses’ doxology includes...the speaking of a new name that redefines all social perception. A review of an unlikely history of inversion in which imperial reality is nullified...An asking for the enactment of

⁷⁸ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 14

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 14

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 14

⁸¹ It is interesting that this is the same language that Tupac uses in Lamar’s construction of their interview on “Mortal Man” on *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

⁸² Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 15

freedom in dance, freedom in free bodies that Pharaoh could no longer dominate...A culmination in enthronement, the assertion of the one reality Egypt could not permit or tolerate: ‘The Lord will reign for ever and ever.’”⁸³ This doxology is central to this work because “the evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric.”⁸⁴

The goal of the prophetic imagination is not to complain, but to lament, in order that God might hear the petitions of oppressed people and empower them to change the state of affairs. Complaint, as Brueggemann uses the word, suggests voicing “resignation” and “self-pity.”⁸⁵ The criticizing prophetic energy behind lament, however, “expresses a militant sense of being wronged with the powerful expectation that it will be heard and answered...The life of freedom and justice comes when they risk the freedom of the free God against the regime.”⁸⁶ This suggests that the lament is grounded in theological conceptualizations, built on recovering a sense of identification as a people of God which produces dignity, and is expectant that God will empower the people to dismantle the oppressive structures they are forced into.

Before this upheaval happens, the people must understand the vision and be committed to the God who will dispense justice over and against the oppressive regime. Brueggemann argues that “bringing hurt to public expression is an important first step in

⁸³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 17-18

⁸⁴ *ibid*, 18

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 12

⁸⁶ *ibid*, 12

the dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge.”⁸⁷ First, there is an expression of lament. Second, there is a rejection of “the empire, cries no more to it, expects nothing of it, acknowledges it in no way, knows it cannot keep its promises, and knows that nothing is either owed it or expected of it. That is the ultimate criticism which leads to dismantling.”⁸⁸ The prophetic effect, then, is to wholly separate the people of God, the oppressed, from the confines of the exploitative culture’s consciousness. By creating a sense of solidarity, the oppressed people are motivated to live into the behaviors and conditions that come with being a people of God. By doing this, they completely remove themselves from the exploitative society. The result of this, is that in situating oneself in the community of oppressed peoples with an alternative consciousness, this allows God to empower the community to reject the imposed ideological and socioeconomic structures of oppression and dismantle them, thereby creating a new society and culture committed to “a new social community to match the vision of God’s freedom.”⁸⁹

In Kendrick Lamar’s music, we see a synthesis of these three realities, the extravagance of music, Black music, and prophetic imagination. Like Moses, Lamar’s “work [comes] precisely at the engagement of the religion of God’s freedom with the politics of human justice.”⁹⁰ It is in this synthesis that death-anxiety is situated. This

⁸⁷ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 12

⁸⁸ *ibid*, 13 This second stage will take effect more clearly on *To Pimp a Butterfly*

⁸⁹ *ibid*, 7

⁹⁰ *ibid*, 7

makes death, along with oppression and exploitation, manageable insofar as religious understanding provides a way to cope with death-anxiety that arises from socioeconomic factors, as we will see in *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Because of the re-location of death-anxiety into an alternative consciousness of socioeconomic justice and the individual's responsibility to unite in order to dismantle the system, death becomes a source of hope. The hope is that by living into a position of positivity for the community that death will not come at the hands of other oppressed people. When this unification occurs, then the community can direct all of its energy at fighting the oppressive and exploitative socioeconomic structures which imposes death at the hands of racist capitalism. This argument will be picked up in the next chapter, where I analyze *To Pimp a Butterfly*. But in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Lamar directs his listener towards liberation of the mind, a liberation that is situated in a community as a communal consciousness. Before any other work can be done, Lamar must liberate the minds of the people. In the next section, I will show how Lamar makes use of music in his prophetic attempt to reform Black self-consciousness in the event of God-as-Black-woman's disclosure.

Lamar's Prophetic Message in good kid, m.A.A.d city

Lamar's prophetic action in *good kid, m.A.A.d city* consists of deconstructing the harmful gang-ideal and static Christian morality and then constructing an alternative new 'real' ideal and fluid morality, which finds its energy in the converting emergence of God-as-Black-woman. Lamar reinterprets the spiritual state of himself and those around him as being in a state of 'dryness,' which contrasts with the new dripping-wet spiritual

state that he will create. This new state of being is realized only when Lamar's self-worth is understood within the disclosive event of his particular conversion. In this section, I will first define the ideals that Lamar is deconstructing. The gang-ideal consists of the harmful coping with death-anxieties due to a misplaced locus of self-understanding ('realness') while the static Christian morality is what James Cone describes as a type of iron-fisted morality created by white Christianity that excludes any possibility of morally ambiguous judgements and utilizes these moral judgements to suppress Black life. Second, I will explain how Lamar deconstructs this consciousness. Third, I will present the alternative consciousness that Lamar presents which is centered around the concept of 'realness.' Fourth, I will argue that this 'realness' is grounded in a certain understanding of self which is situated in the event of God-as-Black-woman's self-revelationary emergence in the midst of despair. I will also begin to develop an understanding for this reimagined morality in reference to this. Hope, in this instance, is found in the ability of becoming, based in a new understanding of self, when before Lamar believed himself to be entrapped in a feedback loop of coping with death-anxiety that only further magnified death-anxiety.

Situatedness in Adolescent Becoming

We can interpret the gang ideal as either a rebellion against parental morals or a feedback loop of destructive copings with death-anxiety. However, in this case these interpretations are complimentary. It should come to no surprise to us that this prophetic work Lamar is doing is situated within the process of becoming in adolescence. Much

like one asserting oneself against the parental structure of values and influence, Lamar is forging his own being over and against the influence of his parents—or more generally the stereotype of Black religiosity. This self-assertion comes in the form of a gangsta identity and lifestyle. Whereas the previous generation has a semblance of rigid Christian beliefs and practices, Lamar presents his experience in the world as one devoid of piety and divine power. As we have seen in section one, the overarching experience of ghetto life is death. Against this inescapable impending mortality that Lamar and his companions face, they turn to self-destructive and communo-destructive actions in order to cope with death anxiety. However, this only leads to frivolity and perpetuating the increase of death-anxieties due to the destructive nature of these actions. Lamar outlines these actions as I showed in section one.

These activities begin to constitute a consciousness of futility and an ethos of self-destruction. Throughout the album, Lamar portrays his youthful attitude toward himself and his community as self-destructive. We see his ignorance and misogyny on “Backseat Freestyle.” We see his predatory behavior in sexual encounters on “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” and “Swimming Pools (Drank).” We see his irresponsibility with his family’s means of transportation on “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter.” We see how he lacks integrity to his moral commitments on “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter,” “The Art of Peer Pressure,” “Money Trees,” and “Swimming Pools (Drank).” Kenny, Lamar’s father, clarifies this theme of self-destruction on “Real.” The more that individuals cope with death-anxiety in ways that bring the reality of death closer at hand, this only makes matters worse.

Realness

It is not that gangsta identity is evil, but it promotes a self-destructive vision of what a “real n—a” is. Kenny says, “any n—a can kill a man, that don’t make you a real n—a. Real is responsibility. Real is taking care of your motherfucking family. Real is God, n—a.” By affirming what a “real n—a” is, this suggests that, as Lamar narrates in his album, the predominate influences that create a gangsta ideal are ultimately flawed.⁹¹ These actions of coping with death-anxiety in harmful ways begin to create a positive affirmation of these practices to an extent that they become a celebrated identity, or ideal expression of Black life. Lamar pushes back against this move. He rejects the idealization of violence, irresponsibility, and irreverence, while simultaneously qualifying his rejection with the realist presentation of street life.

Lamar deconstructs these ideals by showing their natural consequences. We see that the entire album’s narrative trajectory follows the repeated consequences of destructive actions. *Due to a night of abusing substances, Lamar goes to have sex with Sherane. Before Lamar even sees her, he gets jumped. In retaliation, Lamar and his friends attempt a drive-by that ends up in Dave’s death.* This trajectory towards death would easily repeat itself, until Dave’s brother’s moving breakdown when he cries, “I’m

⁹¹ We will see in the next chapter that Lamar is asked the question “What’s wrong, n—a? I thought you was keeping it gangsta,” as he continues to develop this new ideal. Kendrick Lamar, “For Free (Interlude)” track #2 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2015.

tired of this shit.”⁹² It is in this moment of despairing that God-as-Black-woman meets them in the song “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst).”

In the narrative of the album, it is this moment whenever ‘realness’ receives its redefining, from the destructive gang-ideal to the alternative imagining of what a “real n—a” is. God-as-Black-woman says at the end of the interaction, “alright now, remember this day // The start of your new life, your real life.”⁹³ Superficially, this means that a new, real life is to life in submission to Christ. However, this submission to Christ is not a statement about static Christian morality as it is often understood. For Lamar, to live a ‘real’ life is also to live as a ‘real n—a.’ This is what Kenny says is responsibility, family, and God. So we see that ‘realness’ takes into account personal responsibility, familial/communal commitments, and situating oneself in reference to the divine.

God-as-Black-woman: The Disclosive Event

The term God-as-Black-woman is a mixing of divine disclosure through the loving reaching out of an old Black woman. This instance of a woman ministering to Lamar and his friends is more significant than just an individual evangelizing an individual. We see that the emphasis in this event is not on the conversion as such, but in the context of in the parking lot of a grocery store in the hood, in the person of a Black woman. This event reveals that God is working through a Black woman: it is the working

⁹² Kendrick Lamar, “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst)” track #10 on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Aftermath/Interscope Records, 2013.

⁹³ *ibid*

through that is emphasized. Moreover, this working through takes the particularity of Black woman into the disclosive event of the divine. God is working through the most vulnerable in order to disclose a relational reality between God and person, with the particularities of Black and woman on the one hand and Black and gangsta on the other. Thus, this character that leads Lamar and his friends to Jesus is more than what meets the eye. This character is God and woman coming together, contextualized in Blackness. It is the divine love, vulnerability, and identification with Black life that empowers Lamar to become more than a gang ideal. This is done through a re-locating of self-worth within the disclosive event.

This ‘realness’ is grounded in a certain understanding of self which is situated in the event of God-as-Black-woman’s self-revelatory emergence in the midst of despair. The power in this scene is that God would work through the least of the least in order to reveal the path of life to someone in the deepest despair. Cone writes that “revelation is not a rational articulation of human self-consciousness, but an existential encounter in a situation of concern.”⁹⁴ In the reaching out to Lamar and his friends, God-as-Black-woman reveals herself to them, giving them a framework through which to understand themselves. Lamar asks in “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst)” in his own voice a, “am I worth it?” Matthew Linder interprets this question as, “whether life has meaning in the brutalized urban environment of Compton, CA.”⁹⁵ He goes on to frame this question

⁹⁴ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 45.

⁹⁵ Matthew Linder, “Am I Worth It? The Forgiveness, Death, and Resurrection of Kendrick Lamar,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33 no.1 (2017):107-112. 107.

as Lamar “asking how one can face the reality of death on the streets every day, and yet find the courage to live another day.”⁹⁶ Linder rightly observes that “when Kendrick participates with something that transcends the self, namely, God, his anxiety and guilt are diminished, first, by self-affirmation of his black body, second, with his acceptance of divine forgiveness ... In parallel to the Hebrew prophetic tradition, Kendrick expresses his personal suffering as representative of his community’s and imparts a transcendent hope to a people struggling to exist in a city in ruins.”⁹⁷ For Linder, Lamar finds “the ability to face death and place hope in the peculiarity of Christian resurrection.”⁹⁸ Linder argues that “In Kendrick’s prophetic songs, he counteracts the anxiety he experienced in Compton by arriving at a self-affirmation rooted in Christian beliefs about God transcendent.”⁹⁹ However, I think his Tillichian interpretation does not take seriously enough the this-worldliness of Lamar’s prophetic vision, nor does it take into account Lamar’s central redefinition of ‘realness.’ It is not so much that Lamar finds self-affirmation in the beliefs of a transcendent God, but it is in the event of divine disclosure that Lamar is able to see his self worth and be redirected to carry out a this-worldly prophetic action through his music. In relation to the God that would work through the

⁹⁶ Linder, “Am I Worth It?” 107

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 108

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 108

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 108

Black woman to reveal Godself to despairing Black boys in the hood, Lamar finds his sense of self-worth and reframing of his being in the world.

New Understanding of Self-Worth Located in the Self-revelation of God-as-Black-woman

This exchange results in a new sense of dignity and self-worth which creates the hope that by becoming a ‘real n—a’ then this will have the effect of escaping the negative feedback loop which cuts the gang ideal off from the prospect of becoming. Linder is correct to say that “Kendrick’s confidence in his personal encounter with Jesus affirms his dignity and worth.”¹⁰⁰ However, this personal encounter is first and foremost embodied and empowering to engage in individual and social action. This personal encounter breaks the cycle of compounding destructive coping. When an individual recognizes her agency based on divine situated self-worth, then coping with death-anxiety is relocated from self-destruction to coping with death-anxiety by attempting to change the consciousness that perpetuates the self-destructive cycles. This consciousness is a lack of self-worth that results in a paralyzing belief of non-agency. The encounter with God-as-Black-woman obliterates the false belief of unworthiness and paralysis and by reimagining coping mechanisms gives that necessity a constructive avenue to follow. Here, we can understand the gang ideal existentially. We are not talking about an identity as such, but an ideal which creates an ethos of succumbing to non-being in such a way that it worsens the existential state of those who actively perpetuate the ethos. Lamar’s

¹⁰⁰ Linder, “Am I Worth It?” 108

prophetic work, then, is to reject this ethos and influence individuals via music which will empower them to view their own state of being in these colloquial terms and so redirect their methods of coping with death-anxiety towards a place of constructive action rather than destructive.

Communal Morality, Not Law

This redirection comes to express itself in morality. The self-destructive copings are seen as vices, and the self-constructive copings are seen as virtues, much divorced from the Christian categories of sin. This is centered in a reimagining of coping mechanisms. It is not so much that drinking, sex, and violence are condemned by God's law as much as these things are harmful to self and community because they are destructive coping mechanisms. Indeed, "black theology rejects categorically white comments about the sins of blacks, suggesting that we [black people] are partly responsible for [black people's] plight."¹⁰¹ This morality is not suggesting that Black people are keeping themselves oppressed—far from it. This is reimagining morality on the basis of individual self-harm based on a false understanding of self-worth. God has something to say about these actions on the basis of liberation, not law. James Cone writes that "we are thus placed in an existential situation of freedom in which the burden is on us to make decisions without a guaranteed ethical guide."¹⁰² In the circumstance where "every moment of being is surrounded with the threat of nonbeing," God's law

¹⁰¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 53

¹⁰² *ibid*, 7

(white Christianity's morality) loses its monopoly on the actions of the oppressed. He writes further, "the Bible is not the revelation of God; only Jesus is."¹⁰³ "Black theology believes that the spirit of the authentic gospel is often better expressed by 'heretics' than by the 'orthodox' tradition."¹⁰⁴ In this way, orthodox categories of sin are inapplicable to this circumstance. For Lamar, drinking, smoking, sex, violence, etc. can be seen as good things whenever they are not self or communo-destructive. For Cone, this comes in the form of his statement that "the only real question for Christians is whether their actions are in harmony with their knowledge of God,"¹⁰⁵ a God who meets the oppressed in their despairing and empowers them to recognize their self-worth which leads to liberation. This has been primarily an individual-focused moral understanding, but it also has implications for the community.

This also creates the opportunity to redirect individual moralities to express themselves in a communal context which is focused on communal consciousness. This is a grassroots understanding of mental liberation, not a top-down enforcing of a moral code. Since "culture refers to the way persons live and move in the world; it molds their thought forms," it is incredibly important that self-destructive actions based on a false sense of unworthiness do not become a pervasive belief within a community.¹⁰⁶ However, with the gang ideal, this is exactly what Lamar is attempting to dispel. And the best way

¹⁰³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 32

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, 36

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 43

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 29

to do this is through music because “black culture consists of creative forms of expression as one reflects on history, endures pain, and experiences joy.”¹⁰⁷ Whenever that music becomes predatory, as we see in “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe,” and will see in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, there must be a prophetic voice to rebel against the enslaving consciousness and institute an alternative consciousness.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Hope for Kendrick Lamar is found in the ability of becoming, based in a new understanding of self, when before Lamar believed himself to be entrapped in a feedback loop of coping with death-anxiety that only further magnified death-anxiety. The gang ideal which Lamar is pushing back against is destructive to oneself and one’s community because of a communal consciousness. Lamar’s prophetic work is showing the basis for self-worth in the event of self-revelation of God-as-Black-woman. This self-worth located in the experience with Jesus then empowers the oppressed to take concrete actions of transforming learned self-destructive coping mechanisms into the virtues of responsibility, familial loyalty, and relationship with God. As we will see in the next chapter, these vices do not originate within the Black community. These vices are products of white influence on Black artists and socio-economic exploitation. But before the elucidations of *To Pimp A Butterfly* can be totally fleshed out, there must be an

¹⁰⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 28

¹⁰⁸ This is because of white record labels, not because of Black artists. This is very important to realize the complexity of the situation.

understanding that because God identifies with the oppressed then Black life has incredible worth. This worth then leads to “a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing,” an “awaken[ing of] the readiness of expectation” for the special revelation of Jesus Christ who will liberate physically those who He has liberated mentally through the prophetic music of Kendrick Lamar.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Only a God Can Save Us: Der Spiegel’s Interview with Heidegger.” *Philosophy today (Celina)* 20, no. 4 (1976): 277-278

CHAPTER THREE

Kendrick Lamar's Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness and the Prophet as Divine-World Discloser

In the previous chapter I showed how Lamar confronts death-anxieties, is a prophetic rapper, and experiences a disclosive event with God-as-Black-woman in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. In this chapter I will first give a brief summary of *To Pimp a Butterfly* and propose various ways to read its complex structure in the introduction. Second, I will explain and defend Lamar's Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness. Third, I will explain Lamar's prophetic work in this album and argue for an understanding of divine-world disclosure as a model for Lamar's prophetic work in his Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness. The divine-world disclosure present in *To Pimp a Butterfly* will give us insight to how the prophetic makes use of world disclosure.

To Pimp A Butterfly is an incredibly complex album and can be read in a few ways. It can either be read as Lamar's journey to defeat Uncle Sam and Lucy, a narrative based on the pacing of the poem, or as a compilation of loosely related songs. These competing interpretations are possible because *To Pimp a Butterfly* has many overlapping narrative arcs. The first and most obvious is the struggle against Uncle Sam and Lucy. Uncle Sam is a character that represents the American dream to those advantaged by the American system, but it is not beneficial to all members of American society. For Lamar,

Uncle Sam represents the systemic inequality and exploitations of Black life that is inherent to American capitalism, or racial capitalism more generally. Lucy is short for Lucifer. Lucy represents the undergirding satanic motivations that drive Uncle Sam. This interpretation lends itself to a theological framing. In this framework, once Uncle Sam is defeated the real spiritual problem still remains. However, this is not merely a layered depiction: the codependency of Uncle Sam and Lucy show a much more diabolical reality than a moralized understanding of the American capitalist spirit. This is the basis for Lamar's Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness. This is a very interesting part of Lamar's album, but this narrative does not encompass the entire album. This is a secondary narrative.

The second most obvious narrative arc is the poem that runs throughout the album. The poem is revealed in parts that structure the listener's interpretation of the songs and their content, as well as drive the progression of the songs themselves. Additionally, and most importantly, Lamar allows the listener privileged knowledge into his own life, feelings, and perceptions in regard to the narrative with Uncle Sam and Lucy. In this way, this unfolding poem is a device for world disclosure. This poem will finally be recited completely on the song "Mortal Man," and is closer to the main narrative of the album than the first, but it is still a secondary narrative.

The third interpretation that I previously noted was that the album is actually a jumbled mess. This is a weak interpretation because it does not take into account either of the previous interpretations. While it is true that "The Blacker the Berry" feels very out of place, and sometimes the thematic cohesion loosens as the listener progresses through the

album, this either suggests that there is no skillful narrative at all, or there is a driving narrative that doesn't submit to a completely logical plot or one central claim.

Alternatively, unlike *good kid, m.A.A.d city* which is primarily a narrative work, it may be the case that *To Pimp a Butterfly* is not primarily a narrative work but instead these two narrative arcs function as worlds of disclosure. As I will develop implicitly in the following sections, identifying the primary narrative is insignificant for understanding the heart of this album.

I will argue in section two that the album's multi-layered narrative significances and multiple themes are evidence that this album is meant as a disclosive event between Lamar and his listener. All art is disclosive by its nature, but here the album's structure is exactly suited for this type of engagement.¹ As I will argue in section two, Lamar as an artist not only discloses his world, but Lamar as a prophet discloses a world that is disclosed to him by God-as-homeless-Black-man. In this way, Lamar the prophet discloses divine-world. This divine-world disclosure necessitates two things: a response and a relationship. This response has three possibilities. First, to dwell in the disclosed divine-world. Second, to repent of one's own perceptions after a time and dwell in the disclosed divine-word. Third, to reject the disclosed divine-world. In conjunction with liberation and eternity, this model energizes this-worldly social justice. In other words, it realizes the kingdom of God.

¹ I have written on the relationship between art and *aletheia* in the Introduction. See Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of Art" from *Poetry, Language, and Thought* for further reading.

