

**WE GON' BE ALRIGHT: RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND JAZZ RHETORIC
IN KENDRICK LAMAR'S *TO PIMP A BUTTERFLY***

by

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Abstract

Hip-hop has become a massive phenomenon across the globe, and Kendrick Lamar is one of its biggest names. Of all his critically acclaimed work, his 2015 album *To Pimp A Butterfly* is considered his greatest masterpiece. Here, I explore this album using a lens of critical race theory and musical analysis of jazz language to see how different narratives and musical personae are artistically constructed to be reflective of black identity, and representative of issues surrounding race and poverty. I use this to argue *To Pimp A Butterfly* is a seminal album of the 21st century. These personae and narratives represent a complex, non-limiting conception of black identity, pushing artistic discussions of racial identity and poverty into their 21st century iterations.

List of Symbols and Abbreviations

TPAB

To Pimp A Butterfly

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In March 2015 I remember trucking my way through my second year of university, watching as one album set the world on fire. There were talks of praise, of pride, and of hope, and among musicians, fans, and critics there was nothing short of a universal sense of appreciation. It had been two days since Kendrick Lamar had released *To Pimp A Butterfly* and the world had gone mad over it, in the best possible sense. Finally, I got a chance to sit down and listen to it, and I was blown away. The narratives, the artistic intricacies, the musical complexity, and the deep soulful messages were put together in such a way that made the album stunningly different from anything that I heard before. Sure, there has been jazz in hip-hop records before – but not like this. Sure, there has been social commentary in hip-hop albums before – but not like this. Sure, there had been intricate lyricism and stunning performative ability before – but not like this. *To Pimp A Butterfly* (hereafter referred to as *TPAB*) presented these elements in a unique form that wove them together to form contrasting, dynamic personae and narratives. The combination of these elements had me completely floored as I sat there listening for the first time to what would become one of hip-hop's most important works. Every song played off another to create a complex series of narratives that made it impossible to stop listening, like a book that can't be put down, or a movie that can't be paused, until the last track: "Mortal Man", an honest artistic depiction of questioning one's self, and the role one plays in the world.

Maybe it was the emotionally charged melancholic musical space, but as the song progressed I remember thinking *I think I've thought every single thing he's saying*, as he questioned himself, his view of the world, and his role in it as a person that wanted to make a

difference. I don't remember when exactly the tears started, but I noticed that I was in the midst of a full emotional breakdown. The track finished as Lamar called out to Tupac, as he disappeared, and I was left, headphones on thinking that what I just heard was *perfect*. I couldn't define what that meant in terms of saying the right rhymes, or playing the right lines, but I knew what it felt like – and it felt like *artistically saying something that mattered*. “Mortal Man” described a sense of internal conflict yet places it within the external conflict of the world, and all its problems. It centered on feeling a responsibility to the world but seeing oneself as imperfect and flawed – yet still wanting to make a difference when it came to the surrounding external conflict. The line “lead this army, but make room for mistakes and depression” succinctly summed up the song's meaning – wanting to make a difference, and feeling a responsibility to do so, yet being vastly aware of one's own demons, and the struggles to overcome them.¹ As I sat there listening I realized the relevance of the title of “Mortal Man”, as a song that describes being tragically flawed and navigating one's own imperfections while wanting to make a difference in the world – to me, there is no better summation of what it means to be human, and to be, as Lamar states, a mortal man.

But these stories go far beyond hip-hop. These are narratives that are expressed in jazz, R&B, blues, soul, and spirituals. The common thread of these? The African-American experience, and the role that marginalization plays in it. Tricia Rose refers to hip-hop as the “voices from the margins”, and this is where this study begins – discussing those voices, stories, and ideas.² In my lifetime, I had never seen an album cause such a frenzy of praise as *To Pimp A Butterfly*, and when I sat down and listened to the record, it all made sense. From the musical

¹ “Kendrick Lamar- Mortal Man Lyrics”, *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-mortal-man-lyrics>

² Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.

brilliance and intricacy of using jazz rhetoric and harmony to R&B to using the classic West Coast rap sound, the album is a sonic masterpiece that draws on black musical traditions from past and present to tell stories of the experience of poverty, racism, the black experience, and the role which artists such as Lamar play in it.