Kendrick Lamar's Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness

To Pimp a Butterfly is primarily about American Anti-Blackness. In this album, Lamar puts forth a coherent lens through which to understand American Anti-Blackness that simultaneously criticizes racialization and celebrates Blackness as a distinct category of being. He is able to do this because in Lamar's imagination, racialization and its identitarian anti-racism is insufficient due to its further divisiveness and the celebration of Blackness is intended to unify all Black people against the oppressive supremacist structures that have pitted Black people, and minorities, against each other to maintain white domination.² This lens is sufficiently complex as to not be self-contradictory because Lamar recognizes the economic interests of American Anti-Blackness similarly to the Black Marxists and due to the historical realities of white supremacist oppression of Black life the celebration of Blackness is not so much another site of racialization as it is a tool for social revolution. Lamar's Economic-Spiritual critique identifies exploitation and exposes its satanic motivations. Lamar's affirmation of Blackness unifies and energizes those who have been oppressed for so long in order that they can best combat that oppression. I call this Lamar's "Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness" because, as I will argue in sub-sections 2-4, the album's conceptual narrative progression begins with economic critiques, moves to an imagining of these economic exploitations as being satanic in nature, and ends with divine sanction to engage in an

² This critique of identitarian anti-racism comes from Dr. Jonathan Tran, *Yellow Christianity* (still a manuscript at time of writing)

eventual social upheaval while encouraging a revolutionary consciousness in the interim.³ In this section, I will first analyze a poem that Lamar recites at the very end of the album on “Mortal Man” to understand the framework of his Economic-Spiritual Critique. Second, I will summarize Lamar’s struggle with American capitalism in the first antagonist Uncle Sam. Third, I will show how Lamar’s understanding of Uncle Sam is similar to Cedric Robinson’s concepts of racial capitalism and revolutionary consciousness drawing on a track “HiiiPoWeR” from his album *Section 8.0*. This will give context to Lamar’s critique and show how Lamar’s economic critique has matured in *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Fourth, I will summarize Lamar’s struggle with American Anti-Blackness’ satanic nature in the second antagonist Lucy. Fifth, I will show how Lamar encourages Black unification as a response to Lucy’s (and by extension Uncle Sam’s) dividing oppression. Sixth, I will interpret “Mortal Man” as *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s eschatological vision. Finally, I will argue that the tension within Lamar’s presentation of American Anti-Blackness and his response to it is superficial. Understanding the relationship between his presentation and response will resolve any perceived tensions or contradictions.

³ In this section, Anti-Blackness does not mean racism in the contemporary usage: micro-aggressions or interpersonal manifestations of prejudice. It means all of the economic, social, and political oppressions and exploitations that Black people have experienced that have been justified by the ideology of race. This of course implies the experience of racism but sees micro-aggressions and interpersonal manifestations of prejudice as symptoms of racial capitalism.

An Initial Analysis of the Poem "To Pimp a Butterfly"

Before we proceed with this sections' analysis, it would be beneficial to understand Lamar's metaphoric presentation of Black ghetto life and his own role in the community of Black people in America. Lamar recites this poem at the end of his conversation with Tupac on "Mortal Man."

Lamar: I wanted to read one last thing to you
It's actually something a good friend had wrote
Describing my world, it says:
"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
While consuming its environment
The caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive
One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him
But praises the butterfly
The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness
And the beauty within the caterpillar
But having a harsh outlook on life
The caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak
And figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits
Already surrounded by this mad city
The caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon
Which institutionalizes him
He can no longer see past his own thoughts
He's trapped
When trapped inside these walls certain ideas take root, such as
Going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city
The result?
Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant
Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations
That the caterpillar never considered, ending the internal struggle
Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different

They are one and the same”
What’s your perspective on that?
Pac? Pac? *Pac?!!*

Before the analysis of this last poem, we need to note two observations. First, that “mad city” is mentioned three times. This is an emphasis on the societal and structural conditions that Lamar engaged with on a personal level in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Second, this last quote ends with Lamar asking Pac for his input, but is met without a response. Lamar is distraught at Tupac’s untimely death and calls out for him, his hero and the progenitor of commercially successful socially conscious rap music. This implies that now, in Tupac’s absence, Lamar is picking up the torch of the revolutionary socially conscious rapper’s role. If this was not evident before, “Mortal Man” solidifies Lamar’s claim to Tupac’s legacy.

In this last poem, Lamar presents himself as the divinely inspired butterfly that recreates the hood consciousness. At first, we see that the circumstances of Lamar’s “world” bounds its inhabitants to destructive activities for self-preservation. In this self-preservation, the caterpillar internalizes its activities and surroundings, becoming astute to the methods that can offer it the best chance for survival. In this activity, the caterpillar notices “how much the world shuns him but praises the butterfly.” Lamar locates the distinction between caterpillar and butterfly in the following lines. “The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar.” However, being unable to self-actualize because of its circumstances being confined to the “mad city,” the caterpillar falls in on itself, creating “the cocoon” of anti-social beliefs and actions. The caterpillar pimps its own talent, thoughtfulness, and beauty in such a way

that by accepting the identity that is forced upon it tempered by its environment, it becomes “institutionalized.” But this state is unsustainable. The caterpillar, “trapped inside these walls” of its cocoon, realizes that this is no way to cope with its life. With this realization, the caterpillar begins to think for itself using its own experiences as a starting point. It imagines “going home,” and returning to this mental space it can “[bring] back new concepts to this mad city.” With this new consciousness, “wings begin to emerge.” This process of becoming is in contrast to the previous butterfly that forced the caterpillar into self-isolation. While the previous butterfly is defined by societal approval, this second butterfly is a direct result of the energy that is able to effect change. Since the first butterfly is created by society’s approval, defined as society’s possession, this second butterfly must have its basis for becoming elsewhere. This is what Lamar was doing in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, as I covered in chapter one. What *To Pimp a Butterfly* is about is referenced in the last quarter or so of the poem.

The butterfly’s basis for becoming lies in the power that empowers it to “[shed] light on situations that the caterpillar never considered.” In other words, there is an illuminating power that creates this second butterfly. This is a prophetic power of the second butterfly that proceeds from divine illumination. We see the effect of this prophetic power in “ending the internal struggle.” The end to this struggle, in oneself and in one’s community, allows an alternative consciousness to energize the individual and the community to unite against the society that created the conditions that “conceived” the caterpillar. “Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different,” temporally, “they are one and the same” because this is a metaphoric account of Lamar

realizing his prophetic role. In the following three sub-sections I will analyze Lamar's lens which, in continuation with our understanding of the prophetic from the previous chapter, can be rightly understood as prophetic action. In the next section, I will engage with Lamar's prophetic in greater depth.

Uncle Sam

Uncle Sam is a personification of American capitalism. The name Uncle Sam implies a few things: first, it implies the American Dream, second, American capitalism that is the basis of that dream, third, American world dominance due to its capitalism, fourth, American dependence on dominating of Black life (and all minorities in general) in order to achieve its world dominance, and fifth, that Uncle Sam is a figure that was used to recruit the socially disadvantaged to give their lives for American imperial dreams. Uncle Sam makes his appearance in "Wesley's Theory," and makes his exit from the album's narrative when Lamar learns how to defeat him in "Alright." As the same with Lucy in the following section, both Uncle Sam and Lucy will make a reappearance in "Mortal Man" with Lamar's conversation with Tupac.⁴ I will first give a summary of Uncle Sam as he is presented in the album, and then suggest that the character of Uncle Sam can be interpreted in two complementary ways through my analysis: first, that Uncle Sam is has the characteristics of white supremacist exploitation and second, that, in continuation with an analysis of him being connected with white supremacist exploitation, Uncle Sam can be understood as a personification of racial capitalism. I will

⁴ They will resurface not as characters but as ideas.

go through and analyze the interaction between Lamar and Uncle Sam in the first seven songs in sequential order.

Wesley's Theory. Uncle Sam is both an antagonist that Lamar personally battles and an antagonist for Black flourishing. Uncle Sam comes into Lamar's life only after he gets signed to a record label, preying on Lamar's hedonistic aspirations. In "Wesley's Theory,"⁵ Lamar raps about how he will "act a fool," aspiring to "buy a brand new caddy," put "platinum on everything," "buy a strap straight from the CIA,"⁶ then "take a few M-16's to the hood [and] pass 'em all out on the block," which will earn him respect and admiration ("what's good?"). Once his fortune leads him to the White House, he aspires to beat a Republican and be famous. These are unrealistic expectations of money, which may suggest that Lamar is also discussing the false hope some people find in wealth.⁷ Nevertheless, he raps, "uneducated but I got a million dollar check, like that." At this point in the song, the pre-chorus says

We should never gave, we should never gave
N—as money, go back home. Money, go back home.

⁵ Wesley's theory is a reference to the Black actor Wesley Snipes who argued that he did not have to pay his income taxes in a famous court case, citing tax protestor's theory. Hence, "Wesley's Theory." Snipes, not surprisingly, lost the case and was sentenced to 3 years in prison.

⁶ A strap is a gun.

⁷ This could also be a secondary reference to P-Diddy, one of Biggie's proteges, who lost himself in wealth and gangsta behavior when he solidified himself in the limelight.

In this placement in the song, this is a sentiment from the wider supremacist society expressing regret at how Black rappers are irresponsible and menaces to society. This pre-chorus will change its meaning by the end of the song.

Once Lamar's aspirations are presented, Uncle Sam appears to encourage this behavior and exploit Lamar's inability to manage his money. At first, Uncle Sam offers Lamar basic necessities and offers to help him assimilate into American society. He asks,

What you want you? A house or a car?
Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
Anything, see, my name is Uncle Sam I'm your dog.

Then, Uncle Sam becomes malicious, saying "motherfucker you can live at the mall."

Uncle Sam shows his true intentions in the following lines.

I know your kind (that's why I'm kind)
Don't have receipts (oh man, that's fine)
Pay me later, wear those gators
Cliche and say fuck your haters

Uncle Sam shows us that he lives off of exploiting Black talent. He says, "I can see the baller in you, I can see the dollar in you...you make me live forever baby...hit the register and make me feel better, baby...get it all, you deserve it Kendrick." Then, once he exploits Lamar's talent completely, he says "remember, you ain't pass economics in school//And everything you buy, taxes will deny//I'll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five." Then, the pre-chorus comes again. This time, it is not about white resentment of Black prosperity. With Uncle Sam's actions against Lamar, this is a statement of a supremacist government that targets rich Black people and sends them "back home" to poverty. Understood in a historical context, this is White America regretting that they emancipated slaves and are forcing Black people back into financial subjugation. As the

song ends, we see Lamar suggest that this is part of a libidinal economy, with the lyrics “tax man comin’” being repeated eight times to climax. It is clear, from the outset of the album, that Lamar is concerning himself with the supremacist exploitation and oppression of Black people financially by the American system.

For Free? (Interlude). In “For Free? (Interlude),” Lamar and a presumed romantic interest are having a dispute over money. The unnamed Black woman berates Lamar, and lodges a complaint that he didn’t buy her a new outfit or a “Brazilian, wavy, twenty-eight inch” hair extension for the fourth of July. There is a clear framing of this conversation of a Black man’s expectation to celebrate the independence of a country that gained its economic might by slavery, and be expected to participate financially in her physical appearance for it. In response to her, Lamar raps, “this dick ain’t free.” He goes on to reject the capitalist values that she bases her criticism of him on. He later goes on to acknowledge the effects that the capitalist spirit has on relationships. He raps,

Matter of fact it need interest, matter of fact it’s nine inches
Matter of fact see our friendship based on business
Pension, more pension, you’re pinchin’ my percents
It’s been relentless, fuck forgiveness, fuck your feelings
Fuck your sources, all distortion, if you fuck it’s more abortion
More divorce courts and portion
My check with less endorsement left me dormant
Dusted, doomed, disgusted, forced with
Fuck you think is in more shit?

We see here that when the primary concern in relationships is money, it leads to alienation between partners, a lack of empathy, valuing personal wealth over children or counting personal gratification as worth risking pregnancy, and ultimately ruining both

peoples' lives. The relationship that should produce financial stability, a deepening of love and self-sacrifice, and the raising of a new generation actually takes on the antithesis of these ideals. With the following lines, we see that this personal relationship is a metaphor for race relations in America. Lamar raps, "Oh America you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich // Now my dick ain't free," to which the female voice says "I'ma get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up // You ain't no king!"

King Kunta. The next song, "King Kunta," is a response to the last line of "For Free? (Interlude)." However, it is not a very constructive response. Lamar raps that he's "got a bone to pick." He raps, "I don't want you monkey mouthed motherfuckers sittin' in my throne again." While this song is often understood as a great affirmation of Black life and value, in the context of the album it seems to be quite the opposite. Lamar is prideful of his assimilation into the American upper-class, and he uses this position to shame members of his community. He cites the "yams" that he has, or the profit and wealth that he has accrued, while acknowledging that "the yam brought it out of Richard Pryor // Manipulated Bill Clinton with desires."⁸ This position he is in also causes Lamar to lack empathy in verse two, because Lamar came "straight from the bottom, this the belly of the beast // From a peasant to a prince to a motherfuckin' king." However, as we saw in "Wesley's Theory," the corporate music industry gave Lamar his wealth, and

⁸ The wealth and fame that came with success for comedian Richard Pryor drove him to substance abuse: after free-basing cocaine he ran nearly naked through the streets of Los Angeles drinking high proof rum, and he eventually caught himself on fire by pouring it on himself and lighting it. The wealth and fame that came with the presidency led Bill Clinton to disgrace himself by having an affair with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, that led to his impeachment. Note that yams are also a term for female legs which might be insinuating that the female body is commodified for those who Uncle Sam favors.

Uncle Sam guided him in living the way that would end up in his demise, financially and ideologically. So Lamar's appointment to king-status, by the music industry and advised by Uncle Sam, is not an accomplishment as much as it is a tragedy. To this, Lamar speaks the words of the unfolding poem, "I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence."

Institutionalized. In the next song, "Institutionalized," Lamar questions again the concept of "realness," but in reference to wealth. He asks, "What money got to do with it // When I don't know the full definition of a rap image?" Here, Lamar questions what it really means to be a successful rapper navigating the dangerous waters of the music industry and American culture. In the song's last verse, Lamar tells the fictionalized story of bringing one of his friends to the BET awards.⁹ Lamar criticizes before this those who are trapped in mediocrity because they don't put in the effort to attain their dreams. In the narrative, Lamar criticizes his friend for wanting to steal from the rich people at the awards, understanding this impulse as a vice. Bilal sings, "shit don't change until you get up and wash your ass." Lamar raps about his friend's astonishment at seeing the immense wealth in the room, he poignantly asks, "it's a recession, then why the fuck he in King of Diamonds?"¹⁰ Lamar is showing the vast class divide, and the hypocrisy that he feels in himself being rich while other Black people are in abject poverty. To this, Lamar turns Bilal's chorus back on himself. He admonishes himself for displaying his wealth in a

⁹ It would not be an incredible suggestion that this is a metaphor for self-conflict.

¹⁰ King of Diamonds is a high-profile strip club. These rappers are literally throwing away their money.

capacity that affirms the greatest capitalistic achievement. Lamar takes this admonition and changes his ways: he “took his show money, stashed it in the mozey-wozey // Hollywood’s nervous.” Lamar chooses to reinvest his earnings in his community instead of keeping it all for his own use. While this is a commendable action, and meant to be a lesson, in the song’s context Lamar is still trapped in the capitalist mindset. On the next song, he shows a more intimate side of this.

These Walls. In the song “These Walls,” Lamar takes advantage of the financial vulnerability of a Black woman. The song at first seems like a song about “sex,” as is seductively said by a female voice in the introduction after moans of pleasure (or pain). Lamar uses ambiguous words to describe his interaction with the woman that is suggestive of an ulterior motive. This ambiguity runs through the song but is not evident until a second listen when the listener knows how the song ends. Lamar speaks at the end of the song

So when you play this song rewind the first verse
About me abusing my power so you can hurt
About me and her in the shower whenever she horny
About me and her in the after hours of the morning
About her baby daddy currently serving life
And about how she think about you until we meet up at night
About the only girl that cared about you until you asked her
And how she fucking on a famous rapper
Walls could talk

While this is a fictional personal revelation from Lamar, this situation is in direct relation to a lack of welfare, as seen in her financial dependence on Lamar, and is exacerbated by the prison system, her baby daddy who likely was the couples’ breadwinner not being

able to provide anymore. It is also important to note that the woman's baby daddy is the one who shot one of Lamar's friends, perhaps from the same group in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Either way, the situation not only implies lack of welfare and an exploitative prison system, but also the socio-economic factors that lead to gang violence. It is in this system that Lamar takes revenge on that man. This also leads to the dehumanization of the woman as an object to be used for sex and revenge instead of a loving partner. Lamar speaks the next few lines of the unfolding poem in acknowledgement of what he is doing:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power, full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screaming in a hotel room

u. The next song, "u," begins with Lamar screaming. This song is a glimpse into his broken mental state that was caused by his meteoric rise to fame and the effects of being in upper-class American society. Lamar references "you ain't shit" from "For Free? (Interlude)," which suggests an internalization of this sentiment. There are two main things that hurt Lamar to the core: wealth has taken him out of his community to such an extent that he has lost his purpose and his efficacy. Lamar yells to a mirror, "feel like you don't feel, confidence in yourself // breaking on marble floors." Wealth makes his self-confidence worse, not better. Lamar admits at the end of the verse, "thought money would change you, made you more complacent // I fucking hate you, I hope you embrace it." Lamar has lost his focus because money and fame have taken his attentions. Money, here, is the root of Lamar's evils. As an effect of this losing focus, Lamar regrets that his

...little sister bakin'
A baby inside, just a teenager where's your patience?
Where was your antennas? Where was the influence you speak of?
You preached in front of one-hunnid-thousand but never reached her
I fuckin' tell you fuckin' failure—you ain't no leader!"

Wealth has made Lamar lose his “antennas,” or ability to relate with and understand the people he is trying to reach. There is one last thing, Lamar says, that the wealth that has brought him off the street can't do: “money can't stop a suicidal weakness.” So Lamar's situation is a catch-22. He could have died on the street from gang violence or shoot himself because wealth has caused him to lose his grounding. The song ends with the listener not knowing if he will end up killing himself. Thankfully, it may be speculated, Lamar passes out before he can follow through.

Alright. Out of this dark night, Lamar finds himself again and has the ability to defeat Uncle Sam in the song “Alright.” Lamar has a very simple system to defeat Uncle Sam. Lamar recognizes American capitalist exploitation, fights against the system, and understands this fight as one empowered by God. Lamar presents us with this message before he lists how Black artists are exploited by the music industry (“I recognize you're looking at me for the pay cut”), how he is moved to retaliation (“homicide be looking at you from the face down”), where he finds escape (“Painkillers only put me in the twilight/ Where pretty pussy and Benjamin is the highlight”), and he finally realizes how he is consumed with his vices, but holds onto hope that he can change (I think I gone cray/ Drown inside my vices all day/ Won't you please believe when I say...). We then see that the upcoming pre-chorus introduces the main subject of this specific song,

because this first verse has been a summarization of what he has rapped about thus far in the album. We also see that Lamar is making a personal claim in the first verse, but also that his first-person voice stands as a representative for a larger group. The pre-chorus goes,

Wouldn't you know
We been hurt been down before, n—a
When our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like 'where do we go?,' n—a
And we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho, n—a
I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright

This song is so powerful because the pre-chorus and chorus effectively display the disdain of the Black community against oppressive economic and police forces, and the lyrics are short, punchy, and catchy enough to be used as a protest song. We also see the religious significance of this reality. We see that Lamar expresses a history of oppression (“we been hurt been down before”) and a hopelessness at the situation (“lookin’ at the world like where do we go?”). We then see where this anger is directed, (“we hate po-po”), and why (“wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho”). Then, we see the dual response to this anger, and how the two seemingly dichotomous avenues for making things right might be two sides of the same coin. Lamar raps, “I’m at the preacher’s door,” signifying that there is both a human element, going to a person on earth, as well as a divine element, that the person is an ordained minister of God. We can understand this image as a this-worldly image of desperation and hope, that liberation from oppression is not only a human retaliation, nor a gnostic escapism. We see that the actions, “my knees gettin’

weak, and my gun might blow,” are not two different avenues, one of prayer and one of violence, but that these two things, rebellion against oppression and divine power, are not to be understood apart from each other. And even though this state of angst which produces this Malcolm X style action is difficult to deal with (“knees gettin’ weak”), “if God got us then we gon’ be alright.”

The outro of the song concludes the “u” state of being. Lamar raps,

I keep my head up high
I cross my heart and hope to die
Lovin’ me is complicated
Too afraid of a lot of changes
I’m alright, and you’re afraid of it
Dark nights in my prayers

Lamar frames that “lovin’ me is complicated” has to be informed by the way he looks to God, “I keep my head up high/ I cross my heart and hope to die.” The fact that Lamar is changing, and the way people interact with and perceive him are changing, causes him to experience depression. But despite being “afraid of a lot of changes,” he is “alright” because of his vocation that he makes music for his community and the Black community in general, he “write until I right with God.” With this, Uncle Sam disappears as an antagonist of the album, and Lucy emerges in the second half of this song. In the subsection after next I will discuss Lucy, but now I will digress to further discuss Lamar’s similarities with the Black Radical tradition.

Kendrick Lamar's Similarity to The Black Radical Tradition: Economic Focus and the "Revolutionary Consciousness"

Kendrick Lamar's economic critique of American Anti-Blackness is similar to that of the Black Marxists, especially Cedric Robinson and the Black Radical tradition. Lamar agrees with Robinson on two key aspects: focus on economic concerns and what Robinson calls the "revolutionary consciousness." As we have just seen, Lamar identifies the economic forces of American Anti-Blackness as a primary concern in his presentation and as we will see in his discussion with Tupac on "Mortal Man," this economic critique has with it the hope of social revolution.

In Cedric Robinson's work *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, he critiques Marx's analysis as being far too limited in regard to the way that Western capitalism fabricated race as an ideology to justify the exploitation of non-whites. Robinson argues that this racialization is part of the fabric of the Western imagination. He writes that "at the very beginnings of European civilization...the integration of the Germanic migrants with older European peoples resulted in a social order of domination from which a racial theory of order emerged; one from which the medieval nobilities would immerse themselves and their power in fictional histories, positing distinct racial origins for rulers and the dominated."¹¹ He writes further that this

Racialism insinuated not only medieval, feudal, and capitalist social structures, forms of property, and modes of production, but as well the very values and traditions of consciousness through which the peoples of these ages came to understand their worlds and the experiences. Western culture, constituting the structure from which European consciousness was appropriated, the structure in

¹¹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.), 66-67

which social identities and perceptions were grounded in the past, transmitted a racialism that adapted to the political and material exigencies of the moment.¹²

He summarizes the genealogy of racialism throughout the following centuries:

The extension of slavery and the application of racism to non-European peoples as an organizing structure by first the ruling feudal strata and then the bourgeoisies of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries retained this practical habit, this social convention...from the seventeenth century on, English merchant capital (to cite an important example) incorporated African labor in precisely these terms, that is, the same terms through which it had earlier absorbed Irish labor. Moreover, European racialism was to undergo a kind of doubling onto itself, for in between the era of intra-European racism that characterized the first appearance of European consciousness and the predatory era of African enslavement, is the almost entirely exogenous phenomenon of Islamic domination of the Mediterranean—the eventual fount of European revitalization and recivilization.¹³

Thus, as Robinson argues, with the Islamic incursion into the Mediterranean and parts of Europe, a common racialized enemy was perceived, and with it a new system of slavery.