Hailing from Compton California, a hometown that is infamous in hip-hop for its stories of violence and poverty, Kendrick Lamar has become one of the most important artists of 21st century hip-hop. His debut album *Section.80* introduced him to the world as the next step in the lineage of West Coast hip-hop in the form of angry resistance. The lyrics spoke of confrontation and rebellion against oppressive systems of racial and economic domination. As *Section.80* marked Lamar's introduction into the mainstream eye of hip-hop and rap, his career would be furthered with his second album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, telling retrospective stories on surviving and coming of age in ghetto poverty, amidst gang violence, substance abuse, police brutality, and racism. His fourth album *DAMN.* marked the moment where Lamar was accredited for the essential work he was doing, as it became the first hip-hop album, first non-classical album, first non-jazz album to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. This confirmed the arrival of the 21st century's most political artist. However, according to many critics such as Tom Slater the award should have gone to his third album, as *To Pimp A Butterfly* represents modern discussions of race and poverty in the 21st century, and pose the question of the individual's role in these systems.³

This is why I've chosen to write this, to try to understand and show the positive difference music and art can make, by examining one of the most seminal records of the 21st

³ Tom Slater, "The Problem With Kendrick Lamar Winning the Pulitzer", *Spiked*, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2018/04/20/the-problem-with-kendrick-lamar-winning-the-pulitzer/>

century, and of hip-hop in its entirety – Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Specifically, I hope to explore how *To Pimp A Butterfly* uses jazz language and artistic representations of poverty and the black experience. I argue that *TPAB* presents an example of the expression of marginalized social narratives, in particular those around race and poverty, as hip-hop has often done, and has been noted by many scholars. Secondly, I argue why this is one of the 21st century’s most seminal albums due to the following points: it helped to push representations of social narratives and artistic discussions of race and poverty into their 21st century iterations using diverse musical personae by using diverse sonic ideas. These personae are based around jazz language, a gesture which in the context of hip-hop elevates these narratives using a black musical tradition associated with high class and respectability. Lastly, *TPAB* poses the essential question of the role which each individual plays in systems of domination and discrimination.

In chapter 2 I examine the arguments surrounding racial identities to answer the question of why we are still talking about race, and whether race related discourse is helpful whatsoever in combatting racism. Here, I analyse Kwame Anthony Appiah’s iconic piece “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections”, where Appiah argues both the nonexistence of race as a biological phenomenon, and argues against racial identities, where race refers to:

a set of theoretically committed criteria for ascription, not all of which are held by everybody, and which may not be consistent with one another even in the ascriptions of a single person and there is then a process of identification in which the label shapes the intentional acts of (some of) those who fall under it.⁴

Appiah argues against the identities resulting from races due to their nature of becoming dominating and therefore leading to harmful divisions and a restriction of individual freedom. I reject both of these points, and using critical race theory, and arguments from Paul C. Taylor,

⁴ Kwame A. Appiah “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections” in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, ed. by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 80.

W.E.B Du Bois, Tommie Shelby, and Chike Jeffers I argue for the importance of racial identities. I then use arguments from Loren Kajikawa, Tricia Rose, and Cornel West to look at the relationship between music and racial identity, and the role hip-hop plays in expressing the black experience, the experience of poverty and marginalization, and to create a space of empowerment. I then argue that hip-hop is a fundamental medium for the expression of the experiences and narratives listed previously when it comes to representation, and the fight against racism, the fight for equality, and the empowerment of the marginalized.