This opened up the intra-European racist thought and exploitation to extra-European racist thought and exploitation.

Moving to the injustices done to Africans by Europeans in slavery, Robinson notes a few important individual consequences: itemization,¹⁴ reductionism of the plurality of African culture into a homogeneous singularity,¹⁵ the destruction of Black past by the construction of a racist term, the ‘Negro’ which has a significance completely

¹² Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 66

¹³ *ibid*, 67

¹⁴ *ibid*, 73

¹⁵ *ibid*, 73

devoid of historical meaning,¹⁶ and counting African labor as capital.¹⁷ Each of these injustices are forms of abstraction and alienation motivated by an interest to exploit labor which is justified by racist categories. It is important to note: while it is true that Southern plantation owners were racist, this was not the primary reason for the continuation of slavery. The primary reason, in this view, is that it was economic concerns for free labor and maximized returns on investment, as well as a debt industry centered around the slave trade, that perpetuated this ungodly institution. It was the racist capitalist, not the capitalist racist, that is to blame. He argues that this racialized self-consciousness caused Marx to be blind to capitalism's use of race as ideology, to both justify exploitation on racial grounds and miseducate every person in these societies to think of themselves as belonging to a particular race.

Over and against these injustices, Robinson identifies the constant resistance to European exploitation and miseducation as a “revolutionary consciousness.” This resistance is not a historical event, rather it is a spirit that endures. “Black radicalism is a negation of Western civilization...it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization.”¹⁸ In rejecting the itemization of slave laborers and the presentation of a homogenous African culture which served as a

¹⁶ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 81

¹⁷ *ibid*, 109

¹⁸ *ibid*, 73

racialized category that justified exploitation, Black Radicals reject the very basis of what Western society is: an exploitative system. However, as Robinson identifies, this negation has not taken the form of mass violence.

Robinson argues that it is the revolutionary consciousness, not the destruction of an oppressive system, that the radical tradition has been historically concerned with.¹⁹ “Western observers...have repeatedly remarked that in the vast series of encounters between Blacks and their oppressors...Blacks have seldom employed the level of violence that they (the Westerners) understood the situation required.”²⁰ Indeed, “such violence did not come naturally to African peoples.”²¹ Rather, “This violence was not inspired by an external object, it was not understood as a part of an attack on a system, or an engagement with an abstraction of oppressive structures and relations...For them defeat was an internal affair...This was a revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people and not merely from the social formations of capitalist slavery or the relations of production of colonialism.”²² This communal attachment to how “they lived on their own terms, they died on their own terms, they obtained freedom [in death] on their own terms,” are “terms that these African peasants and farmers had brought with them to their captivity.”²³ This mindset is

¹⁹ This challenges the afro-pessimist idea of fungibility.

²⁰ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168

²¹ *ibid*, 309

²² *ibid*, 168-9

²³ *ibid*, 170

in the spirit of Black Radicalism. The revolutionary consciousness provides the ethos and essence of resistance. The resistance that Africans brought with them across the Atlantic survived and is coming to fruition. This intends “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”²⁴ I am not saying that Black resistance is not or should not be against oppressive systems. Rather, as Robinson puts it later in his book, “this was the raw material of the Black radical tradition, the values, ideas, conceptions, and constructions of reality from which resistance was manufactured.”²⁵

In conclusion, the Black Radicalist understanding of the world that Robinson champions is, in part, understood in this way: in the beginning of Western civilization there was racialism. This racialism endured, and the capitalists called it good. This racialism was then used to justify the exploitation and oppression of Africans as an ideology, as it had been used to justify the exploitation and oppression of other European peoples previously. Chattel slavery, the exemplar of this system, resulted in abstractions and alienations that ate away at the humanity of the enslaved people. However, along the way, the enslaved were not fungible. They took up methods of resistance that kindled the revolutionary consciousness. But, due to the West’s particular ability for large-scale cruelty and brutality and the African peoples’ unaquaintedness with constant large-scale engagements, Black slaves did not engage in mass-murder events even in their many

²⁴ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 171

²⁵ *ibid*, 309

rebellions when they had great opportunity. Nevertheless, this commitment to liberation persisted and is in a constant progressing state to fruition. Now, the work is focused on critique of Western culture and aimed at its rejection. It is along these lines that Lamar wrote the song “HiiiPower” on his album *Section8.0*. Lamar frequently references this song in his subsequent albums and features, but nowhere in as much depth and relevance as in his engagement with Uncle Sam. I will briefly look back into Lamar’s discography for assistance in elucidating his more mature vision on *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

HiiiPoWeR. “HiiiPower,” or alternatively styled “HiiiPoWeR,” is a radical message created by Kendrick Lamar when he was in a group called Black Hippy. Hidden within the name is a claim in and of itself. “Hiii,” with the three “i’s” standing for “heart, honor, respect,” is a behavioral code between a people group. This people group, “PoWeR,” or ‘poor we are,’ is the lower class and anyone facing exploitation or discrimination. From the onset, we are interpreting this song to be a song of solidarity and empowerment to the proletariat, the Black proletariat especially.

Lamar begins each verse with the line, “visions of Martin Luther starin’ at me.” This immediately frames what HiiiPower is and what Lamar’s focus is on: social justice. Verse one begins like this:

Visions of Martin Luther starin’ at me
Malcolm X put a hex on my future, someone catch me
I’m falling victim to a revolutionary song, the Serengeti’s clone

Lamar connects the force and reach of this “revolutionary song” with the Serengeti wildebeest migration. In this image, he envisions a movement that mobilizes an

unstoppable number of people that turn away from their previous existing in one place to migrate to another. In other words, an energized populous that upends the current state of American racist structures. He raps further,

I got my finger on the mothafuckin' pistol
Aiming it at a pig, Charlotte's web is going to miss you
My issue isn't televised, and you ain't gotta tell the wise
How to stay on beat, because our life's an instrumental
This is physical and mental, I won't sugar coat it
You'd die from diabetes if these other n—as wrote it
And everything you see on TV just a figment of imagination

In the spirit of this revolution, Lamar targets those who maintain socioeconomic and mental poverty: the police and the media. The police target and segregate Black people from white society so that Black communities are forced into ghettos, and the police have free reign to terrorize these communities. The media does the same thing, but with information. The media either does not cover the realities of racist capitalism or they “sugar coat it,” so that when outside eyes look into the inner city they are misled or blinded. Lamar is not falling for the traps set for oppressed peoples, of self-destruction, of holding others down, and of letting the media control one's thoughts and actions. “While you mothafuckas waiting, I be off the slave ship, building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs.” Similar to what Lamar and Ab-soul were saying in “Ab-soul's outro,” it takes not only a physical and mental, but also a philosophical revolution to overcome injustice. In this context, it means creating new ways of encoding information, creating new culture, building one's own worldview and building new structures. Instead of waiting for injustice to fade away, Lamar is inviting all who listen to his message to join

him in his act of identifying and destroying racist structures in order to create a new society that is free from oversight from racist governmental and economic structures.

Verse two goes into this further. While Lamar aligns himself with the historical social justice movement in verse one, in verse two he distances himself from King's peaceful action. Lamar raps,

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me
If I see it how he seen it, that would make my parents happy
Sorry mama, I can't turn the other cheek
They wanna knock me off the edge like a fucking widow's peak

Lamar goes on to include spiritual language that directly informs, though also questions, his militancy.

And she always told me pray for the weak
These demons got me, I ain't prayed for some weeks
Dear Lord come save me, the devil's working hard
He probably clocking double shifts on all of his jobs

We see here that Lamar is beginning to connect outside forces that maintain oppressive structures and demonic activity, occupying the same space. We will see these two play the same role in *To Pimp a Butterfly*. However, we may question if this militancy is a product of revolution or of demonic influence. The implication is ambiguous, however it is most likely that Lamar perceives sin as something that hinders the right exercise of power against oppressive regimes. In this way, the prayer that fends off the devil also informs the most effective path to liberation.

Returning to a Black Radical-esque sentiment, Alori Joh sings the bridge,

Every day we fight the system just to make our way
We been down for too long, but that's alright
We was built to be strong, 'cause it's our life na-na-na

Every day we fight the system, we fight the system
We fight the system (Never like the system)
We been down for too long but that's alright, na-na-na

We see from the repetition that it is “the system” that is Lamar and co.’s target.

Interestingly, the bridge’s lyrics are recycled somewhat into one of Lamar’s most significant songs of his career, “Alright,” which becomes a “revolutionary song” itself.

Verse three alludes to what “the system” is. The last lines of verse two and the first of verse three are the same:

Who said a black man in the Illuminati?
Last time I checked, that was the biggest racist party.

While Lamar is referring to the conspiracy which states that the Illuminati rules global events and politics, this is also able to be understood as an economic critique. Let us engage in a thought experiment: there is an entity that controls world politics and events. This is an exclusive and secretive entity. This entity also controls the global economy. This entity has profited by and loves the exploitation of those that are not in this entity’s command structure. If I can take a wild guess, this sure sounds a lot like late-stage capitalism which was created by and is sustained by discrimination against non-whites and exploitation of the lower class. Lamar seems to be making this connection, especially because of the lines which follow:

Last time I checked, we was racing with Marcus Garvey
On the freeway to Africa 'til I wreck my Audi
I want everybody to view my autopsy
So you can see exactly where the government had shot me
No conspiracy, my fate is inevitable
They play musical chairs once I'm on that pedestal

Alluding again to MLK, Lamar seems to realize that what he is saying is divisive. What follows assuredly is:

Pull your guns on me, let's set it off
Cause a riot, throw a Molotov
Somebody told me them pirates had got lost
Cause we been off them slave ships
Got our own pyramids, write our own hieroglyphs

Lamar is presenting the deadly tension that he feels, and that Black communities feel. It is the sentiment that caused the Watt's Riots, and our recent BLM protests. In effect, if the oppressive structures do one more thing to target Black individuals, there will be dire consequences. These consequences will shake American society to its core. Lamar is rewriting America's origin story, from explorers to lost "pirates." These pirates, that pillaged and plundered and brought Africans back on the passage, built for themselves a pirate haven on the backs of non-whites. But Lamar ends the song with hope. This hope is that the last two lines of the verse are now in the present tense. The revolution lies in wait.

Lamar's concept of HiiiPoWeR and Robinson's two points of race as ideology and the revolutionary consciousness come together in Lamar's economic critique of American Anti-Blackness in three main ways. The first is that American capitalism exploits Black life in a myriad of ways related to miseducation: racialization and separation from heritage. The second is the identification that American capitalism uses this fabricated reality to economically dominate the poor, specifically the Black underclass. The third is that Lamar envisions a social upheaval that rejects this false reality. Lamar will continue with his spiritual critique of American Anti-Blackness

exposing that this system is at its core satanic, and it, distinct from Robinson, requires a divine power to fully liberate the oppressed.

Lucy

The character of Lucy represents Lucifer. Once Lamar rejects Uncle Sam, Lucy comes to him promising the same things. This suggests that the temptations of Uncle Sam run deeper than having a moralistic element. Rather, there is a satanic basis for everything that Uncle Sam stands for. I will examine the instances in which Lucy does the same work as Uncle Sam and show how Lucy is actually like the puppet master pulling the strings of Uncle Sam.

Alright. In the second half of “Alright,” Lucy assumes the antagonist role until the end of the album. However, unlike the personified Uncle Sam that has a material, if abstract, form and effect, Lucy acts in a much more diabolical way. Lucy works through Lamar’s own desires and the desires of others around him. While it is true that Uncle Sam capitalized on Lamar’s initial hedonistic aspirations, Lucy seduces Lamar to do the same deeds that Uncle Sam did while Lamar decries the evil of Uncle Sam. Lucy makes Lamar a hypocrite. Because of this, even when the economic concerns that Uncle Sam presents are solved, Lucy is a much more difficult beast to defeat. Uncle Sam works systemically and materially, Lucy attempts to preserve oppression and perverts Lamar’s perceptions and actions. Indeed, as we will see, it is prophetic music that is Lucy’s match.

Lucy offers Lamar the same things that Uncle Sam offers. Lucy asks,

What you want you? A house or a car?
Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
Anything, see, my name is Lucy I'm your dog
Motherfucker you can live at the mall

There is a change in Lamar's relationship with these offers. While with Uncle Sam these items took on an economic character, as status symbols, indulgence, or practicality, when Lucy offers them, they take on a character of spiritual deficiency. Lamar raps, that he can "see the evil," that he "know it's illegal," but he "don't think about it." Describing his relationship with Lucy he raps "digging in my pocket, ain't a profit big enough to feed you // Every day my logic: get another dollar just to keep you." Lamar had a similar relationship with Uncle Sam, where Uncle Sam influenced Lamar to buy things for himself and dig himself into a financial hole. However, with Lucy, this relationship makes Lamar dependent on the vices that Lucy encourages within himself. Lamar anticipates the emergence of Lucy when he defeats Uncle Sam in the first verse and yet still raps, "drown inside my vices all day." The economic concerns are a systemic issue to be sure, but Lamar is saying that economic critique must carry with it a critique of self. Thus, in this way he evades Marx's materialism maintaining that there are systemic economic problems but that in defeating Uncle Sam the same concerns will arise and materialistic efforts will be ineffective against the soul. The blurring of lines between Uncle Sam and Lucy's influences strike at the heart of Lamar's critique.

For Sale? (Interlude). In the next song, "For Sale? (Interlude)," Lamar displays a fictionalized conversation he has with Lucy. Lucy attempts to seduce Lamar into giving himself completely to vice. Lamar depicts Lucy as one who gets ahold of people, enticing

them with substances to make them “idle” and irresponsible. Lamar then quotes other things that Lucy offers

Lucy give you no worries, Lucy got million stories
About these rappers that I came after when they was boring
Lucy gon’ fill your pockets
Lucy gon’ move your mama out of Compton
Inside the gigantic mansion like I promised
Lucy just want your trust and loyalty

Lamar then indicts the rich for association with Lucy. Lamar shows the risk that he runs being rich and successful, because Lucy is “at these functions,” likely a reference to the BET awards from earlier. Lamar continues speaking in Lucy’s playful voice, but gradually returns to his normal voice as he reaches the last line of the verse. Lamar says in persona Lucy, “All your life I watched you // And now you all grown up to sign this contract, if that’s possible.” This contract is the spiritual side of the record label contract. Instead of signing his life away to the music industry, on this level Lamar is signing away his soul to the devil. To conclude the song, Lamar speaks new lines of the unfolding poem

The evils of Lucy was all around me
So I went runnin’ for answers
Until I came home

Momma. The next song, “Momma,” concerns this coming home. Admittedly, the song is cryptic and the second half of the album does not follow the same easily analyzable structure as the first half. To understand this song, we must first understand its backstory. Lamar found his home and sense of belonging when he took a trip to South Africa. Lamar said in an interview, “I felt like I belonged in Africa...I saw all the things

that I wasn't taught. Probably one of the hardest things to do is put [together] a concept on how beautiful a place can be, and tell a person this while they're still in the ghettos of Compton. I wanted to put that experience in the music.”²⁶ While this is what motivated Lamar when making this song, the images of a mother and home in this song also works metaphorically for a type of mindset. Particularly, the mindset of self-love and unity. This mindset is heritage-based, a heritage that was taken away from Black people by enslavers motivated by Lucy to make enslaved Africans more easily controlled.

The context of this song is Lamar reflecting on all the things that he knows. He raps, “I know everything, I know myself...I know what I know and I know it well // Not to ever forget until I realized I didn’t know shit // The day I came home.” Next, we see that Lamar is referring to Africa. He has an interaction with a little Black boy that “resemble [his] features.” The boy tells him to

Take a glimpse at your family’s ancestor
Make a new list, of everything you thought was progress
And that was all bullshit, I mean your life is full of turmoil
You spoiled by fantasies of who you are
I feel bad for you
I can attempt to enlighten you...
...if you pick destiny over rest in peace
Then be an advocate go tell your homies especially
To come back home

The third verse ends with Lamar’s world being completely changed. This little African boy cuts to the center of his being and offers an alternative to the way he lives his life, but Lamar doesn’t find out what it is. What happens is that Lamar is opened to the possibility

²⁶ Jessie Morris, “Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down the Meaning of To Pimp a Butterfly,” Complex, February 8, 2016.

of spreading the little boy's message, and that this is something that is worth not committing suicide to pursue. We see in part two of this song, Lamar chooses his "destiny" of being a prophet because he has found his purpose and meaning, not opposed to when his mother told him in "Real" but even greater. Lamar raps, the refrain in part two,

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?
Tell me something, think I'm losing my mind"

The boy doesn't answer, and Lamar ends the outro with the statement,

I can be your advocate
I can preach for you if you tell me what the matter is

The second half of the album is strange because Lamar is actively struggling with Lucy throughout. Lucy is not like Uncle Sam. Lucy cannot be destroyed by human activity. Thus, one must struggle against evil one's entire life. Lamar seems to be giving us a model of this, climaxing on "The Blacker the Berry." I read "Momma," and Lamar's wider understanding of Africa, as being the alternative to Lucy. Lamar thought many things about himself and the world, but they crumbled when he found his heritage that was hidden from him. In this way, Lucy is a dividing force, dividing racialized groups and dividing a person from himself.

Hood Politics. The following song, "Hood Politics," is about this division. First, in the intro, he shows his division from his friends in Compton when he doesn't pick up a phone call from an unnamed man. Lamar then shows his lack of empathy in the chorus.

He calls many groups of Black people “boo boo,” a slang for “shit.” In the second verse, Lamar inconspicuously depicts that Lucy and Uncle Sam gave him the things they both offered. He gets out of a Cadillac, just having received oral sex, and is on his way to be involved in retaliatory violence. However, to complete the scenario, he connects this image of gang violence with American politics and racism. He raps, “they tell me its a new gang in town...DemoCrips and ReBloodicans // Red state versus a blue state, which one you governin’?” Further, he raps,

Everybody want to talk about who this and who that
Who the realest and who wack, who white or who black
...your priorities are fucked up.

Lamar is showing that it is satanic systems that pit people against each other, and by infighting sections off possibility for progress. This is a sentiment that Lamar has expressed repeatedly, but nowhere as explicitly as his song “F*ck Your Ethnicity,” on *Section8.0*. That song begins with a voice in a skit saying, “I recognize all of you. Every creed and color. With that being said, fuck your ethnicity. You understand that? We gon’ talk about a lot of shit that concerns you. All of you.” To this Lamar raps,

Now I don’t give a fuck if you
Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, goddammit
That don’t mean shit to me
Fuck your ethnicity, n—a

On its own, this sounds like Lamar is advocating for a post-racial society, or that he is ignoring the significance of race, even if it is not an ontological category. But in context with the album, where Lamar and Ab-Soul iron out what HiiiPoWeR is, we see that Lamar is really making an economic critique. HiiiPoWeR, meaning “Po’ We aRe,” is putting more weight on political economy than race relations, because, fundamentally,

political economy fabricated and exploits race, not the other way around. It is this idea that Lamar is gesturing toward with this song, and Lamar implicitly claims that it is a satanic spirit that inhabits this system. Therefore, to see true change, there can't be economic liberation alone, there must be spiritual liberation that leads to unification of all against the oppressive and exploitative system. But in this album, specifically the Black community.

How Much a Dollar Cost? In the next song, "How Much A Dollar Cost?," Lamar meets God in Africa and the event solidifies the idea that the use of wealth has a necessarily moral element. Like the previous song, Lamar begins by displaying his achievement of what Uncle Sam and Lucy offered to him. Lamar is approached by a homeless Black man who asks him for a dollar's worth of rand, the currency in South Africa. Lamar is driving a luxury car, likely wearing expensive clothing, and goes into a gas station to pay with cash. But when the homeless man asks him for money, Lamar says that he doesn't have enough to spare. The satanic spirit is behind Lamar's greed and self-interest. The homeless man gets mad at Lamar, and they exchange words for a time until the man reveals to Lamar that he is "the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power...the Holy Spirit, the nerve of Nazareth." Lamar finds out what a dollar really costs, "the price of having a spot in heaven." It is because of this event that Lamar repents, and Lucy finally meets his end.²⁷ Lamar defeats Lucy only when God discloses divine-world that is capable of offering an alternative to the identitarian schema.

²⁷ I will discuss the particulars of this disclosive event in the next section.

Dis-Unity as Lucy's Diabolical Work; Divinely Empowered Unification as Remedy

At this point in the album, we have seen how Uncle Sam exploits Black life and how Lamar defeated him by recognizing American capitalist exploitation, fighting the system, and understanding this fight as empowered by God. We then discussed how Lamar's Economic critique is very similar to the Black Marxist critique of American Anti-Blackness that Cedric Robinson posits in the tradition of the Black Radicals. Then, we saw how Lucy does the same thing as Uncle Sam, though with the aspect that he cannot be defeated by societal restructuring because Lucy is a spiritual antagonist. Lucy can only be defeated by Jesus. In the previous song, "How Much a Dollar Cost?," God comes to Lamar and frees him from Lucy's clutches. In the following three songs, "Complexion (A Zulu Love)," "The Blacker the Berry," and "i," Lamar takes this newly received freedom and preaches messages of divinely empowered unity. This message is anticipated by "Hood Politics," but in "Hood Politics," as a continuation of the more Black Radical message of "F*ck Your Ethnicity" in the philosophy of HiiiPoWeR, it is incomplete until God frees Lamar from Lucy's grasp. This message that Lamar repeats from God-as-homeless-Black-man's disclosure of divine-world is not without complications. As we will soon learn, Lamar has to negotiate his own complicity in American Anti-Blackness in the song "The Blacker the Berry." However, instead of wallowing in shame or regret, Lamar admits to his hypocrisy and invites his listener to do the same, establishing a precedent of repentance before establishing his final empowering message of Black kingship on "i."

Complexion (A Zulu Love). In “Complexion (A Zulu Love),” Lamar rejects the satanic spirit that produced sexism, colorism, and racialism. The story of the song is a love story between a dark-skinned enslaved man and a light-skinned enslaved woman.²⁸ Lamar cites two primary evil ideas: “what the Germans done,” impressing race theory into their colonies thereby racializing Black people and pitting them against each other, and “Willie Lynch theory,” keeping slaves fighting between themselves in order to more easily maintain control over all of them and to maximize labor output. The application of this metaphor to current American race discourse and pitting minorities against themselves for the most menial labor is palpable. Then, to end the song, Lamar hands over the mic to Black female rapper Rapsody,²⁹ who ends her long verse with “call your brothers magnificent, call all the sisters queens // We all on the same team, blues and pirus, no colors ain’t a thing.”

The Blacker the Berry. In the next song, “The Blacker the Berry,” Lamar makes his accusation against white America, but also wrestles with his complicity in the system. In the complex and multilayered intro, he expresses experiencing double consciousness,

²⁸ It is significant that their skin tones correspond to their position on the plantation. Vincent Lloyd elaborates on this in the introduction to his book, *Religion of the Field Negro*, with the example of the field slave, who typically had a darker skin tone, and the house slave, who typically had a lighter skin tone. Vincent Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1-17.

²⁹ The entire song was originally supposed to be only Rapsody and Prince. Lamar didn’t want to even make an appearance on the track, but due to scheduling conflicts with Prince and other factors, the song ended up how it is now. It is important to note the significance of Lamar giving over so much of this song to a female rapper and introducing her by name beforehand.

rejects white Christianity's god, and voices America's desire to enslave Black people again. Further into the song, he paints a picture of revolution, widespread rioting against America reminiscent of the Watts riots. He then explains why this revolution is happening

You hate me don't you?
You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture.
You're fucking evil. I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey.
You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me...
...You sabotage my community, makin' a killin'
You made me a killer, emancipation of a real n—a

Lamar raps in the second verse about how America makes him "irrelevant to society," that "penitentiary would only hire me," and that white Christianity "church me with your fake prophesizing that I'mma be just another slave in my head." In verse three, he says that this is "generational hatred // Its genocidism, its grimy, little justification." He says, "you hate my people, I can tell cause its threats when I see you." However, in verse three, Lamar flips the picture around on himself. He raps,

It's funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war
Two tribal armies that want to build and destroy
Remind me of these Compton Crip gangs that live next door
Beefin' with Pirus, only death settle the score
So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers...
...So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
When gangbangin made me kill a n—a blacker than me
Hypocrite!"

The song then has a musical outro so that the listener can reflect on what Lamar said. This is not a statement saying that Black on Black violence is the root of Black suffering. Rather, Lamar is expressing the inner conflict of someone who has experienced the effects of generational economic oppression. I have covered this topic in the previous

chapter. Lamar also doesn't claim to have any answer because the reality of inner-city violence cannot be solved by a scapegoat or reductionist answers. Lamar instead shows what state of life that supremacist systems and incessant oppression forces Black people in his community into. This is the result of the satanic forces of supremacy. What Lamar does in the following songs is an attempt at re-education, a refocusing of a collective consciousness that will, hopefully, encourage Black unification against supremacist systems.

You ain't gotta lie (Momma said). The next song, "You ain't gotta lie (Momma said)," is about the concept of realness. Lamar is saying in this song, like I showed in chapter one, that the gang ideal is a destructive coping mechanism. Lamar says, additionally, that one cannot lie to oneself. It is only in the recognition of reality that Uncle Sam and Lucy can be fought. Lamar calls for a more genuine expression of personal grief and a more realist perspective of what is going on in America.

i. To introduce the following song, "i," I will first turn to how the music video frames the song. In the video, an older Black man in a white suit says these words as two younger Black men fight in a club:

Stop! Stop! We talkin' about peace!
A piece of yours, a piece of mine!
A peace of mind!
One nation—under a groove.³⁰

³⁰ "one nation": Zulu Nation, the world-wide Black unity movement started by Afrika Bambaataa.

This song celebrates life and calls for unity. It has images of revolution, and in the album version of the song, which is like a recording of a live performance, before Lamar can finish his thought about preaching unity to the coming generation there is a fight in the crowd. Lamar then admonishes the men fighting, calling their squabble “petty.” He says that since America takes the time to oppress Black people (“the judge make time”), that Black people should band together and fight back. The unifying vehicle is music. Lamar says that fights have no place in a concert because they have “come out here to enjoy the last little bit of life we got left.” He then raps acapella. He redefines the n-word as “N.E.G.U.S.” This is the Ethiopian word for king. He says that he “retraced my steps on what they never taught me // Did my homework before the government caught me.” That “the history books overlook the word and hide it // America tried to make it to a house divided // The homies recognize we been using it wrong.” It is the supremacist forces that have hidden Black peoples’ worth from them. And “Kendrick Lamar, by far, [is] the realest Negus alive” because he has discovered his true worth in spite of America’s work to hide it, and he is moving to spread the message so that there may be Black unification to resist supremacist forces.

Mortal Man. In the last song of the album, “Mortal Man,” Lamar solidifies this hope. The satanic spirit that motivates supremacist hatred and racial capitalism is defeated by understanding Black self-worth in light of God and history. He speaks the final revelation of the poem, and I quote a selected section:

But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city
I was entering a new one

A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination
Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned
The word was respect
Just because you wore a different gang color than mines
Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a black man
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

“Mortal Man” : To Pimp a Butterfly’s Eschatological Vision

The revolutionary content of “Mortal Man” is *To Pimp a Butterfly’s* eschatological vision in the following ways: first, the hope of spiritual liberation is intertwined with economic liberation. Lamar understands the gospel as radically this-worldly. Second, since the political economy that holds Black life in subjection to supremacist structures is rightly understood as satanic, it leads to the idea that Anti-Black violence, either physical violence or social violence in terms of oppression and exploitation, will lead to a magnification of judgement.

On “Mortal Man,” Lamar and Tupac discuss how ultimately, what the supremacist society does when it oppresses Black life is not secure capitalist interests but bring American society one step closer to collapse. Lamar prefaces this discussion with the entirety of the poem that runs through the album. I will quote a section of it which is relevant:

But while my loved ones was fighting
A continuous war
Back in the city
I was entering a new one
A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination
made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned
The word was respect
Just because you wore a different gang color than mine’s

Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a black man
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

As Sampada Aranke argues in her dissertation “Black Power/Black Death: The Visual Culture of Death and Dying in Black Radical Politics,” anti-Black violence motivates generative violence and hopes toward Black futurity.³¹ Aranke defines anti-Black violence as “the performative rhetoric(s) and structural formation responsible for the use of durational force against black subjects.”³² “Generative violence rhetorically refers to how radicals invoked narratives and discourses that encouraged the use of violence towards black liberation...[black empowering] texts also make connections between antiblack violence as a motivating force for generative violence towards revolution.”³³ “Black futurity can be understood as a vision of black life that exists beyond or after the destruction of existing antiblack structures and investments.”³⁴ As Lamar and Tupac engage in their fictitious interview, there is a clear logical progression of their dialogue that ends with a revolutionary sentiment. I will quote this in length. For the sake of clarity, I will number the dialogue by question and answer and title the groupings by theme.

³¹ Sampada Sadashiv Aranke, “Black Power/Black Death: The Visual Culture of Death and Dying in Black Radical Politics,” (Santa Cruz: University of California, 2008).

³² *ibid*, 1

³³ *ibid*, 3

³⁴ *ibid*, 4

I: Class.

Lamar: Shit and that's all I wrote
I was gonna call it "Another N—a" but, it ain't really a poem
I just felt like it's something you probably could relate to
Other than that, now that I finally got a chance to holla at you
I always wanted to ask you about a certain situa-
About a metaphor actually, uh, you spoke on the ground
What you mean by that, what the ground represent?

Tupac: The ground is gonna open up and swallow the evil
That's how I see it, my word is bond
I see—and the ground is the symbol for the poor people
The poor people is gonna open up this whole world
And swallow up the rich people
'Cause the rich people gonna be so fat
And they gonna be so appetizing, you know what I'm saying?
Wealthy, appetizing.
The poor gonna be so poor, and hungry
You know what I'm saying, it's gonna be like
You know what I'm saying, it's gonna be...
There might, there might be some cannibalism out this muh-fu-
They might eat the rich, you know what I'm saying?

This first dialogue is concerned with the socioeconomic class divide. Tupac identifies the “evil” which “the rich” exert against “the poor.” This evil that will motivate revolution is not enacted by white people against Black people, interestingly. What Tupac and Lamar both seem to be doing here is allowing room for exploitation to not be solely defined in terms of racial identity, but by capitalist relations between the “wealthy,” those who exploit others for their own gain, and “the poor,” those who are “so poor, and hungry,” that “there might be some cannibalism up in this muh-fu-.” This is not excluding the racist realities of the socioeconomic structures in America, rather the emphasis is on relations of exploitation. The poor can be of any racial identity, as we

have already established in “F*ck Your Ethnicity,” though here it has the emphasis on Black life.

II: Class distinctions.

Lamar: Aight so let me ask you this then
Do you see yourself as somebody that’s rich
Or somebody that made the best of they own opportunities?

Tupac: I see myself as a natural born hustler
A true hustler in every sense of the word
I took nothin’, I took the opportunities
I worked at the most menial and degrading job
And built myself up so I could get it to where I owned it
I went from having somebody managing me
To me hiring the person that works my management company
I changed everything, I realized my destiny
In a matter of five years, you know what I’m saying?
I made myself a millionaire, I made millions for a lot of people
Now it’s time to make millions for myself, you know what I’m saying?
I made millions for the record companies
I made millions for these movie companies
Now I make millions for, for us

Lamar asks a reasonable question. Tupac is rich, likewise Lamar is rich. However, we get the sense that “the rich,” and “the wealthy,” is not necessarily a category of quantitative worth, but one of social responsibility. It is not monetary value that establishes class lines but rather one’s profits from exploiting others. We see that Tupac justifies his claim to not be “rich” by saying that he is somebody who has “made the best of they own opportunities.” And this making the best of an opportunity comes with a social responsibility: to “make millions for, for us.” This is Tupac’s “destiny,” and by the leading question we can make the assumption that it is Lamar’s destiny as well. This

leads us to a second observation, that this framework does not include any form of government. This is a purely communal exercise, not a socialist organization.

III: The centrality of God and hustle.

Lamar: And through your different avenues of success
How would you say you managed to keep a level of sanity?

Tupac: 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"
Lamar: Right

Tupac: You know what I'm saying?
And it was happening to me for a reason
You know what I'm saying, I was noticing, shit
I was punching the right buttons and it was happening
So it's no problem, you know
I mean, it's a problem but I'm not finna let them know
I'm finna go straight through

In this third dialogue, Tupac answers that he is grounded by his "faith in God," his "faith in the game," and by his "faith in 'all good things come to those who stay true.'" We see that God is the bedrock on which this social vision is built. The assumption is that if one stays true to this vision "in the game," that is to say music, then God will bring about change. Lamar assents to this view.

IV: The necessity for fighting and resistance.

Lamar: Would you consider yourself a fighter at heart or somebody that
Somebody that only reacts when they back is against the wall?

Tupac: Shit, I like to think that at every opportunity I've ever been, uh

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

Here we see that “[fighting] back” is core to the identity of those seeking an improved state. However, in the following dialogue, we see that this temperament is short-lived because of social and economic pressures.

V: The suppression of Black energy.

Lamar: Aight well, how long will you think it take before n—as be like
"We fighting a war, I'm fighting a war I can't win
And I wanna lay it all down"

Tupac: In this country, a black man only have like
5 years we can exhibit maximum strength
And that's right now while you a teenager, while you still strong
While you still wanna lift weights, while you still wanna shoot back
'Cause once you turn 30 it's like
They take the heart and soul out of a man
Out of a black man, in this country
And you don't wanna fight no more
And if you don't believe me, you can look around
You don't see no loud mouth 30-year old motherfuckers

Tupac identifies the hamstringing effect that racial capitalism has on Black energy for change. While on the one hand individuals may be forged by the fire, more often individuals are beaten down so often and with such severity that the community cannot unify or act against the seemingly invincible forces against them. These forces are forces of *de jure* racism, to be sure, but also the socio-economic forces of systemic racism. As we see next, this tension breaks out in destructive instances but not a sustained effort, although this may not always be the case.

VI: The subsequent disdain and coming revolution.

Lamar: That's crazy, because me being one of your offsprings
Of the legacy you left behind, I can truly tell you that
There's nothing but turmoil goin 'on so, I wanted to ask you
What you think is the future for me and my generation today?

Tupac: I think that n— as is tired of grabbin' shit out the stores
And next time it's a riot it's gonna be like, uh, bloodshed
For real, I don't think America know that
I think America think we was just playing
And it's gonna be some more playing but
It ain't gonna be no playing
It's gonna be murder, you know what I'm saying?
It's gonna be like Nat Turner, 1831, up in this motherfucker
You know what I'm saying, it's gonna happen

In this dialogue, Tupac claims that the time is almost come for riots to turn into full scale insurrections. At a certain point, riots will seem too peaceful. However, there is still opposition to the revolutionary energy that must somehow be countered. This countering is found in the moving power of music.

VII: The importance of music to bring about this revolution.

Lamar: That's crazy, man, in my opinion
Only hope that we kinda have left is music and vibrations
Lot a people don't understand how important it is, you know
Sometimes I can like, get behind a mic
And I don't know what type of energy I'ma push out
Or where it comes from, trip me out sometimes

Tupac: Because it's spirits, we ain't even really rappin'
We just letting our dead homies tell stories for us

Lamar: Damn.³⁵

The counter to the oppressive psychological forces against the poor and Black community is music that is able to empower and energize. This is the “only hope,” that once everything is taken away, it is divinely-inspired prophetic music that will unify and empower those downtrodden to rise up against exploitative structures. It is the history of the “dead homies,” those who died at the hands of American Anti-Blackness, that make Lamar’s music so powerful.

Tension and Resolution of Kendrick Lamar’s Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness

In this section, I have shown Kendrick Lamar’s critique of American Anti-Blackness. This critique depicts American Anti-Blackness as economic, political, and satanic. American Anti-Blackness is economic because, as Cedric Robinson observed, race is used as an ideology to justify the exploitation of Black life. This exploitation comes in a myriad of ways, but particularly to this album is comes in terms of Uncle Sam’s predatory actions toward Lamar’s successes in the commercial rap industry. By nature of rap music being commercialized into an industry implies at base level that it is not interested primarily in the creation of art, but rather the creation of wealth. And, as all

³⁵ This is the response that Lamar gives Tupac in response to the power and hope in music, and is the title of his next album. This suggests that there is a continuity between these two albums. I will discuss this in the next chapter.

capitalistic endeavors invariably do, this results in various instances of abstraction, alienation, and commodification. But more specifically, Lamar identifies how Uncle Sam exploits Lamar's hedonistic aspirations in order to benefit American capitalists at the expense of Lamar's wellbeing and general welfare. This economic exploitation does not end with Lamar, however. We see Lamar identifying ways in which the wealthy upper-class flaunt their wealth, even wealthy Black entertainers, while the impoverished majority of Black people see no share in the selling of their culture or experiences. American Anti-Blackness is also political. While I have not engaged fully with this aspect of *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s content, I mentioned briefly in "Hood Politics" about how political disenfranchisement comes on both sides of the political isle due because, to use a vernacular phrase, "money talks." The Black poor have little political representation due to systemic economic disadvantage in a political system that values wealth over human life. And, as we see in this album, the only way Lamar makes it to the white house is by his financial success. American Anti-Blackness is also satanic. As we have seen in Lamar's antagonist on the second half of the album, Lucy, it is a satanic spirit that inhabits American racial capitalism as it exploits Black life.

Lamar does two things to change the status quo. He first identifies the exploitative nature of American capitalism in the character of Uncle Sam, exposing its satanic nature, and celebrates Blackness as a categorical reality. Lamar first identifies and exposes American Anti-Blackness in order to start the conversation about the realities of the current situation. Then, he celebrates Blackness in order to bring about Black unification and encourage revolution. As I mentioned in the introductory paragraph to this section,

this creates a tension between what he identifies and exposes and how he chooses to confront the situation.

This tension arises because while the framework that Lamar uses to understand American Anti-Blackness understands that the forces against Black people in America is primarily an economic one, he then seemingly turns to not challenge the racial categories that have been falsely imposed but rather asserts Blackness against whiteness thereby making his music a site of further racialization. He does not do this. What Lamar is actually doing is deciding to mend the fractured proletariat by means of Black empowerment by stating the value of Black life. By creating a space in his music that states the value of all Black life, then the fractured Black community may unify against the fracturing effects of racialization, especially colorism, so that in unity Black people might be able to resist the oppressive and exploitative structures of American Anti-Blackness. But this still seems to create a Black-white divide working within a white-Black binary. Note, however, that Lamar never demonizes whiteness. He never even mentions it apart from political economy. Therefore, Lamar affirms Black value against Anti-Blackness in such a way that avoids pitting races against each other while also not ignoring the racialized nature of the American (and Western) imagination.

Lamar's Economic-Spiritual Critique of American Anti-Blackness is not problematic because it criticizes racialization due to its dividing effects while affirming Blackness in order to unify an oppressed community. In this way, his critique and message is not self-contradictory because it identifies American racial capitalism and its

satanic nature as the true actor behind American Anti-Blackness, celebrating Blackness as a tool for revolution.

Lamar's Prophetic Message in To Pimp a Butterfly

In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Lamar's primary prophetic work was one of deconstructing a false consciousness and constructing a new conceptualization of self-worth that is based on God's working through a Black woman to disclose Godself. In *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar's primary prophetic work is to first, identify predatory American economic structures that exploit Black life and expose their satanic power. Second, in response to the racial aspect of American capitalism, Lamar redefines the n-word as NEGUS, Black kingship, with a vision for Black unification and solidarity. Third, Lamar gives a model for the revolutionary consciousness which is an active waiting for the time to rise up, in similar language with which Christians speak about the second coming of Christ. Fourth, revolutionary consciousness and Black kingship are opened up as possibilities by God-as-homeless-Black-man in another event of divine disclosure. Fifth, Lamar mirrors this disclosure and makes *To Pimp a Butterfly* a site for subsequent divine-world disclosure. Finally, I will conclude that this suggests that objectivity in regard to ethics and *aletheia* is dependent upon divine-world disclosure and the prophetic work is subsequent disclosure of divine-world to other human beings, locating ultimate reality within divine being.

Prophetic Work: Identification and Exposing

In *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar identifies predatory American economic structures that exploit Black life and expose their satanic power. This is what the previous section concerned itself with. We can understand this identification and exposure now as a prophetic work. As I said in the previous chapter with Walter Brueggemann, this-worldly liberation is understood as a fundamental aspect of the gospel. James Cone would say that the this-worldly liberation of the oppressed is *the* fundamental aspect of the gospel. With this in mind, the identification of structures that oppress and exploit is a prophetic endeavor because it reveals the truth about reality, tears the sheet of ideology off of exploitative structures, and does the liberative work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, these structures are not merely existing in secular space thereby limiting the Christian's ability to act with gospelic license. If the gospel is concerned with this-worldly oppression as forces of evil, then any action against these forces can rightly be seen as prophetic. Furthermore, the identification and exposure that Lamar engages in, in this understanding, is of the utmost importance in the active life of the Christian. Spiritual liberation and this-worldly liberation are two sides of the same coin. There cannot be one without the other, and they both inform one another. While Lamar does speak on individual ethical topics such as sexual exploitation in "These Walls," greed in "How Much a Dollar Cost," violence in "The Blacker the Berry," these ethical topics are situated within his greater prophetic work as symptoms of a greater disease.

Creating an Alternative Consciousness in Relation to Reality

The greater disease that Lamar identifies and exposes is American capitalism and its satanic power. In response to the racial aspect of American capitalism, Lamar redefines the n-word as NEGUS, Black kingship, with a vision for Black unification and solidarity. This image of rejecting a false self-consciousness and exploitative structures is what Brueggemann calls rejection of the “Royal Consciousness.” The prophet identifies and exposes, and then offers a counter-consciousness. In this way, Lamar offers a self-empowering image of Black life’s worth, which is understood as a fundamental truth of reality which has been hidden and distorted by the exploitative practices of white supremacy.

Revolution as Second Coming

Lamar gives a model for the revolutionary consciousness which is an active waiting for the time to rise up against the supremacist system, in similar language with which Christians speak about the second coming of Christ. Owing much to Lamar’s this-worldly prophetics, his vision for the kingdom of God is correlated with Black kingship. In his discussion with Tupac, we see that faith is tied directly with the personal belief that God will enact the liberation of Black life. In this way, the longed-for revolution that Patterson shows to have been ingrained within Black consciousness from the initial establishing of slavery is for Lamar and Tupac the promise of God’s re-ordering of creation. The satanic establishment (of white supremacist racial capitalism) will be

thrown down by the coming Christ (the empowerment of Black people by God for their this-worldly liberation). Therefore, the same faith that looks to the eschaton for Christ's return to the world is the same faith that looks to the eschaton of Black liberation.