In chapter 3 I build on the theory and ideas discussed previously, and then begin the analysis of *TPAB* to see how music is being used to represent complex social narratives. Here, I argue that both lyrically and musically, *TPAB* expresses particular personae that represent the complexity of the multitude of narratives of the black experience, the experience of poverty, and systems of oppression. These personae and narratives include, among many others: the field negro resisting racial dominance; a nihilistic persona turned aggressive from antiblack racism; a woman's perspective on race and standards of beauty; the expression of black pride, and Uncle Sam as a representation of the broken promise of the American dream. This is a unique element of the album that helps to represent the message of the individual's role in a system – by using drastic contrasting personae in combination with adventurous sonic ideas to represent them. My analyses are informed by arguments from Kehinde Andrews, R.A.T. Judy, Mark Anthony Neal, Murray Forman, and Tommie Shelby to argue that *TPAB* musically represents the complex narratives of the black experience, marginalization due to race and poverty, and the effect of systems of domination. This results in a musical work that is essential in propelling 21st century discussions of race, poverty, and marginalization into the forefront of popular culture.

In chapter 4 I build on the arguments and ideas in the first two chapters, yet I turn my attention to performance. Here, I use arguments from Tricia Rose, Thomas DeFrantz and Brenda Dixon Gottschild to argue that Lamar uses performative material on *TPAB* such as televised performances and music videos to express the role which physical characteristics of the black body play in conceptions of blackness, and how these can be used through hairstyles, dance moves, etc. to express the black experience. This furthermore displays the importance of *TPAB* in the discussions of race in the 21st century.

I then conclude with a short summary of the previous arguments, and discuss the future of hip-hop, rap and music when it comes to the representation and discussion of social narratives, the effect *TPAB* had on political movements, and on music discussing marginalized experiences to affirm the importance of this album. Furthermore, I end with a discussion on the role which art and music plays in representing and conveying social narratives, and how these narratives relate to humanity at large, and a progression towards a society of justice, equality, and empowerment.

Chapter 2: Race, Identity, and Hip-hop

It is common knowledge to many that hip-hop falls under the vibrant umbrella of black culture. But what is the use of attaching any racial or ethnic label to a style of music? To reiterate the goal of this project, I seek to understand how Lamar creates artistic representations of narratives such as his experience of being black in America, the effects of poverty, and his role as an artist coming from a marginalized community. But an understanding of an artistic representation of Lamar's experience of blackness requires us to explore the foundation of the metaphysics of the concept of racial identities.

The first question that needs to be addressed is how does the discussion of racial identities help with moving towards a more harmonious and just society? And why should we examine music from this angle? Should we not be aspiring to move towards a society that looks past these divisions? Shouldn't the solution to racism be to work towards a post-racial society? And isn't examining music from this angle needlessly dividing art? I reject all these premises and argue the importance of racial identities in creating a just, harmonious society. Furthermore, I argue that music such as hip-hop can act as a medium for the expression of racial identities such as black identity, and marginalized narratives such as the experience of poverty. Lastly, hip-hop can convey these to those that do not share these narratives, thereby making hip-hop a fundamental artistic medium for creating social change in moving towards a just society of equality and empowerment.

The arguments towards the non-existence of race fall under the antirealist hypothesis of critical race theory. Philosopher, cultural theorist and antirealist Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that race is not real, and he looks towards the eliminativist hypothesis. Many other thinkers

within the academy, such as Charles Mills and Paul C. Taylor hold race to be a social identity, yet Appiah argues both the lack of existence, and why identifying with it should be done away with. The Ghanaian born, Cambridge-educated professor is highly regarded when it comes to racial theory and cultural analysis (in particular when it comes to African-American culture), having published several books with Oxford University Press, reviews with the *New York Review of Books*, and even being listed as one of the world's seven most powerful thinkers by *Forbes* magazine (the list was selected by Princeton's president). His essay "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections" is considered fundamental in the debate surrounding race and racial identities.

Appiah looks at race from the standpoint of "skin color, hair, and gross morphology, corresponding to the dominant pattern for these characteristics in the major subcontinental regions: Europe, Africa, East and South Asia, Australasia, the Americas, and, perhaps, the Pacific Islands".⁵ The issue he finds with this is that these demarcations used to discuss race don't really seem to be of any use, and "have very little established correlation with any characteristics currently thought to be important for moral or social life."⁶ Therefore, Appiah's concludes to race talk doesn't add anything meaningful into social life or lead to a more harmonious and moral society. Appiah notes however that racial identities are real.