Divine-world disclosure: God-as-homeless-Black-man

Revolutionary consciousness and Black kingship are opened up as possibilities by God-as-homeless-Black-man in another event of divine disclosure. The interaction that Lamar has with the homeless man in South Africa who turns out to be God frees Lamar from Lucy, and by extension Uncle Sam. God-as-homeless-Black-man does two things. First, God disclosing Godself through the particularity of a homeless Black man reveals God's identification with the oppressed and downtrodden. The intersection of homeless, Black, and man play a significant role in the album. "Homeless" gestures that the economic structuring of society is unjust. This is also a flag for God's identification with those who are uncared for by unjust economic systems. Note the inequality between Lamar and the man, and how Lamar stereotypes the man as a drug addict. "Black" gestures that the economic system is racist and is a flag for God's identification with oppressed racialized peoples. As Robinson rightly observes, capitalism and its derivative inequalities are never without a racialized aspect. "Man" gestures to the fact that even by virtue of male privilege, this system is dominant over that privilege. This is taking the idea of male strength in patriarchal power to imply the man's disgraceful position in society. Problematic as it is, a homeless Black woman may arouse pity or annoyance from someone in a higher socio-economic-racial position. But a homeless Black man, as

Lamar admits himself in the song, arouses scorn and hatred. This is the power of the image, first showing the character's domination by the supremacist system, and second showing the assumptions that this system teaches the people within that system, even those who are fellow-oppressed.

It is this two-fold reality that God-as-homeless-Black-man reveals to Lamar. This world disclosure, by virtue of God disclosing it, becomes divine-world disclosure. When Lamar inhabits this disclosed space, he is able to distinguish the lies of his previous reality in relation to the character of God-as-homeless-Black-man and his *aletheia*.

Prophetic Work as Subsequent Divine-World Disclosure

Lamar mirrors this disclosure and makes *To Pimp a Butterfly* a site for subsequent divine-world disclosure to his listeners. "Our nature is to be world disclosers. That is, by means of our equipment and coordinated practices, we human beings open coherent, distinct contexts or worlds in which we perceive, feel, act, and think."³⁶ I would like to suggest that this is a way in which we can understand the prophetic work of Lamar, and prophetic work in general. God first discloses the divine-world to the prophet and the prophet dwells within this disclosure, taking the disclosed world as ultimate reality by virtue of it being God's world. As this divine-world is unconcealed, the prophet is able to perceive what is ultimate reality. Although this is how beings have intelligibility, this divine-world is ultimate not necessarily because it carries with it objectivity as such, but

³⁶ Hubert L Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa. "Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology, and the Everyday." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 23, no. 5 (2003): 339–349, 339.

because it is divine-world. The prophet then, having glimpsed divine-world, discloses this world to other beings with the expectation that they participate in dwelling in this disclosure. Some people immediately do this, while it takes a process of repentance for others to inhabit it. Of course, some altogether refuse.

This model necessitates sustained community and relationship because it is a structure of repeated disclosure and unconcealment. When God discloses Godself, God being infinite, God discloses particular things (such as historical prophesy, future acts) and God's own being which cannot be fully unconcealed to human beings. Thus, this disclosure continues eternally. Participation in the life of God is dwelling in this disclosed divine-world. Revealing God's love is a subsequent disclosure to God's initial disclosure. Lamar is disclosing to others the divine-world which was disclosed to him. This is the basis of prophetic action. Lamar is told to go, "...be an advocate, go tell your homies especially // To come back home" to which he responds, "I can be your advocate // I can preach for you if you tell me what the matter is."³⁷

The very structure of the album is constructed to be an experience of sustained world disclosure. Lamar is disclosing his own world to his listener by self-revelation, the archetype in *To Pimp a Butterfly* being "u," and in his previous album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, he did so likewise. But the structure of *To Pimp a Butterfly* is different. It is meant, not in an instance but prolonged over 78 minutes, to disclose a divine-world that identifies exploitation, exposes satanic power, and reveals Lamar's self in relation to this

³⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "Momma," track #9 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Aftermath/Interscope Records (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2015.

divine-world by tracing his own path to dwelling in it. This is a liturgical movement into divine-world, which includes his social critique of systems, conveying revolutionary consciousness, and inviting his listeners into an ultimate reality where liberation is the eschaton, whereas *good kid, m.A.A.d city* was a liturgical movement toward ‘realness’ that had to occur before he could do his prophetic work in *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

Conclusion

To Pimp a Butterfly is a rich and complex album that lends itself to many different forms of analysis. In this chapter, I have only discussed two fundamental aspects of the album. First, I engaged with Lamar’s Economic-Spiritual Critique of Anti-Blackness. Second, I framed Lamar’s critique as a prophetic work and provided a model for the prophet as a discloser of divine-world.

In the first section, I first analyzed a poem that Lamar recites at the very end of the album on “Mortal Man” to understand the framework of his Economic-Spiritual Critique. Second, I summarized Lamar’s struggle with American capitalism in the first antagonist Uncle Sam. Third, I showed how Lamar’s understanding of Uncle Sam is similar to Cedric Robinson’s concepts of racial capitalism and revolutionary consciousness drawing on a track “HiiiPoWeR” from his album *Section8.0*. Fourth, I summarized Lamar’s struggle with American Anti-Blackness’ satanic nature in the second antagonist Lucy. Fifth, I showed how Lamar encourages Black unification as a response to Lucy’s (and by extension Uncle Sam’s) dividing oppression. Sixth, I interpreted “Mortal Man” as *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s eschatological vision. Finally, I

argued that the tension within Lamar's presentation of American Anti-Blackness and his response to it is superficial. Understanding the relationship between his presentation and response, I resolved tensions or contradictions.

In the second section, I argued that Lamar identifies predatory American economic structures that exploit Black life and exposes their satanic power. Second, that in response to the racial aspect of American capitalism, Lamar redefines the n-word as NEGUS, Black kingship, with a vision for Black unification and solidarity. Third, that Lamar gives a model for the revolutionary consciousness which is an active waiting for the time to rise up, in similar language with which Christians speak about the second coming of Christ. Fourth, that revolutionary consciousness and Black kingship are opened up as possibilities by God-as-homeless-Black-man in another event of divine disclosure. Fifth, that Lamar mirrors this disclosure and makes *To Pimp a Butterfly* a site for subsequent divine-world disclosure. Finally, I concluded that this suggests that objectivity in regard to ethics and *aletheia* is dependent upon divine-world disclosure and the prophetic work is subsequent disclosure of divine-world to other human beings, locating ultimate reality within divine being.

Ultimately, Lamar's hope on this album is the process of social becoming: unification of the oppressed and revolution against an exploitative, oppressive, and satanic political economy. In this framework, social becoming is the coming of God's kingdom by concrete actions that usher forth social justice. God discloses divine-world to the prophet in order that the prophet might disclose divine-world to humanity, and this divine-world disclosure is the basis for identifying and exposing satanic oppression and

exploitation. Further, this divine-world disclosure breaks satanic attachments that hinder the coming kingdom. In this way, Lamar reimagines Black life as N.E.G.U.S., not as n-word. And in so doing he claims true kingship, not the satanic facade of kingship that American Anti-Blackness offers.

CHAPTER THREE

Wickedness or Weakness: Pride and Humility in *DAMN.*

DAMN. is Kendrick Lamar Duckworth's fourth full length studio album. It was released on Good Friday 2017. This album contains one of Lamar's biggest singles, "HUMBLE.," which was heard across America from rolled down car windows to house parties. In 2018, *DAMN.* was certified triple platinum with over a million copies sold. While *DAMN.* is Lamar's second-most selling album (after *good kid, m.A.A.d city*), it is his highest critically acclaimed work. It earned him a Pulitzer at the 2018 Grammy's, being the first non-jazz, non-classical winner. *DAMN.* stayed in the #1 spot in the United States into 2018.¹ The complexity, the vulnerability, the lyrical genius and the profound theological, cultural, and personal concepts that Lamar wrestles with in this album has rightfully earned him his accolades. But he is in a crisis. Lamar asks "how many accolades do I need to stop denial" and "why God why God do I gotta suffer?"² As we listen through *DAMN.*, we will see "Yeshua new weapon" struggle through vices such as pride and lust, quake with fear, and question if he has what it takes to lead humbly, "like Nelson."³ However, to fully understand these questions and tensions we must first briefly

¹ "Year End Charts: Billboard 200 Albums," Billboard. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2017/top-billboard-200-albums>

² Kendrick Lamar, "FEAR.," track #12 on *DAMN.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2017.

³ Kendrick Lamar, "Mortal Man," track #16 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2015.

examine an album of demos and b-sides that did not make it onto *To Pimp a Butterfly* from his album *untitled unmastered*.

In section one I will summarize the events following *To Pimp a Butterfly* on *untitled unmastered*. and then offer an analysis of *DAMN.*'s narrative based on the continuity between the two albums. In section two, I will summarize Lamar's prophetic message which is in two parts, the wickedness/weakness dichotomy and the image of the Candyman.

The Prideful Prophet: Analysis of the narrative of DAMN.

In this section I will first give context to *DAMN.* by summarizing the preceding album, *untitled unmastered*. Second, I will analyze *DAMN.* in continuity with *untitled unmastered*. This analysis will happen in four parts. The first part will cover the opening of the album and the first movement of Kung Fu Kenny's narrative as he descends into self-absorbed isolation in the songs "BLOOD.," "DNA.," "YAH.," "ELEMENT.," "FEEL.," and "LOYALTY. FEAT. RIHANNA." The second part will cover the second movement of Kung Fu Kenny's narrative as he recognizes the destructive nature of the path of wickedness and begins to learn humility in the songs "PRIDE.," "HUMBLE.," "LUST.," and "LOVE. FEAT. ZACARI." The third part will cover the final movement of Kung Fu Kenny's narrative and Kenny's disappearance as Lamar shifts to speak in his own voice once again and makes his prophetic admonition in the songs "XXX. FEAT. U2.," "FEAR.," "GOD.," and "DUCKWORTH." Finally, I will argue that *DAMN.* is primarily a confession of Lamar's inner thoughts and feelings by which he investigates

the wickedness in his personal life in the character of Kung Fu Kenny. The path of wickedness is defined by prideful self-interest and it destroys both individual and society. Kung Fu Kenny is meant to be an example to others for how not to live. Once Kenny disappears, as Lamar gives his fear over to God, Lamar gives a veiled prophetic admonition to choose the path of weakness and humility so that curses may be reversed on earth. More may need to be said on this: For Lamar, weakness is assuming the posture of Jesus Christ with the understanding that God the Father ought to be feared because of His power and judgement. Additionally, this is a humble weakness which acknowledges human helplessness. This is contrasted with prideful wickedness because wickedness is anti-Christ and this is by means of pride. I will return to this in the second section.

Vocational crisis: untitled unmastered.

After *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which was released in 2015, Kendrick Lamar looked for change in America. He imagined his music as a prophetic message that identified and rejected American Anti-Blackness and the satanic forces which generated it. However, this did not happen. Black people were still being murdered by police, racial inequality did not disappear, and BLM protests were not effecting the great impact that they hoped to achieve. After *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar went on various late night television shows and performed untitled tracks that were not on any previously released albums. Seeing these, LeBron James tweeted to TDE (Lamar's record label) on February 23, 2016, that he wanted to see those tracks released on an album. So, on March 4, 2016, *untitled unmastered.* was released.

It is a strange album to be sure. The track titles are a sequential list beginning with “untitled 01” including after each track the date on which it was made. While this album is not very approachable and does not have the cohesion of Lamar’s other albums, it gives particular insight to Lamar’s creative mindset and his understanding of his prophetic work. On *untitled unmastered*. Lamar is in the middle of a vocational crisis because the message of *To Pimp a Butterfly* does not seem to be having much effect in the world. His response to this crisis forms the context for *DAMN.*: Lamar is beset with feelings of futility and this tempts him to forsake his prophetic music making, his audience, and God.

untitled 01 | 08.18.2014. The album begins with a very uncomfortable sex skit.⁴ This is reminiscent of the moans on “These Walls,” but in this instance it only contains the words of a man with a deep voice. After this, Lamar begins rapping about the apocalypse when oppressors and wicked people are destroyed. There are “no birds chirping or flying, no dogs barking.” He narrates “the tallest building plummet, cracking and crumbling,” as “the ground is shaking, swallowing young woman // With a baby, daisies, and other flowers burning in destruction.” He sees “valleys and high places turn into dust // Famous [people] screaming in agony” as “backpedaling Christians settling for forgiveness...Another trumpet has sounded off and everyone heard it.” The reason for these events is clear: “our beliefs the reason for all this.” As Jesus Christ returns, there are

⁴ Kendrick Lamar, “untitled 01 | 08.19.2014,” track #1 on *untitled unmastered.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2016.

“mothers yelling ‘He’s alive’” and there is “no more discriminating the poor.” On this day of judgement, God asks Lamar “what have you did for me?” To this question, Lamar responds by making a list of his good deeds. He narrates that “I fell to my knees, pulled out my resume...I was valedictorian, I was fearful of judgement // But confident I had glory in all my past endeavors.” He continues, “I thought you said that I excel // I made *To Pimp a Butterfly* for you told me // To use my vocals to save mankind for you // Say I didn’t try for you, say I didn’t ride for you // I tithed for you, I pushed the club aside for you // Who love you like I love you?” However, it seems that good works does not satisfy this vengeful God because “some of us never did wrong but still went to Hell...I can see, our days been numbered // Revelation greatest as we hearing the last trumpet // All man, child, woman, life completely went in reverse // I guess I’m running in place trying to make it to church.”

This vengeful God seems to be different than the forgiving and correcting God that Lamar knew on “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst)” and “How Much a Dollar Cost.” This could be due to these instances being God’s attempts at reconciling Lamar to Godself, and that in this apocalyptic instance God is displaying God’s wrath and judgement. However, observing the relative faithfulness that Lamar has displayed in recounting his “resume” it would be surprising if Lamar was claiming that he deserves judgement for failing to obey God’s commands. Lamar’s vision of judgement here may in fact be God’s judgement on humankind, not individuals. In this image, Lamar is making a statement about how humanity *as humanity* receives God’s judgement. In this interpretation, Lamar’s first person shows us that every individual shares in the human

experience of failing to satisfy God's standard. As the album progresses, we will see how Lamar's first person speech can be understood in this way.

untitled 02 | 06.23.2014. - untitled 08 | 09.06.2014. Chronologically, the album's following songs occur before the day of judgement. This sets up the following seven tracks to meditate on the state of humanity and the state of the world which causes this judgement to happen: namely, a lack of personal piety and a lack of societal immediacy to doing the work of God. We see that Lamar is in a constant state of fighting between virtue and vice: "sick and tired of being tired // I can't pick a side, the Gemini // Prophesize if we livin' I // Promise momma not to feel no lie."⁵ This state of conflict leads him to rap "I know I'm greedy // Stuck inside the belly of the beast // Can you please pray for me? // Get God on the phone!" The line "can you please pray for me" anticipates the many times that Lamar states that nobody is praying for him on *DAMN*. Similarly, the line "get God on the phone" anticipates *DAMN*. as well, because Lamar experiences a lack of God's presence on *DAMN*. Lamar continues to face his sinfulness as he raps, "I did a lot of dumb shit in my past // Lord forgive me, hoping I don't relapse." However, as the song progresses, we see that he does just that. He boasts, "I'm as real as they come // Shit is amazing, I'm feeding my cravings ... I'm fucking I'm crazy // Serving it like I belong in the basement." He then questions if he is able to overcome "pistol and poverty," with the implication that, like on earth, those who are born into

⁵ Kendrick Lamar, "untitled 02 | 06.23.2014," track #2 on *untitled unmastered.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2016.

“pistol and poverty” are doomed to death from their beginning. Lamar questions if there is any sense of meaningful agency in the world and in relation to God. He doesn’t give an answer.

It is from this point that Lamar is questioned by other religions.⁶ He interacts with “the Asian” who believes in Buddha. This character admonishes Lamar that he is “thinking too much, plus you too full of yourself // Worried about your career, you ever think of your health?” He then interacts with “the Indian,” who recommends that he should “invest” in “property,” because it will provide security for his progeny. However, Lamar then interacts with “the black man” who advises him that “pussy is power, fuck on a new bitch every night.” He then interacts with “the white man” who influences him to succumb to greed. Lamar raps that “I go platinum from rappin’ I do the company fine // What if I compromise? He said, ‘it don’t even matter // You make a million or more, you livin’ better than average’ // You lose your core following, gaining it all // He put a price on my talent, I hit the bank and withdraw.”

From this point, Lamar launches an investigation of his soul and the three vices of greed, lust, and murder. First, he turns to sex.⁷ Lamar whispers to SZA like a devil on her shoulder. He whispers, “Do you believe in God? If you don’t, its cool,” to which SZA then sings “head is the answer...head is the future.”

⁶ Kendrick Lamar, “untitled 03 | 05.28.2014.,” track #3 on *untitled unmastered.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2016.

⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “untitled 04 | 08.14.2014.,” track #4 on *untitled unmastered.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2016.

On the next song, Lamar turns to violence.⁸ He raps,

I got 100 on my dash, got 200 in my trunk
Name in the grab bags, put my Bible in the trunk
Taaka vodka on the top of my binocular I'm drunk
How can I can make them popular, pop em' when I want
See I'm livin' with anxiety, duckin' the sobriety
F*ckin' up the system I ain't f*ckin' with society
Justice ain't free, therefore justice ain't me
So I justify his name on obituary
Why you wanna see a good man with a broken heart?
Once upon a time I used to go to church and talk to God
Now I'm thinkin' to myself, hollow tips is all I got
Now I'm drinkin' by myself, at the intersection, parked
Watch you when you walk inside your house
You threw your briefcase all on the couch
I plan on creeping through your f*ckin' door and blowin' out
Every piece of your brain until your son jump in your arms
Cut on the engine, then sped off in the rain
I'm gone

As Lamar finishes this aggressive verse about how he turns to violence and gives up his personal commitment to God, Punch raps about the same concept. Punch raps that he is “tryna dismantle // These wicked ways,” and he “studied the Son of God, but still didn’t recognize my flaws // I guess I’m lost.” Lamar picks up on this vein and raps that he “couldn’t fathom the meaning of seeing sacrifice // I’m passing lives on a daily, maybe I’m losing faith // Genocidism and Capitalism just made me hate.” Jay Rock then raps, “Before I blink do I see me before them pearly gates?” Cee Lo Green then sings about this experience making another reference to the Gemini. He sings, “A Gemini, duality

⁸ Kendrick Lamar, “untitled 05 | 09.21.2014.,” track #5 on *untitled unmastered.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2016.

personalities always conflict in me.”⁹ Thus, this struggle between doing what is good and doing what is bad is a central struggle not only for life, but it is at the center of Lamar’s personality as if there is a good and evil Kendrick Lamar fighting for control of his body.

Indeed, this fight comes out in “untitled 07.” Lamar raps that
“Love...Drugs...Fame...Chains...Juice...Crew...Hate won’t get you high as this //
Life...He...She...’For Free?’ ...Two keys...Bentleys...Bars won’t get you high, no, no,
no.” Instead, he advises that the listener “levitate” above these temporal temptations and imperfect goods to pursue God. But Lamar’s evil personality emerges, yelling, “shut your fucking mouth and get some cash, you bitch you.” In the second half of this song, Lamar boasts about his wealth. Then, to end the verse, gunshots ring out signifying that this path of life ends in death.

On the last song, “untitled 08,” Lamar reflects on his condemned state and identifies the problem for individuals and the society that they comprise. He raps,

In today’s day and age we practice the self pity of taking the easy way out
You wait on them, him, her
But when a blessing takes too long, that’s when you go wrong
You selfish motherfucker.

Lamar claims that, like himself, it is out of selfishness that individuals impatiently fall into vice when their wants are not satisfied within the timeframe that they want. This reveals a lack of personal piety in self-interestedness and a lack of social immediacy in doing the work of God because this is a widespread phenomenon. Thus, the reason that Lamar fears judgement during his vision of the Apocalypse is that he recognizes that his

⁹ Kendrick Lamar, “untitled 06 | 06.30.2014.,” track #6 on *untitled unmastered.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2016.

selfishness causes him to give up on the “blessings” which come to fruition only after one decides to live according to the word of God, following in Jesus’ example. Sins are selfish because they are acts of immediate gratification when eternal gratification could be attained by dying to self and “levitat[ing]” above the temporal traps of temptation. Likewise, when desiring social justice, it is one of the most difficult things to see it not happen. Is the answer to, like Tupac suggests, take up arms like Nat Turner? Lamar challenges this response because there is a possibility that that action could be due to selfishness and ultimately a rejection of a coming liberation enacted by God. However, Lamar leaves the final conclusion to his audience. It is from this point that Lamar begins his next album, *DAMN*.

The DAMN. Analysis Part One: BLOOD. — LOYALTY. (Feat. Rhianna)

In *DAMN*., Lamar investigates more deeply the impulse of his diabolical personality in the creation of an alter ego, Kung Fu Kenny. Kung Fu Kenny emerges as a consequence of criticism by FOX News. Kenny gives up on trying to make the world a better place and goes down the path of wickedness and experiences destruction. However, unlike other interpretations of this album, I will argue that the narrative of Kung Fu Kenny is didactic. The primary focus of this album is how Lamar struggles with his prophetic calling as a leader in the Black community while facing criticism for his calling. Through exploring what would happen if he gave up on his prophetic music and decided to give into the gang-ideal, he concludes that one should follow God because without God the individual (and the Black community) would crumble, while following

God leads to the reversal of curses, or liberation and freedom from oppression. In this first part Kung Fu Kenny will descend into self-absorbed isolation.

BLOOD. Lamar begins the album by introducing it as a meditation on the consequences of choosing the paths of wickedness or weakness. He complicates this choice by showing how he was metaphorically shot to death pursuing the way of weakness. As the song ends, it is clear that Lamar has crafted this scene as a metaphor for how he was treated by FOX News for doing his prophetic work. Also, Lamar is already hinting at the fact that this choice between life or death is greater than only temporal life or death. From the first song, this album is already incredibly complex.

As the song begins, Becon gives the listener a choice: “wickedness” or “weakness.” The consequences of this decision are life and death, not only individually but communally. Becon asks, “are we gonna live // or die?” Lamar then describes the incident. He says,

So I was takin' a walk the other day,
and I seen a woman—a blind woman—pacin' up and down the sidewalk.
She seemed to be a bit frustrated, as if she had dropped somethin' and
havin' a hard time findin' it.
So after watchin' her struggle for a while,
I decide to go over and lend a helping hand, you know?
"Hello, ma'am, can I be of any assistance?
It seems to me that you have lost something.
I would like to help you find it."
She replied: "Oh yes, you have lost something.
You've lost
your life." *gunshot*

After the gunshot, Becon asks, “is it wickedness?” This marks the moment where Lamar decides to consider the path of wickedness since the path of weakness got him killed. As

he lay dying, a FOX News “The Five” sample plays of Eric Bolling and Kimberly Guilfoyle from FOX News’ “The Five” on June 30, 2015. They say,

Lamar stated his views on police brutality
With that line in the song, quote:
“We hate the popo, wanna kill us dead in the street fo’ sho”...Kimberly?
Oh please, ugh, I don’t like it.

Lamar responded to this FOX segment on TMZ live in 2015 before *DAMN.* was released, “How can you take a song that’s about hope and turn it into hatred?”, he said. ‘The overall message is “we’re gonna be alright.” It’s not the message of “I wanna kill people.”’¹⁰ The blind woman in the story manipulated what Lamar was saying in order to harm him. Likewise, the FOX5 pundits manipulated and misrepresented his prophetic message in order to harm him, the greater Black community, and efforts for social justice. This criticism was evidently very hurtful to Lamar. He goes on to respond to another sample from the same program in the following song. This exchange is the trigger that caused Lamar to question the way of humble weakness which befits a prophet and instead lash out at them, others, and God in a fit of prideful wickedness.

DNA. In response to this criticism of his song, Lamar makes a braggadocio rap asserting his value. The song begins as Lamar affirms his worth but quickly devolves into insults to others. This begins his descent into the path of wickedness with the three cardinal vices of the gang ideal: sex, money, and murder.

¹⁰ Michelle Geslani, Kendrick Lamar Responds to Fox News: How Can You Take a Song That’s About Hope and Turn It into Hatred?,” Consequence of Sound, July 2, 2015. <https://consequenceofsound.net/2015/07/kendrick-lamar-responds-to-fox-news-how-can-you-take-a-song-thats-about-hope-and-turn-it-into-hatred/>

Lamar initially affirms his self-worth while not smoothing over his problematic aspects. Lamar raps,

I got
Loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA
Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA
I got power, poison, pain and joy inside my DNA
I got hustle though, ambition, flow, inside my DNA
I was born like this, since one like this
Immaculate conception
I transform like this, perform like this
Was Yeshua's new weapon
I don't contemplate, I meditate, then off your fucking head
This that put-the-kids-to-bed

We see that this is a very honest confession of how Lamar comprehends himself and the vices that are particularly difficult for him. He reveals himself to be violent and prideful in these first few lines, but not overwhelmingly so. In the following, he revisits the concept of 'realness' and boasts of his share in it. He raps,

I got
Realness, I just kill shit 'cause it's in my DNA
I got millions, I got riches buildin 'in my DNA
I got dark, I got evil, that rot inside my DNA
I got off, I got troublesome, heart inside my DNA

Lamar boasts about the gang-ideal (murder, money, and sex ["I got off"]). Then he begins to insult his enemies. He raps,

See, you's a, you's a, you's a—
Bitch, your hormones prolly switch inside your DNA
Problem is, all that sucker shit inside your DNA
Daddy prolly snitched, heritage inside your DNA
Backbone don't exist, born outside a jellyfish, I gauge
See, my pedigree most definitely don't tolerate the front
Shit I've been through prolly offend you
This is Paula's oldest son
I know murder, conviction
Burners, boosters, burglars, ballers, dead, redemption

Scholars, fathers dead with kids
And I wish I was fed forgiveness
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, soldier's DNA
Born inside the beast

Lamar boasts even about this prophetic calling when he raps,

And Nazareth gonna plead his case.
The reason my power's here on earth.
Salute the truth, when the prophet say...

Here we see Lamar finding his prophetic power not from God's empowerment but from prideful boasting about his vices. He continues to reprimand a sample from Geraldo Rivera in spitefulness. In the following verse, Lamar is taken by his vicious indignation and launches into a series of boasts similar to what he rapped before. Then, he makes a series of assertions about human worth measured by the gang-ideal. He raps,

Sex, money, murder—these are the breaks
These are the times, level number 9
Look up in the sky, 10 is on the way
Sentence on the way, killings on the way
Motherfucker, I got winners on the way
You ain't shit without a body on your belt
You ain't shit without a ticket on your plate
You ain't sick enough to pull it on yourself
You ain't rich enough to hit the lot and skate

The final four lines of the song establish the parameters of what wickedness is. This is what Lamar will commit to in the following song and what forms the basis of his alter ego, Kung Fu Kenny. He raps,

Tell me when destruction gonna be my fate
Gonna be your fate, gonna be our faith
Peace to the world, let it rotate
Sex, money, murder—our DNA

“DNA.” is the first step toward Lamar’s descent into damnation as he chooses the path of wickedness. He revisits the concept of flawed ‘realness’ (or the gang-ideal) from *good kid, m.A.A.d city* and commits to it. He measures human worth by it, makes a response to criticism in its spirit, and ultimately establishes a fatalistic or nihilistic view of human “destruction” under its constraints. In this investigation of personal wickedness, Lamar presents himself either acting as if the consequential “destruction” is irrelevant or ignoring it in favor of creating a “faith” around the damnedness of embracing “sex, money, murder.” This has the result of calling into question his prophetic ability and work, as well as his own individual commitment to Jesus. Instead of being a figure like Mandela, he boasts in being “Yeshua’s new weapon.”

YAH. “YAH.” begins with Kid Capri yelling, “new shit, new Kung Fu Kenny!” This is Kung Fu Kenny’s first mention on the album. Lamar raps in persona Kenny, beginning a few threads that will weave through the following songs. He begins to lose touch with reality, he commits to the gang-ideal, he chooses to “lean...on [his] own understanding,”¹¹ and he reveals that his “intuition” tells him to commit acts of murder to “keep the family close,” be consumed with greed, and have promiscuous sex. He raps,

I got so many theories and suspicions
I'm diagnosed with real n—a conditions
Today is the day I follow my intuition
Keep the family close—get money, fuck bitches

¹¹ Proverbs 3:5

This deviation from his prophetic and personal reliance on God leads to his going out of touch with others and his own perceptions. He raps, “radars is buzzin,” which is likely a reference to the “antennas” on “u” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The chorus of the song is saturated with the word “yah” repeated over and over. This is a significant word which has a triple meaning of his dismissal of this fact (as in, “yeah yeah, whatever”), “yah” as the name of God (likely alluding to God trying to reach him by drawing near, but due to Kendrick’s sinfulness and rejection of God he cannot perceive anything other than a static buzz), and his dismissal of the entire situation.

In verse two, Lamar restates the events that have happened in the two previous songs with FOX News and adds commentary about how this event effected his family. He realizes how the media manipulates his image and emotions for their own gain. He re-locates his identity from Blackness, which was so dear to him on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, to the nation of Israel according to the teachings of the Black Hebrew Israelites (though he references a voicemail which we will hear in its entirety on “FEAR.,” this is not the exact sentiment of what Carl Duckworth tells him). He finally confesses how his Christian belief and his wicked desires are at odds with each other, ultimately deciding to follow his “intuition” and reject Christian teaching on sex, greed, and violence. All the while, though, God is in the midst of this as Lamar weaves the word “yah” into the verse casting doubt on the goodness of this decision. He raps,

Interviews wanna know my thoughts and opinions
Fox News wanna use my name for percentage
My latest muse is my niece, she worth livin'
See me on the TV and scream: "That's Uncle Kendrick!"
Yeah, that's the business
Somebody tell Geraldo this n—a got some ambition

I'm not a politician, I'm not 'bout a religion
I'm a Israelite, don't call me Black no mo'
That word is only a color, it ain't facts no mo'
My cousin called, my cousin Carl Duckworth
Said know my worth
And Deuteronomy say that we all been cursed
I know he walks the Earth
But it's money to get, bitches to hit, yah
Zeroes to flip, temptation is, yah
First on my list, I can't resist, yah

Lamar then ends the verse by widening his scope to “everyone together” who follows in his footsteps choosing the path of wickedness. The song ends with a long outro to allow the listener time to reflect on what he has said. However, on the next song, “ELEMENT.,” Kung Fu Kenny is not turning back from the path of wickedness.

ELEMENT. In “ELEMENT.,” Kenny conjoins violence and sex in order to maintain his financial position. As Kid Capri yells in the introduction, this is because “what happens on Earth stays on Earth,” implying that the temporal life is the only thing that matters thus one should only be concerned with improving one’s own experience,¹² and because “ain’t nobody prayin’ for me.” Kenny responds, repeating “I don’t give a fuck” five times. Kenny doesn’t care about other people (“I’ll take your fuckin’ life for this shit”) or about God (“Put the Bible down and go eye for an eye for this shit”). Instead, he only cares about not “goin’ back to broke, family sellin’ dope,” and will avoid it at all costs, including dominating other people. Since they do not appreciate him, he

¹² this meaning will change drastically by the end of the album

decides to only care about himself. He raps in the first verse about how he is willing to commit acts of violence to maintain his economic status. He raps,

I'm willin' to die for this shit
I done cried for this shit, might take a life for this shit
Put the Bible down and go eye for an eye for this shit
D.O.T. my enemy, won't catch a vibe for this shit, ayy
I been stomped out in front of my mama
My daddy commissary made it to commas
Bitch, all my grandmas dead
So ain't nobody prayin' for me, I'm on your head, ayy
Thirty millions later, know the feds watchin'
Auntie on my telegram, like, "Be cautious!"
I be hangin' out at Tam's, I be on Stockton
I don't do it for the 'Gram, I do it for Compton
I'm willin' to die for this shit, n—a
I'll take your fuckin' life for this shit, n—a
We ain't goin' back to broke, family sellin' dope

In the chorus, Lamar conjoins images of sex and violence, essentially making violence “sexy.” He does this also with wealth. But there is something more at play: this is an image of domination over others who are weaker than he is to maintain his status.

If I gotta slap a pussy-ass n—a, I'ma make it look sexy
If I gotta go hard on a bitch, I'ma make it look sexy¹³
I pull up, hop out, air out, made it look sexy
They won't take me out my element
Nah, take me out my element

Returning to Capri’s statement that “what happens on Earth stays on Earth,”

Lamar utters fatalistic lines after the second chorus. He raps,

Damned if I do, if I don't (yuhhh)
Goddamn us all if you won't (yuhhh)

¹³ It is important that Lamar mixes these images with femininity, however I will return to this subject on “HUMBLE.,” and “LOVE.,” where it is more central to the album’s narrative. Here, this functions to show how the way of wickedness begins with predation on those weaker than oneself.

Damn, damn, damn, it's a goddamn shame
You ain't frontline, get out the goddamn way

This fatalism is due to a sense of a lack of meaningful agency. As Kung Fu Kenny rejects God, eternity becomes a non-issue and thus the this-worldliness that Lamar is so committed to in previous albums loses its meaning as well. This can also be read as a loss of hope in God due to events in the world that shatter hope in this-worldly redemption, thus sending a person into a spiral of self-pity which manifests in vicious actions. In verse three, it is evident that this is the case. Lamar raps,

N—as thought they wasn't gonna see me, huh?
N—as thought that K-Dot real life
Was the same life they see on TV, huh?
N—as wanna flex on me and be in L.A. for free, huh?
Next time they hit the 10 freeway, we need receipt, huh?
'Cause most of y'all ain't real
Most of y'all gon' squeal
Most of y'all just envy, but jealousy get you killed
Most of y'all throw rocks and try to hide your hand
Just say his name and I promise that you'll see Candyman
Because it's all in your eyes, most of y'all tell lies
Most of y'all don't fade, most of y'all been advised
Last LP I tried to lift the black artists
But it's a difference between black artists and wack artists

At this point, the song breaks down and the chorus plays again. The mood changes from being upbeat and threatening to ominous and distant. Lamar ends the song rapping, “take me out my element.” Upon first listen, this seems like a continuation of his prior threats. However, due to the mood change this seems to suggest that Kenny is profoundly unhappy having chosen the path of wickedness. In the next song, “FEEL.,” Kenny lists his many feelings, anxieties, and the things that he pities himself for.

FEEL. On “FEEL.”, Kenny comes face to face with his isolation. In verse one, Kenny admits to feelings of depression (“I feel like a chip on my shoulders”), anxiety (“I feel like I'm losin' my focus // I feel like I'm losin' my patience”), nihilistic tendencies (I feel like it ain't no tomorrow, fuck the world // The world is endin', I'm done pretendin' // And fuck you if you get offended”), that his family and friends are disloyal to him (I feel like friends been overrated // I feel like the family been fakin’”), and that because of these feelings he is tempted to give up on those close to him and his audience (“Feel like removin' myself”).

In verse two, Kenny admits that he feels like people are only in his life in order to take advantage of him (“I feel n—as tappin' they pockets”), that he is the last person of earth (“I am legend”), that he is tempted to use his platform for personal gain at the expense of his audience (“Feel like only me and the music...I feel like the enemy”), that he is at war with the world (“I feel like I'm boxin' demons // Monsters, false prophets schemin' // Sponsors, industry promises”), that he does not feel close to God (“I ain't feelin' your presence”), and due to these things he is tempted to forsake the world because it has forsaken him (I feel like skatin' off, I feel like waitin' for ‘em // Maybe it's too late for ‘em // I feel like the whole world want me to pray for ‘em // But who the fuck prayin' for me?”). Kenny also admits that he is “fillin’ the void with ballin’” that he feels by his decision to choose the path of wickedness, and due to this he experiences “the feelin' of an apocalypse happenin.’” At this point in the album, Kung Fu Kenny has reached the point of total isolation due to his choice to follow the path of wickedness, and experiences the weight of judgement on him for his decisions.

LOYALTY. FEAT. RIHANNA. At this point in the album, Kenny is still obstinate in his decision to choose the path of wickedness. On the song “LOYALTY.,” Kenny decides to form a “secret society” with himself as the leader so that he creates a society of disillusioned people that will support his wickedness. He is the “king” of this society. He boasts that “my resume is real enough for two millenniums,” but that his career is “only for the dollar sign.” This leads him to reflect that “I done been down so long, lost hope.” Finally, from the realization of his hopelessness, he asks if there is “anybody you would die for?” And responds, “that's what God for.”

A Brief Rest and Reflection. Kendrick Lamar began the album in the path of weakness. He aided a blind woman and was shot for it, a metaphor for FOX News criticism. Thus, he barreled down the path of wickedness without restraint and landed in the pit as a king over his own domain—a king in total isolation, high on drugs, using women’s bodies for sex, only doing things for money, and using violence to maintain his superiority. This is a very different picture than the NEGUS image from “i.” These two ideas of kingship are diametrically opposed because NEGUS is empowered and enthroned by God, while King Kenny has totally separated himself from God and others. However, there is hope. Kenny realized that the path of wickedness only leads to self-destruction and that God is worthy of his allegiance unto death. Thus, having brought himself so low, Kenny tries to be humble and this event marks Kenny’s fight between virtue and vice.

The DAMN. Analysis : PRIDE.-LOVE.

At this point in the album, Kenny is led through a series of virtues and vices. The next four tracks on the album are “PRIDE.,” HUMBLE.,” LUST.,” and “LOVE. FEAT, ZACARI.” At this transition, Becon gives the listener another ultimatum. He sings, “Love’s gonna get you killed // But pride’s gonna be the death of you and you and me // And you and you and you and me.” This develops the first ultimatum Becon gave. We can infer from this that love and weakness are related while pride and wickedness are related. If weakness and love will get one killed, but wickedness and pride will be “death,” Lamar must be suggesting that being killed is a physical phenomenon and experiencing death is a spiritual phenomenon. In this part of the album, Kenny experiences spiritual death. Pridefulness is Kenny’s chief failing and what caused him to plunge into the path of wickedness. His pride was offended when FOX criticized him so he felt helpless with his music. Pride was the driving factor in his decision to pursue the ideals of sex, money, and murder. Pride cast him into neurosis to form a disillusioned realm where he was the leader. In this part of the album we will see Kung Fu Kenny flounder in his separation from God, but by “LOVE. FEAT. ZACARI.” he will show small signs of humility.

PRIDE. At this point in the album Kenny begins a fight within himself to choose virtue over vice. The initial image of weakness begins to take on a new meaning. While weakness may end up in being killed, as in “BLOOD.,” the path of wickedness will end

up in “death.” While wickedness may preserve temporal life, wickedness ultimately results in damnation. Thus, weakness takes on a sacrificial character which leads to spiritual life. With this in mind, “PRIDE.” acknowledges this fact but questions if Kenny was actually “there.” While Lamar intellectually assents to the benefit of weakness and virtue, he doesn’t know if he has ever had any prior goodness that he can return to. In the second verse, Lamar raps,

Now, in a perfect world, I probably won't be insensitive
Cold as December, but never remember what Winter did
I wouldn't blame you for mistakes I made or the bed I laid
Seems like I point the finger just to make a point nowadays
Smiles and cold stares, the temperature goes there
Indigenous disposition, feel like we belong here
I know the walls, they can listen, I wish they could talk back
The hurt becomes repetition, the love almost lost that
Sick venom in men and women overcome with pride
A perfect world is never perfect, only filled with lies
Promises are broken and more resentment come alive
Race barriers make inferior of you and I
See, in a perfect world, I'll choose faith over riches
I'll choose work over bitches, I'll make schools out of prison
I'll take all the religions and put 'em all in one service
Just to tell 'em we ain't shit, but He's been perfect, world

The fact that he doesn’t know if he has ever truly known the path of weakness, he speaks in a hypothetical. While he says things which could be interpreted as returning to the path of God, naming the imperfections of religious institutions, admitting God’s perfection and human imperfection, telling his dreams and aspirations for a better life for himself and others, this is in a hypothetical and thus emphasizes the inverse. So from this inversion of his statement, he commands on “HUMBLE” that “nobody pray for me.” This is a state of hopeless resignation, and Kenny will attempt to improve himself and the world by his own power, but perverts everything he tries to do.

HUMBLE. On “HUMBLE.,” Kenny attempts to right his wrongs and the wrongs of the world by his own power. However, being separated from God Kenny perverts everything he attempts and in trying to liberate he sets others under his domination. Lamar boasts about money and success, but these are done in hate at the expense of others. He boasts about a romantic relationship, but this establishes himself as the dominator in the relationship (“Ooh, that pussy good, won't you sit it on my taste bloods? // I get way too petty once you let me do the extras”). He boasts about getting justice, but alluding to the Sandman implies retributive and hateful retaliation (Who dat n—a thinkin' that he frontin' on Man-Man? (Man-Man) // Get the fuck off my stage, I'm the Sandman (Sandman)). He seems to affirm the Black male and female body, but does so establishing himself as the dominator of those bodies (I'm so fuckin' sick and tired of the Photoshop // Show me somethin' natural like afro on Richard Pryor // Show me somethin' natural like ass with some stretch marks”). He boasts about attaining success, but he flaunts his superiority (“I make a play fuckin' up your whole life”). He affirms realness, but this is truly the gang-ideal (If I kill a n—a, it won't be the alcohol, ayy // I'm the realest n—a after all, bitch”). So we see his admonitions to others to “be humble” is not so that they will attain virtue, but like he rapped on King Kunta, that they are inferior to him in a stratified society (“It's levels to it, you and I know, bitch, be humble”).

LUST. The next words the listener hears after Lamar’s dominating admonition to “be humble” is a connection to “Sing About Me (I’m Dying of Thirst).” Lamar begins

“LUST.” pleading, “I need some water.” This references the same idea running throughout *good kid, m.A.A.d city* about the dryness of sin, pointing to the ultimate fulfillment of these sins in the living water of Jesus. However, unlike his earlier experience with this spiritual dryness, he does not turn to God but attempts to satiate his desires at the expense of others. He raps in the chorus,

I need some water
Somethin' came over me
Way too hot to simmer down
Might as well overheat
Too close to comfort
As blood rush my favorite vein
Heartbeat racin' like a junkie's
I just need you to want me
Am I askin' too much?
Let me put the head in
Ooh, I don't want more than that
Girl, I respect the cat
I promise just a touch
Let me put the head in
If it's okay
She said, "It's okay."

Lamar is describing a sexual encounter that has become a well-known pop culture theme. The action of trying to put “the head in,” or in other instances ‘just the tip,’ is how some men pressure women into sex. This is a way to work around consent. Lamar sing in the chorus “I just need you to want me,” which reveals that this sexual encounter is not about the woman, or even the sex. This is about an individual’s need for his desires to be satisfied. This also shows us something about sexual lust in particular, that it is mainly focused on one’s own desire to experience pleasure and doesn’t take into account whatsoever the desires, good, or dignity of the one lusted over. This concept will fuel the rest of the song’s verses.

Kenny first raps about a stereotypical Black man and advises him through his entire day. Then, Kenny raps about a stereotypical Black woman and advises her through her entire day. He raps,

Wake up in the mornin'
Thinkin' 'bout money, kick your feet up
Watch you a comedy, take a shit, then roll some weed up
Go hit you a lick, go fuck on a bitch, don't go to work today
Cop you a fit or maybe some kicks and make it work today
Hang with your homies, stunt on your baby mama
Sip some lean, go get a pistol, shoot out the window
Bet your favorite team, play you some Madden
Go to the club or your mama house
Whatever you doin', just make it count
(I need some water)
Wake up in the mornin'
Thinkin' 'bout money, kick your feet up
Hop in the shower, put on your makeup, lace your weave up
Touch on yourself, call up your n—a, tell him he ain't shit
Credit card scam, get you a Visa, make him pay your rent
Hop on the 'Gram, flex on the bitches that be hatin' on you
Pop you a pill, call up your bitches, have 'em waitin' on you
Go to the club, have you some fun, make that ass bounce
It's whatever, just make it count

Kenny raps about the same progression of like events which manifest differently in the lives of a man and a woman. They both wake up, think about money, and then don't act on their thought. He then instructs them how to begin their daily routine which is centered around their particular needs. He then advises them to engage in non-committal sexual acts and cause trouble. Then he advises them to acquire material things for themselves and their image, hang out with their friends, act disrespectfully to people in their lives, take drugs, go with their friends to another location and waste their time there. Kenny admits that these things really don't "count," because "it's whatever." The insertion of "I need some water" suggests that these activities leave the soul in a state of

dryness, and that causes one to wither—not only in the spiritual but the physical life.