Appiah's idea of racial identities centers on a script of sorts, which speaks to being black, white, Asian, etc. He then brings into question whether it is worth having such an

⁵ Appiah, 73.

⁶ Appiah, 74.

idea in place, as it means one must succumb to a certain mold, and he concludes that individual freedom is lost to group identity politics.

Appiah's critique on racial identities seems justified, as it provides an explanation for the dangers on having such a concept: i.e. meaningless divisions. The easy solution to this issue is to simply change the narrative of the script- if blackness and whiteness are set scripts to be adhered to, then one would simply have to expand the narrative, thereby allowing for individual freedom. Appiah also addresses this by discussing how the narrative of black identity changed with the Black Power Movement, in which "the old script of self-hatred, the script in which he or she is a 'nigger', and works, in the community with others to construct a series of positive life scripts".⁷ Appiah concludes that central to being black, as a positive script, requires, among other things, "refusing to assimilate to white norms of speech and behaviour", ergo giving a mold to blackness that is distinct from that of whiteness. This gives the implication that there is a series of set norms for different racial identities that one must abide by if they are part of the group – even if the mold is a positive one, it is a script nonetheless which one must abide by, which means, in essence, "replacing one kind of tyranny with another".⁸ As Appiah states, "If I had to choose between Uncle Tom and Black Power, I would, of course, choose the latter. But I would like not to have to choose. I would like other options", and therefore concludes the script of racial identities, regardless of positive or negative, limits the freedom of the individual, and therefore should be done away with.⁹

⁷ Appiah, 98.

⁸ Appiah, 99.

⁹ Ibid.

I would like to address this issue in several points. Firstly, Appiah's concept of the script of blackness being dependent on the rejection of white norms of speech and behaviour need to be examined further. If one is living in a predominantly white society, as we are now, then white norms of speech and behaviour needs to be examined from two angles. The "rejection" of white speeches and norms implies the *imposition* of white speeches and norms on non-white races. But why the imposition? There are two reasons for this, both of which revolve around a sense of white superiority. The first of these is due to whiteness being seen as superior, and therefore something which racialized groups then feel a need to try to assimilate to – an internalized sense of racial degradation. An example of this is a black woman that feels unattractive due to her natural hair, and therefore constantly straightens it. Second is the active imposition of white speeches and norms by white people on racialized groups – an external act resulting in forced racial assimilation. Examples of this are sentiments such as demanding that immigrants adhere to white cultural norms, or residential schools which First Nations and indigenous people were forced into due whiteness being viewed as superior, and therefore being something which others must assimilate to. Therefore, rejecting white speeches and norms is part of the script for blackness as it would be rejecting a sense of white supremacy, thus holding a collective black identity equal to that of whiteness.

But to be specific, Appiah's view that racial identities are limiting to individual freedom only seems to be when an individual does not see themselves as anything more than a collective group identity, and does the same thing with others. Appiah provides the following example:

Suppose I live in a society with two groups, Blacks and Whites. Suppose that, for whatever reason, the Black group, to which I obviously belong, scores averagely low on a test that is genuinely predictive of job-performance. Suppose the test is expensive. And suppose I would have, in fact, a high score on this test, and that I would, in fact, perform well. In these circumstances, it may well be economically rational for an employer, knowing what group I belong to, simply not to give me the test and, thus, not to hire me. The employer has acted in a rational fashion; there is no Sowellian discrimination here. But most people will understand me if I say that I feel that this outcome is unfair. One way of putting the unfairness is to say: what I can do and be with my talents is being held back because others, over whose failings I have no control, happen to have the characteristics they do¹⁰

Essentially what happens in this example is that though the individual does well on the test, and would perform well, they are not given the job because the group has typically not done well. This would be considered unfair as the individual is held back due to factors out of their control. The way which the individual has been refused the opportunity has been by their collective group identity taking foreground over their individual talents and abilities, and therefore Appiah concludes that when individuals foreground group identity, it leads to unfairness as described above.