Both these individuals are not living a happy life. In verse two, Kenny is living the same life that he is advising them to live. He raps,

I wake in the mornin', my head spinnin' from the last night
Both in the trance, feelings I did—what a fast life!
Manager called, the lobby called, it's 11:30
Did this before, promised myself I'd be a hour early
Room full of clothes, bag full of money: call it loose change
Fumbled my jewelry, 100k, I lost a new chain
Hop on the bird, hit the next city for another M
Take me a nap and do it again

This is not an image of success or glory. Rather, this shows the futility of self-interest.

Lust, focusing on one's own desires, does not lead to a happy life. Instead, it makes necessary the satiation of desires at the expense of flourishing. Lamar then refocuses this discussion of lust to an entire group of people, those who felt marginalized at the election of Donald Trump. He raps,

We all woke up, tryna tune to the daily news
Lookin' for confirmation, hopin' election wasn't true
All of us worried, all of us buried, and our feeling's deep
None of us married to his proposal, make us feel cheap
Still and sad, distraught and mad, tell the neighbor 'bout it
Bet they agree, parade the streets with your voice proudly
Time passin', things change
Revertin' back to our daily programs, stuck in our ways; Lust

This seems to be Lamar saying that self-interest impedes social action. Before the last chorus of the song, Lamar raps these lines:

Lately, I feel like I been lustin' over the fame
Lately, we lust on the same routine of shame
Lately, lately, lately, my lust been hidin' (Lately)
Lately, it's all contradiction
Lately, I'm not here
Lately, I lust over self

Lust turn into fear
Lately, in James 4:4 says
Friend of the world is enemy of the Lord
Brace yourself, lust is all yours

LOVE. FEAT. ZACARI. Kenny is brought by his love of a romantic interest into love for God. We see his prior boasting of success turn into a boasting about love and his prior dominating language turn into consideration for his love. Zacari, the featured artist on this track, sings,

Give me a run for my money
There is nobody, no one to outrun me
(Another world premiere!)
So give me a run for my money
Sippin' bubbly, feelin' lovely, livin' lovely
Just love me

Kenny asks questions about how strong this romantic interest's love is, if she would still love him if he gave up his wealth and status. He asks this because “[if] I don’t got you, I got nothing.” This love that he is interested in is not a one night stand. Lamar raps that this is “for life.” In the second verse, Lamar raps these lines which show a marked shift in his behavior from the previous song. He raps,

I'm on the way
We ain't got no time to waste
Poppin' your gum on the way
Am I in the way?
I don't wan' pressure you none
I want your blessing today

This shift that occurs marks the end of his section on the struggle between virtue and vice. Lamar shows that a certain type of love, that is considerate to the desires, feelings,

and needs of the other, is the remedy to the self-centered path of wickedness. He is no longer in isolation.

This character also doubles as a God figure. He references images from *untitled unmastered.* to meld the love for a woman with the love for God. In *untitled unmastered.*, Lamar shouts “get God on the phone.” In this song, he raps,

I want your blessing today
Oh, by the way, open the door by the way
Told you that I'm on the way
I'm on the way, I know connection is vague
Pick up the phone for me, babe

Thus, at the end of his musings about virtue and vice and the struggle between the two, Kenny is now making his return to God because he loves God while previously we can speculate that he used God’s words for his own gain as “Yeshua[’s] new weapon.”¹⁴ On the road to God, Kenny is “an exit away.” This positive interpretation of is supported by the line “another world premiere” which is a reference to “i,” the song of Black empowerment and self-confidence from *To Pimp a Butterfly*.¹⁵

The DAMN. Analysis: XXX. - DUCKWORTH.

This part of the album is truly grueling. Kenny is fighting self-centeredness with everything he can muster but seems to be getting nowhere. The listener is tempted to become discouraged, and likely Kenny is so as well. Indeed, anyone trying to live a

¹⁴ Kendrick Lamar, “DNA.,” track #2 on *DAMN.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2017.

¹⁵ “This is a world premiere” is only in the single version, the album version does not have this statement.

better, more holy life, can commiserate. The road to virtue is full of speed bumps and potholes. Kenny will be caught in hypocrisy, admit some of his most intimate fears, and once he admits his greatest fear about losing God's presence, this seems to make him feel better. He then realizes that chastisement is due to God's love and makes him a better person. With this new outlook, Lamar is able to take the FOX criticism in stride.

XXX. While Kenny has learned the first steps of humility, in this song Kenny oscillates between trying to choose weakness but still choosing wickedness. When a man comes to him with a great problem, Kenny advises him to choose the path of wickedness and perpetuate the curse that was placed on him. Kenny is caught in hypocrisy and feels the weight of condemnation. Then he makes his condemnation of American Anti-Blackness.

Kenny begins the song boasting about himself. He raps,

Throw a steak off the ark
To a pool full of sharks, he'll take it
Leave him in the wilderness
With a sworn nemesis, he'll make it
Take the gratitude from him
I bet he'll show you somethin', whoa
I'll chip a n—a little bit of nothin'
I'll chip a n—a little bit of nothin'
I'll chip a n—a little bit of nothin'
I'll chip a n—a, then throw the blower in his lap¹⁶
Walk myself to the court like, "Bitch, I did that!"
X-rated

Then, a man turns to Kenny for spiritual guidance for the death of the man's son. He raps,

Yesterday I got a call like from my dog like 101

¹⁶ shoot someone and then throw the gun into the lap of the murdered person

Said they killed his only son because of insufficient funds
He was sobbin', he was mobbin', way belligerent and drunk
Talkin' out his head, philosphin' on what the Lord had done
He said: "K-Dot, can you pray for me?
It's been a fucked up day for me
I know that you anointed, show me how to overcome."
He was lookin' for some closure
Hopin' I could bring him closer
To the spiritual, my spirit do no better, but I told him
"I can't sugarcoat the answer for you, this is how I feel:
If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin' killed."
Tell me what you do for love, loyalty, and passion of
All the memories collected, moments you could never touch
I'll wait in front a n—as spot and watch him hit his block
I'll catch a n—a leavin' service if that's all I got
I'll chip a n—a, then throw the blower in his lap
Walk myself to the court like, "Bitch, I did that!"
Ain't no Black Power when your baby killed by a coward

Against his spiritual conscience, Kenny suggests that the man retaliate.

You should chip a n—a, then throw the blower in his lap
Matter fact, I'm 'bout to speak at this convention
Call you back- *tires screeching*

At this point, Becon catches Kenny in his hypocrisy of being a self-identified prophet and pursuing the life of wickedness while advising others to do the same. We see Kenny is speaking to a youth conference about the benefit of “gun control.” Kenny says “pray for me” before Becon says “Damn...” Kenny then, at the moment of feeling this condemnation, realizes the source of his hatred. He condemns America. He raps,

Hail Mary, Jesus and Joseph
The great American flag
Is wrapped and dragged with explosives
Compulsive disorder, sons and daughters
Barricaded blocks and borders
Look what you taught us!
It's murder on my street, your street, back streets
Wall Street, corporate offices
Banks, employees, and bosses with

Homicidal thoughts; Donald Trump's in office
We lost Barack and promised to never doubt him again
But is America honest, or do we bask in sin?
Pass the gin, I mix it with American blood
Then bash him in, you Crippin' or you married to blood?
I'll ask again-oops-accident
It's nasty when you set us up
Then roll the dice, then bet us up
You overnight the big rifles, then tell Fox to be scared of us
Gang members or terrorists, et cetera, et cetera
America's reflections of me, that's what a mirror does

At first, it seems like America is the reflection of Kenny's violence. However, it seems that the line "that's what a mirror does" implies a false perception like the mirrored image thinking that the real image is the reflection. Additionally, since this is a reference to the Candyman it follows that Kenny's violent and hateful aspects are taught to him by the greater influencing force of American Anti-Blackness. Indeed, Bono repeats a triplet that he has sung once before the verse we just examined. Bono sings, It's not a place // This country is to be a sound of drum and bass // You close your eyes to look around." Here, America is not the geological place, but the spirit and history of oppression and injustice of white people against everyone else. While on *To Pimp a Butterfly* Lamar showed the economic and spiritual forces which were behind systemic oppression and injustice, here Lamar indicts the American spirit that hypnotizes everyone it comes into contact with and makes them soldiers against love, peace, and equality. For Lamar to identify this is an act of love whereas for Lamar to attempt to create a violent revolution would be playing into the hands of the American spirit.

FEAR. On the next song, “FEAR.,” Lamar seems to shed his alter ego and begin rapping in his own voice. Lamar’s fear is generated from the physical poverty and violence created by American Anti-Blackness. In this song, Lamar questions suffering at three points in his life, when he is seven, seventeen, and twenty seven. Before Lamar goes into this exploration of fear, a part of a voicemail plays from his cousin, Carl Duckworth, who is a Black Hebrew Israelite. Carl says,

What's up, family? Yeah, it's yo cousin Carl, man, just givin' you a call, man.

I know you been havin' a lot on yo mind lately,
and I know you feel like, you know, people ain't been prayin' for you.
But you have to understand this, man, that we are a cursed people.

Deuteronomy 28: 28 says,

"The Lord shall smite thee with madness,
and blindness,
and astonishment of heart."

See, family, that's why you feel like you feel like you got a chip on your shoulder.

Until you finally get the memo, you will always feel that way...

Lamar takes this idea of cursedness and examines it in his own life. But before that,

Charles Edward Sydney Isom Jr. raps,

Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Pain in my heart carry burdens full of struggle
Why God, why God do I gotta bleed?
Every stone thrown at you restin' at my feet
Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Earth is no more, won't you burn this muh'fucka?

These two parts of the song from Carl and Isom Jr. are bookended with a sample, “I don’t think I can find a way to make it on this earth” from “Poverty’s Paradise,” a song by The 24-Carat Black. Lamar is sympathetic to these sentiments however he does not seem to

accept this sentiment or Carl's claims without nuance.¹⁷ I will revisit this in the following paragraphs.

At seven, Lamar was afraid of his mother because of her constant scolding. These scoldings were due to the family's vulnerable financial position. At seventeen, he recounts fears of hopelessness, the inevitability of death, and other fears that he has previously mentioned on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. At twenty seven, he is afraid that his career won't last and that he will have to return to Section 8 housing. From these physical fears Lamar turns to existential and spiritual fears. He raps,

I'm talkin' fear, fear of losin' creativity
I'm talkin' fear, fear of missin' out on you and me
I'm talkin' fear, fear of losin' loyalty from pride
'Cause my DNA won't let me involve in the light of God
I'm talkin' fear, fear that my humbleness is gone
I'm talkin' fear, fear that love ain't livin' here no more
I'm talkin' fear, fear that it's wickedness or weakness
Fear, whatever it is, both is distinctive
Fear, what happens on Earth stays on Earth
And I can't take these feelings with me
So hopefully they disperse
Within fourteen tracks, carried out over wax
Searchin' for resolutions until somebody get back
Fear, what happens on Earth stays on Earth
And I can't take these feelings with me
So hopefully they disperse
Within fourteen tracks, carried out over wax
Wonderin' if I'm livin' through fear or livin' through rap

Note that Lamar weaves titles of the album's songs into this verse. He references being afraid of losing "loyalty" because of his "pride," that his sinfulness in his "DNA won't let

¹⁷ Brian Hiatt, Kendrick Lamar: The Rolling Stone Interview," Lamar says, "Shit's true," in response to a question about Carl's claim that Black people are cursed by God in Deuteronomy, though he qualifies his agreement: "There's so many different ways to interpret it, but it's definitely truth when you're talking about unity in our community and some of the things we have no control over."

[him] involve in the light of God,” that his “humbleness is gone” and that “love” is no longer within him. He is afraid of the dichotomy of “wickedness or weakness” and which of the two his life will be judged as because “what happens on Earth stays on Earth” during the apocalypse. Because of this, he is “searching for resolutions until [Jesus Christ] get back,” and he is doing this through his music. However, “what happens on Earth stays on Earth” also takes on another meaning. The things of Earth (i.e. curses) remain on Earth and have consequences for coming generations. Thus, it is important for what happens on Earth to be attended to with the regenerative power of God in the way of humble weakness.

After this confession the rest of the voicemail from Carl plays. Carl says,

Verse two says¹⁸

“you only have I known of all the families of the Earth,
therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

So until we come back to these commandments,
until you come back to these commandments,
we're gonna feel this way, we're gonna be under this curse.

Because he said he's gonna punish us,
the so-called Blacks, Hispanics, and Native American Indians,
are the true children of Israel.

We are the Israelites according to the Bible.

The children of Israel, he's gonna punish us for our iniquities,
for our disobedience, because we chose to follow other gods
that aren't his son, so the Lord, thy God, chasten thee.

So, just like you chasten your own son,
he's gonna chastise you
because he loves you.

So that's why we get chastised,
that's why we're in the position we're in.

Until we come back to these laws, statutes and commandments,
and do what the Lord said, these curses are gonna be upon us.

We're gonna be at a lower state in this life
that we live here in today,

¹⁸ Now referencing Amos.

in the United States of America.
I love you, son, and I pray for you. God bless you, shalom.

While Lamar does not visibly reject this, Carl's claims are different than those that Lamar made in "XXX. (FEAT. U2.)," and previously on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Carl's claims distill into the argument that if oppressed people were moral then they would not face oppression. Interestingly, this is similar to the FOX criticism on "YAH." Geraldo Riveras accuses hip hop of being more harmful to Black youths than racism because, he implies, it instills in them propensities to sin and keeps them from integrating fully with white America. Lamar, on the other hand, has in previous albums and in the previous song been very clear about America's role in the almost inescapable oppression of non-white people. Furthermore, Lamar's hope rests in Jesus Christ's regenerative power to reverse curses and his coming judgement, of which Carl makes no mention. However, the sentiment of inescapable damnation remains: Becon sings,

Damn
Goddamn you
Goddamn me
Goddamn us
Goddamn we
Goddamn us all

It is unclear whether or not these six lines are six independent but related claims or if there is enjambment going on. This would create at least three interpretations. The "Goddamn" here could be taken as outcries of which the emphasis is on "you...me..."etc. It could also be taken as God damn (ing) "you...me..."etc. Taken another way, Lamar could be using enjambment (which he does very often) to say "Goddamn(ej.), you(s.) goddamn(v.) me(d.o.);" and so on and so forth. The second

interpretation seems to be the most likely due to the intonation of Becon's voice, however the other two interpretations should not be dismissed because while the second emphasizes God's seemingly arbitrary judgement like *untitled unmastered.*, the first emphasizes individual and communal responsibility for their salvation, and the third emphasizes our responsibility to each other. Each of these meanings could fit with the overall meaning of the album because each of the three are expressed in different places.

GOD. It is the most hopeful song of the album. Lamar, having given his fears to God, concludes his examination into the path of wickedness and coming back to reality with the assurance that the path of weakness is better. Lamar exults about how his life has been changed by music and following God's path for his life. He raps,

This what God feel like, huh, yeah
Laughin' to the bank like, "A-ha!", huh, yeah
Flex on swole like, "A-ha!", huh, yeah
You feel some type of way, then a-ha!
Huh, yeah (a-ha-ha, a-ha-ha)

At first glance this seems rather hedonistic. "A-ha!" could either signify a transcending of these hedonistic pleasures and noting how Lamar experiences the joy of finding these pleasures in God, or out of experiencing the deprivation of these fleeting pleasures Lamar is reoriented to the eternal pleasures that can only be found in God. Either way, what laughter is not in Lamar's wealth or superiority, but rather in the immense blessing that God has bestowed upon him. His flexing is not to dominate others, rather Lamar is displaying the talents and aspects of himself that God has blessed him with. Indeed, this

also notes how indulgence in lesser pleasures, when they end up being empty, directs the soul to God. This theme runs throughout the verses. In verse one Lamar raps,

Ever since a young man
All I wanted to be was a gunman
Shootin' up the charts, better run, man
Y'all gotta see that I won, man

In verse two, Lamar raps,

Everything in life is a gamble
Nothin' in life I can't handle
Seen it all, done it all, felt pain more
For the cause, I done put blood on sword
Everything I do is to embrace y'all
Everything I write is a damn eight ball
Everything I touch is a damn gold mine
Everything I say is from an angel

This is a completely different outlook on life than how Kenny viewed the world. Lamar is now not focused on himself and his pride, but humbly gives his life “for the cause” of his prophetic work and Black advancement. Additionally, we see that Lamar has changed from the selfishness and self-pity that condemned him on “untitled 08.” He raps that he has learned patience (“I don’t rush shit”) and the love of other people and their needs (“always your shit, my shit”). Furthermore, he can now “levitate, duckin’ haters.”

DUCKWORTH. On the final song of the album, Lamar goes back in time and tells a story about his father, Kenny (“Ducky”) Duckworth. From the upbeat and joyful song of “GOD.,” “DUCKWORTH.” has a very dark and menacing tone. On the one hand this is because of the song’s setting: Compton in the late 1980’s during the Crips and Bloods feud, when Kendrick Lamar was a child. On the other hand, this is because the

album's main argument is in the process of being questioned. Lamar narrates the story of how Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith and his father Ducky met. I will quote the entire story.

See, once upon a time inside the Nickerson Garden projects
The object was to process and digest poverty's dialect
Adaptation inevitable: gun violence, crack spot
Federal policies raid buildings and drug professionals
Anthony was the oldest of seven
Well-respected, calm and collected
Laughin' and jokin' made life easier; hard times, Momma on crack
A four-year-old tellin' his nanny he needed her
His family history: pimpin' and bangin'
He was meant to be dangerous
Clocked him a grip and start slangin'
Fifteen, scrapin' up his jeans with quarter pieces
Even got some head from a smoker last weekend
Dodged a policeman, workin' for his big homie
Small-time hustler, graduated to a brick on him
10,000 dollars out of a project housing, that's on the daily
Seen his first mil twenty years old, had a couple of babies
Had a couple of shooters
Caught a murder case, fingerprints on the gun they assumin'
But witnesses couldn't prove it
That was back when he turned his back and they killed his cousin
He beat the case and went back to hustlin'
Bird-shufflin', Anthony rang
The first in the projects with the two-tone Mustang
That 5.0 thing, they say 5-0 came
Circlin' parking lots and parking spots
And hoppin' out while harrassin' the corner blocks
Crooked cops told Anthony he should kick it
He brushed 'em off and walked back to the Kentucky Fried Chicken
See, at this chicken spot
There was a light-skinned n—a that talked a lot
With a curly top and a gap in his teeth
He worked the window, his name was Ducky
He came from the streets, the Robert Taylor Homes
Southside Projects, Chiraq, the Terror Dome¹⁹
Drove to California with a woman on him and 500 dollars
They had a son, hopin' that he'd see college
Hustlin' on the side with a nine-to-five to freak it

¹⁹ That is, Chicago

Cadillac Seville, he'd ride his son around on weekends
Three-piece special with his name on the shirt pocket
'Cross the street from the projects, Anthony planned to rob it
Stuck up the place before, back in '84
That's when affiliation was really eight gears of war
So many relatives tellin' us, sellin' us devilish works
Killin' us, crime, intelligent, felonious
Prevalent proposition with 9's
Ducky was well-aware
They robbed the manager and shot a customer last year
He figured he'd get on these n—as' good sides
Free chicken every time Anthony posted in line
Two extra biscuits, Anthony liked him and then let him slide
They didn't kill him; in fact, it look like they're the last to survive
Pay attention, that one decision changed both of they lives
One curse at a time
Reverse the manifest and good karma, and I'll tell you why
You take two strangers and put 'em in random predicaments
Give 'em a soul so they can make their own choices and live with it
Twenty years later, them same strangers, you make 'em meet again
Inside recording studios where they reapin' their benefits
Then you start remindin' them about that chicken incident
Whoever thought the greatest rapper would be from coincidence?
Because if Anthony killed Ducky, Top Dawg could be servin' life
While I grew up without a father and die in a gunfight.

After this is over, there is a gunshot and the album plays in reverse until Lamar can be clearly heard saying the beginning lines of “BLOOD.,” “so I was takin’ a walk the other day.” This story illustrates Lamar’s message on *DAMN*. Ducky chose the path of weakness. This seems insignificant because when interacting with a dangerous individual one’s natural response is to lower oneself so as to not be injured. However, Ducky was a dangerous man also. He came from the hood in Chicago and was in the Gangster Disciples.²⁰ Ducky could have easily stood up to Anthony, but he decided to humble

²⁰ John Eells, “The Trials of Kendrick Lamar,” *The Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2015.

himself to the point of giving Anthony free food, bread even.²¹ This act of humility, for Lamar, created “good karma” because good actions are met with blessings from God, and wicked actions are met with God-sent curses. If Ducky did not humble himself before Anthony, Lamar concludes that both the men’s lives would have been destroyed, and the effects of this destruction would touch Lamar’s generation and likely the following ones.

Lamar frames this event by acknowledging that God had a role in this situation. Lamar raps that “Life is one funny mothafucka,” and that God is “a true comedian, you gotta love him, you gotta trust him.” It is in even small acts of humility and love that curses begin to be reversed. It is Anthony’s curse that is lifted by Ducky’s giving him biscuits because this led Anthony to save his life. In this story, Carl’s claims about why “the true nation of Israel” faces oppression appears to be too limited. While it is true that if Anthony just wasn’t a criminal then Ducky would be in no danger. But this is unrealistic due to the relativizing effects of poverty on moral judgement.²² Ultimately, Lamar’s message of humble weakness appears to have a better grasp on human nature and reality. This claim that God repays those what they deserve makes the events in this album not only metaphysical consequences of wickedness (such as an increasing privation of good hastening something or someone to an emptier share of being), but direct judgements from God. Lamar does not hope that all criminals will immediately change and never do crime again in places that almost necessitate criminal activity for

²¹ This is a eucharistic image, though it would be conjecture to say if Lamar meant it in this way or not. Very literally, these biscuits are the bread of life.

²² see subsection in chapter two, Communal Morality, Not Law

survival, like Compton.²³ Rather, Lamar hopes in God's justice that can both condemn the environmental factors and their cause, American Anti-Blackness, and reward people for the smallest good deeds which, in turn, have enormous effects for life.

DAMN. COLLECTOR'S EDITION.

I would do a disservice to not mention the reverse album, *DAMN. COLLECTOR'S EDITION*. When the album is played backwards, it has a much different meaning. Instead of going from vice to virtue, the album goes from virtue to vice. It follows Kenny as he succumbs to hatred, not grows out of it. This album is meant to show the effects of Ducky's choice not to be humble and offer Anthony bread. Kenny is not Lamar's altar ego in this alternate reality. Kenny and Lamar are one and the same. The path of wickedness that he pursues leads not only to physical death, but to damnation as well.

Kendrick Lamar's prophetic message in DAMN.

In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Lamar's primary prophetic work was one of deconstructing a false consciousness and constructing a new conceptualization of self-worth that is based on God's working through a Black woman to disclose Godself. In *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Lamar's primary prophetic work was primarily to identify predatory American economic structures that exploit Black life and expose their satanic power with a vision for Black unification and solidarity. In *DAMN.*, Lamar's prophetic work is first

²³ He becomes more of a realist in this regard than he was in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*.

to examine the personal and societal consequences of the path of wickedness and pride, and suggest the way of weakness and humility. Additionally, Lamar continues his critique of American Anti-Blackness and develops on his previous condemnation of it in *To Pimp a Butterfly* with the image of the Candyman. Here, the Candyman is a mirror for white hatred, a pedagogical spirit of American Anti-Blackness that transforms the minds of every individual it touches into murderous and hateful people. Undergirding both of these points is his firm conviction that God is just as much a God of judgement as a God of grace and repays sinfulness with discipline. Finally, Lamar's conclusion that humility and weakness are the only beneficial ways to respond to criticism and oppression suggests that I revisit and nuance my interpretation of his interaction with Tupac's revolutionary consciousness.

Wickedness, Weakness, and the Prophetic

The pairs of opposites in this album, wickedness/weakness, pride/humble, and lust/love, have one tension point in common: the tension between self-interest and self-sacrifice. Wickedness, pridefulness, and lust all manifest as the desire to assert oneself's desires and superiority over and against other people and God. Wickedness leads to self-destruction. Pride leads to isolation and domination. Lust leads to exploitation. Weakness, humility, and love, on the other hand, all manifest as ways in which a person seeks God. Weakness participates in Jesus' weakness. Humility participates in Jesus' humility. Love participates in Jesus' love.

Lamar tries to inspire God-seeking behavior by examining the personal and societal consequences of the path of wickedness and pride. These consequences are as much casual as they are judgements. Indeed, in a letter Lamar sent to DJBooth after DJBooth analyzed *DAMN.*, Lamar wrote about the judgement of God and how God punishes or “chastise[s]”²⁴ people for their sins. Lamar wrote,

I went to a local church some time ago, and it appalled me that the same program was in practice. A program that I seen as a kid the few times I was in service. Praise, dance. Worship. (Which is beautiful.) Pastor spewing the idea of someone's season is approaching. The idea of hope. So on and so forth. As a child, I always felt this Sermon had an emptiness about it. Kinda one-sided, in what I felt in my heart. Fast forward. After being heavily in my studies these past few years, I've finally figured out why I left those services feeling spiritually unsatisfied as a child. I discovered more truth. But simple truth. Our God is a loving God. Yes. He's a merciful God. Yes. But he's even more so a God of DISCIPLINE. OBEDIENCE. A JEALOUS God. And for every conscious choice of sin, will be corrected through his discipline. Whether hysical or mental. Direct or indirect. Through your sufferings, or someone that's close to [sic] ken. It will be corrected.

Hence the concept "The wages of sin is Death." It shall be corrected. As a community, we was taught to pray for our mishaps, and he'll forgive you. Yes, this is true. But he will also reprimand us as well. As a child, I can't recall hearing this in service. Maybe leaders of the church knew it will run off churchgoers? No one wants to hear about karma from the decisions they make. It's a hard truth. We want to hear about hope, salvation, and redemption. Though his son died for our sins, our free will to make whatever choice we want, still allows him to judge us.

So in conclusion, I feel it's my calling to share the joy of God, but with exclamation, more so, the FEAR OF GOD. The balance. Knowing the power in what he can build, and also what he can destroy. At any given moment.

I love when artists sing about what makes Him happy. My balance is to tell you what will make Him extinguish you. Personally, once that idea of real fear registered in my mind, it made me try harder at choosing my battles wisely. Which will forever be tough, because I'm still of flesh. I wanna spread this truth to my listeners. It's a journey, but it will be my key to the Kingdom. And theirs as well. I

²⁴ “FEAR.” Carl’s word.

briefly touched on it in this album, but when he tells me to react, I will take deeper action.²⁵

For Lamar, the way of weakness and humility is the only way for true liberation and the only way to escape God's judgement. He tries to control the tension between this-worldly social justice as the liberative work of Jesus Christ and this-worldly social vengeance which is the destructive work of wounded pride. One is patient, loving, and hopeful, the other is impatient, hateful, and hopeless. As FOX criticizes his prophetic music and as he is in the middle of a vocational crisis, it is his wounded pride which triggers his descent into self-pity and down the path of wickedness. However, as Lamar shows how Kenny ends up destroying himself and locates failed social action in self-interest on "LUST.," Lamar makes his anecdotal argument for weakness believing that choosing the path of weakness is the only way to reverse the effects of sin in the world in his personal life, implying that the same may be true of the public life. As wickedness destroys the self, wickedness also destroys society. As weakness reverses curses by participating in Jesus' weakness, perhaps it may do the same for society. One thing is for certain in Lamar's mind: God will pay back humanity for their sins and any action taken out of pridefulness will bring down curses upon those who commit them—even if they have good intentions. The reverse is also true: God will send down blessings on those who walk with weakness and humility as they issue in the coming kingdom. So, for Lamar, weakness is assuming the posture of Jesus Christ with the understanding that God the Father ought to be feared because of His power and judgement. Additionally, this is a

²⁵ Brian "Z" Zisook, "Kendrick Lamar Responded to Our Article About His Fear of God," *DJ Booth*, April 14, 2019. <https://djbooth.net/features/2017-04-28-kendrick-lamar-god-response>

humble weakness which acknowledges human helplessness. This is contrasted with prideful wickedness because wickedness is anti-Christ and this is by means of pride. This theology of weakness also has consequences for the prophet and the prophetic voice.

The prophet, Lamar in this case, is most effective whenever he takes on the posture of humble weakness. There is something about being a chosen person for God that tempts individuals to take advantage of this elevated position. For example, David coercing Bathsheba, Moses striking the rock in Numbers 20, and Lamar's position as a spiritual leader. Additionally, there is something about being one through whom God condemns others that leads individuals to overlook their own vices. For example, Sampson disregarding his wickedness in the service of God and Jonah overlooking his disobedience and hatred in giving an imperfect message of repentance to the Ninevites. Lamar the man loses himself and Lamar the prophet loses his effectiveness as a prophet when he succumbs to prideful wickedness. Kenny exhibits these failings, among others: he dominates the Black and female body in "HUMBLE.," he acts in violence and suggests another man follow his example in "XXX.," shows himself to be given over to vice throughout the entire album and gives an imperfect message of humility which is actually forcing others into a lower social status as himself in "HUMBLE."

Kenny, like the other examples I have provided, experienced the consequences of his prideful wickedness. David's sexual coercion of Bathsheba resulted in death (the murder of Uriah and the death of David and Bathsheba's son) and condemnation (Samuel's rebuke), not to mention the untold trauma that Bathsheba must have experienced. Moses' disobedience caused him to be refused entry into the promised land.

Samuel suffered torture and fulfilled his condemnation of the Philistines by pulling down the pillars of the temple of Dagon, killing the Philistines and himself in the process. Jonah's resentment led him to sit in misery overlooking a repentant Nineveh. Kenny, similarly to these biblical figures, experienced a loss of family and friends due to his neurosis. Kenny experienced alienation from God because of his rejection of God. Ultimately, Kenny experienced an almost total dissolution of his life due to his wickedness and obstinance, in the event of realizing his hypocrisy. Lamar's prideful wickedness consists of trying to usurp God and dominating other people because he felt slighted by his critics. This causes him to lose touch with the message that he preaches and forsake those that he feels called to speak the truth of American Anti-Blackness and personal obedience to. Lamar's eventual humble weakness consists of obedience to God coming from a place of fear (the end of *DAMN.*) and sacrificing the gang-ideal in order to speak truth to the world (we see a glimpse of this in his discussion with God during the apocalypse on the first track of *untitled unmastered.*). This causes him to recover his prophetic voice because he is aligned with God once again.

Hatred and the Candyman: Condemnation of American Anti-Blackness

Lamar has previously identified predatory American economic structures that exploit Black life and has exposed their satanic power. Using Brueggemann's and Cone's understanding of the this-worldly gospel and the prophetic, I have argued that this identification and exposure is a prophetic work. I argued that the identification of structures that oppress and exploit is a prophetic endeavor because it reveals the truth

about reality, tears the sheet of ideology off of exploitative structures, and does the liberative work of Jesus Christ.

In *DAMN.*, Lamar takes this a step further. He is critical of American Anti-Blackness here with the emphasis that, like the Candyman, hatred generates hatred. As we see in the album, this hatred is not limited from white to Black, and Black to white. This hatred moves from white people among white people, white people to Black people, Black people to Black people, and then Black people to white people. This is an invasive spirit of hatred which diffuses throughout every community until everyone is at each other's' throats.

This is what the Candyman movies depict. In short, the Candyman is a vengeful spirit of a lynched Black man who, if you say his name five times in a mirror, appears and murders whoever summoned him. In the second movie his backstory is revealed. Candyman is the story of a Black man in the late 1800's, named Daniel Robitaille, who is brutally murdered by a mob of white people. He gets the name "Candyman" because the white people mutilate his body, sawing off his arm as vengeance for having a child with a white woman. They then smear honey on his body which draws a swarm of bees that sting him to death. A child comes to the dying body of Daniel and tastes some of the honey on his body and mocks him calling him "Candyman." The crowd chants his new name five times, joining in the mocking. The father of Daniel's lover forces Daniel to look at his own disfigured face in a hand mirror before he dies. Years pass and Candyman's vengeful spirit murders many individuals when eventually "After his great-granddaughter found the mirror that Daniel's lover hid, Daniel explained to her the deep

significance of the mirror. He claimed that his vengeful spirit derived its power from the mirror because he had become a reflection of the hatred and evil that was perpetrated against him.”²⁶

We may examine this spirit of hatred as a consequence of racial capitalism. Abstraction becomes domination. Slavery was total domination. As slavery was abolished, the dominating need of the American capitalist spirit went unmet because this type of oppression could not be legally engaged in. So, the capitalists found ways to work around this, all the while their resentment for their unmet dominating need grew. This resentment turned into hatred, and manifested in, among many other things such as micro-aggressions, lynchings. So this racist hatred that inspired the murder of the Candyman can be understood as linked to the American Capitalist spirit. However, as the Candyman becomes a vengeful spirit, he draws on white hatred for his own power. This is an image of race relations in America. Indeed, Lamar set up the album with the FOX news criticism being the trigger for his examination of wickedness because he is tempted to do the same thing that the Candyman does. He is tempted to take hatred and reflect it back to its source and create an infinite feedback loop. Lamar identifies that this temptation is rooted in his pridefulness and selfishness.

What then is the answer? we ought to ask ourselves. Lamar does not tell us other than “I can't change the world until I change myself first.”²⁷ This seems like an

²⁶ Femi Olutade, “Reflections on Dissections: S5E7 – “ELEMENT.”” *Medium*, November 8, 2019. <https://medium.com/@folutade/reflections-on-dissections-s5e7-element-15d24586c5a6>

²⁷ “Kendrick Lamar: ‘I Can’t Change the World Unless I Change Myself First,’” NPR, December 29, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/29/461129966/kendrick-lamar-i-cant-change-the-world-until-i-change-myself-first>

unsatisfactory answer. Indeed, I think that it is an unsatisfactory answer—but that does not mean that Lamar is wrong. Rather, it seems like his prophetic vision has developed since *To Pimp a Butterfly* to include from for patience, uncertainty, and faith. Lamar is trying to get people, I think, to stop “point[ing] the finger to make a point.”²⁸ Likewise, he notices how self-interest can extinguish one’s desire to fight for justice. There is no room in Lamar’s vision for hatred of other people because this hatred will pervert and rot any good it disguises itself as. If “capitalism and genocidism made [him] hate,” then to use hatred and violence to get what he wants without the command of God would be the greatest triumph of both these institutions: secretly making more soldiers that march to “the sound of drum and bass.”²⁹

Conclusion

This is Lamar’s most difficult album to analyze because of the many layers and references, as well as the undergirding principles that he does not explicitly state in the album. One could spend hours trying to find every meaning for each line and track similarities and themes throughout. Cole Cushna and Femi Olutade on the fifth season of the Dissect Podcast for Spotify Studios do as much, though most of their work was not fitted to the aims of this chapter. Nevertheless, I am in a great debt to their thoughts, opinions, and effort.

²⁸ Kendrick Lamar, “PRIDE.,” track #7 on *DAMN.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2017.

²⁹ Kendrick Lamar, “XXX. (FEAT. U2.),” track #11 on *DAMN.*, Aftermath/Interscope (Top Dawg Entertainment), 2017.

In this chapter, I summarized the events following *To Pimp a Butterfly* on *untitled unmastered.* and offered an analysis of *DAMN.*'s narrative based on the continuity between the two albums. On *untitled unmastered.*, I showed how Lamar was amidst a vocational crisis after *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This crisis, he revealed, was in a great part due to his struggle with sin as if it were a second personality. Then, Lamar diagnosed the root of the human condition as one of prideful self-interest that does not wait on the blessings of God and thus perverts the ends that they try to effect in their own power. By this diagnosis I grounded my analysis of *DAMN.* I argued that the narrative of Kung Fu Kenny was a creation of Lamar's, a personification of his wicked personality by which he explored the possibility that the way of wickedness might lead to life, since the way of weakness led to his being killed. Far from this, Kung Fu Kenny found himself in a place of spiritual death. It was not until he learned to love that he learned an iota of humility, and it was not until he was caught in hypocrisy, felt the weight of condemnation, and expressed his fear of losing his salvation that he turned back to God. This return then taught Lamar that God repays humans for their actions, and the way of weakness can reverse curses, the consequence of sin, and bring down blessings from God.

In section two, I summarized Lamar's prophetic message which is in two parts: the wickedness/weakness dichotomy and the image of the Candyman. The concept that God repays humans for their actions undergirds both of these parts of Lamar's prophetic message. The wickedness/weakness relation is fairly obvious. The idea that hatred generates hatred from Lamar's references to the Candyman I found to be an incredibly interesting and thought provoking concept. Lamar's prophetic message in this album is

quite different than in the previous two albums in the preceding chapters. In this album Lamar's prophetic voice focuses much less on issues of liberation in favor of the message that God should be feared because God repays humanity for their sins.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

I hope to have offered a fair and accurate presentation of Lamar's views and his prophetic rap music. Through this project, I have learned much about the experience of growing up in a place like Compton and what it is like to combat, every day, American Anti-Blackness. But beyond my own personal benefit, I hope that these ideas and stories of Kendrick Lamar's will have a greater impact on any study of this complex topic. I hope, also, to have succeeded in proving a peripheral goal that I mentioned in the introduction, that the music of Kendrick Lamar, other rappers, and other Black artists, should be fully engaged with and taken seriously by academia.

In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, I argued that hope for Kendrick Lamar is found in the ability of becoming, based in a new understanding of self, when before Lamar believed himself to be entrapped in a feedback loop of coping with death-anxiety that only further magnified death-anxiety. The gang ideal which Lamar is pushing back against is destructive to oneself and one's community because of a communal consciousness. Lamar's prophetic work is showing the basis for self-worth in the event of self-revelation of God-as-Black-woman. This self-worth located in the experience with Jesus then empowers the oppressed to take concrete actions of transforming learned self-destructive coping mechanisms into the virtues of responsibility, familial loyalty, and relationship

with God. These vices, I have argued, do not originate within the Black community as something particular to their Blackness. These vices are products of white influence on Black artists and socio-economic exploitation. But before Lamar is able to reach the elucidations of *To Pimp A Butterfly*, there must be a crucial understanding: because God identifies with the oppressed, Black life has incredible worth. This worth then leads to “a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing,” an “awaken[ing of] the readiness of expectation” for the special revelation of Jesus Christ who will liberate physically those who He has liberated mentally. And, for Lamar, this mental liberation can in a large part happen through prophetic music.

In *To Pimp a Butterfly*, I named and constructed Lamar’s Economic-Spiritual Critique of Anti-Blackness. Second, I framed Lamar’s critique as a prophetic work and provided a model for the prophet as a discloser of divine-world. In the first section, I first analyzed a poem that Lamar recites at the very end of the album on “Mortal Man” to understand the framework of his Economic-Spiritual Critique. Second, I summarized Lamar’s struggle with American capitalism in the first antagonist Uncle Sam. Third, I showed how Lamar’s understanding of Uncle Sam is similar to Cedric Robinson’s concepts of racial capitalism and revolutionary consciousness drawing on a track “HiiiPoWeR” from his album *Section8.0*. Fourth, I summarized Lamar’s struggle with American Anti-Blackness’ satanic nature in the second antagonist Lucy. Fifth, I showed how Lamar encourages Black unification as a response to Lucy’s (and by extension Uncle Sam’s) dividing oppression. Sixth, I interpreted “Mortal Man” as *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s eschatological vision. Finally, I argued that the tension within Lamar’s

presentation of American Anti-Blackness and his response to it is superficial.

Understanding the relationship between his presentation and response, I resolved tensions or contradictions.

In the second section of chapter three, I argued that Lamar identifies predatory American economic structures that exploit Black life and exposes their satanic power. Second, that in response to the racial aspect of American capitalism, Lamar redefines the n-word as NEGUS, Black kingship, with a vision for Black unification and solidarity. Third, I argued that Lamar gives a model for the revolutionary consciousness which is an active waiting for the time to rise up, in similar language with which Christians speak about the second coming of Christ. Fourth, that revolutionary consciousness and Black kingship are opened up as possibilities by God-as-homeless-Black-man in another event of divine disclosure. Fifth, that Lamar mirrors this disclosure and makes *To Pimp a Butterfly* a site for subsequent divine-world disclosure. Finally, I concluded that this suggests that objectivity in regard to ethics and *aletheia* is dependent upon divine-world disclosure and the prophetic work is subsequent disclosure of divine-world to other human beings, locating ultimate reality within divine being.

Ultimately, Lamar's hope on *To Pimp a Butterfly* is the process of social becoming: unification of the oppressed and revolution against an exploitative, oppressive, and satanic political economy. In this framework, social becoming is the coming of God's kingdom by concrete actions that usher forth social justice. God discloses divine-world to the prophet in order that the prophet might disclose divine-world to humanity, and this divine-world disclosure is the basis for identifying and exposing satanic

oppression and exploitation. Further, this divine-world disclosure breaks satanic attachments that hinder the coming kingdom. In this way, Lamar reimagines Black life as N.E.G.U.S., not as n-word. And in so doing he claims true kingship, not the satanic facade of kingship that American Anti-Blackness offers.

On *DAMN.*, I summarized the discouraging events following *To Pimp a Butterfly* on *untitled unmastered.* and offered an analysis of *DAMN.*'s narrative based on the continuity between the two albums. On *untitled unmastered.*, I showed how Lamar was amidst a vocational crisis after *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This crisis, he revealed, was in a great part due to his struggle with sin as if it were a second personality. Then, Lamar diagnosed the root of the human condition as one of prideful self-interest that does not wait on the blessings of God and thus perverts the ends that they try to effect in their own power. By this diagnosis I grounded my analysis of *DAMN.* I argued that the narrative of Kung Fu Kenny was a creation of Lamar's, a personification of his wicked personality by which he explored the possibility that the way of wickedness might lead to life, since the way of weakness led to his being killed. Far from this, Kung Fu Kenny found himself in a place of spiritual death. It was not until he learned to love that he learned an iota of humility, and it was not until he was caught in hypocrisy, felt the weight of condemnation, and expressed his fear of losing his salvation that he turned back to God. This return then taught Lamar that God repays humans for their actions, and the way of weakness can reverse curses, the consequence of sin, and bring down blessings from God.

In section two of chapter four, I summarized Lamar's prophetic message which is in two parts: the wickedness/weakness dichotomy and the image of the Candyman. The concept that God repays humans for their actions undergirds both of these parts of Lamar's prophetic message. The wickedness/weakness relation is fairly obvious. The idea that hatred generates hatred from Lamar's references to the Candyman I found to be an incredibly interesting and thought provoking concept. Lamar's prophetic message in this album is quite different than in the previous two albums in the preceding chapters. In this album Lamar's prophetic voice focuses much less on issues of liberation in favor of the message that God should be feared because God repays humanity for their sins.

By the end of *DAMN.*, Lamar's hope has evolved into a type of understanding that becoming, social action, and morality are not human constructions and are not in the realm of human judgement. Lamar envisions a world that is orchestrated and presided over by a God who is both at the same time loving and judging. This God judges every action and every human being, giving blessings or curses on the individual and, as a collection of individual judgements, on the society. This hope rests in God's power to act, and in God's fairness of judgement. This locates the power of liberation and social justice in God. To relate to a God such as this, and to live in such a world created by this God that has these two qualities of love and judgement, requires that the human act with humility. Moreover, to be a spokesperson for God, to disclose divine-world as a prophet, requires great humility. This is a humility of giving up one's own false perceptions of being able to judge right from wrong and in obedience assenting to God's presentation of

Godself and thus of reality; in other words, leaving our projected world to dwell in the
Open of divine-world—the 'real' world.

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