However, it is important to note that Appiah sees the above scenario as different from racial essentialism. For, if the black individual who did well on the test is discriminated against purely because they were black, i.e. the essence of blackness would mean they would do poorly, then this would constitute racial essentialism. Instead, what is happening in this scenario is that the group typically doesn't do well on a given test, collective group identity is foregrounded, and then it is assumed that, even though an individual may have done well on a particular test, they would not perform adequately at the job, and are therefore refused. The difference here is racial essentialism would imply

¹⁰ Appiah, 100.

that the group does poorly because they are black, whereas the above scenario describes the group, on average, not doing well on the test for numerous potential reasons, and they happened to be black – blackness was not the driving factor in the causation of the group’s poor test results. Appiah brings up this example to show that even without racial essentialism, foregrounding group identity leads to unfairness and injustice as depicted in the example above. He then suggests several possible ways of addressing this issue, where he views the root of the problem being collective identity.

With all the possible solutions Appiah presents to this problem, the existence of collective identity is not the issue, so much as is the foregrounding of the collective group identity over the individual. He tries to account for this towards the end of the piece by mentioning how collective identities tend to “go imperial” over other identities, i.e. individual identity is subsumed to collective identity.¹¹ Since group identities tend to have this “imperial” nature to them, Appiah then proposes four potential solutions, as a way of addressing this issue, where the general common effect all of them would be the slow obliteration of the divisions between groups, moving towards “a more recreational concept of racial identity”, which he differentiates from moving towards a single cultural norm, then providing the example of making “African-American identity more like Irish-American identity for most of us who care to keep the label”.¹² But, exploring this idea, let’s say African-American identity becomes more like Irish-American identity, what would this look like? A sharing of different music? Food? Religious traditions? This is where the role of culture and racial identities would come into play. I argue the role of music as part of a culture and racial identity, as I began this chapter by stating

¹¹ Appiah, 103.

¹² Ibid.

how hip-hop falls under black culture. Appiah views this connection of racial identities and culture to be false, stating:

I have insisted that African-Americans do not have the same culture, in the sense of shared language, values, practices, and meanings. But many people who think of races as groups defined by shared cultures conceive that sharing in a different way. They understand black people as sharing black culture by definition: jazz or hip-hop belongs to an African-American, whether she likes it or knows anything about it, because it is culturally marked as black. Jazz belongs to a black person who knows nothing about it more fully or naturally than it does to a white jazzman.¹³

However the issue with this idea (cultural geneticism as Appiah calls it) is that it rests on the conscious action of entitled possession – an African-American who has no experience in any musical element of jazz or hip-hop, has ownership of it over a white rapper or jazz artist, since these musical styles belong “to an African-American whether she likes it or knows nothing about it”. This is a straw man, as what is meant, in musical circles, by jazz and hip-hop being black music has little to nothing to do with possession by a collective group, rather it is a reflection of identity – i.e. the script. There is a bit of a split here between a reflection of identity, and possessing the group identity as well, hence why a white jazzman can have much more knowledge of jazz, or a white rapper have better bars than an African-American. This is because these reflections of identity develop their own characteristics, concepts, and practices. As these develop, it is more than possible for someone that does not share the identity being reflected to learn the necessary concepts relevant to a particular cultural element such as music, food, religious practices, etc.

¹³ Appiah, 90.

Looking at the example of jazz, the instrumentation itself differentiates itself from western European classical music. The idea goes even further with jazz harmony and musical language such as the bebop scale, the use of extended harmony, and concepts surrounding improvisation and the use of timbral and harmonic dissonance. As these concepts were put into practice by some of the greats (Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, etc.) a language developed in the form of certain phrases that would get used by other artists – for example, Julian “Cannonball” Adderley quotes a famous line Charlie Parker used in a solo on “Now’s The Time” in his solo on Thelonius Monk’s “Straight No Chaser”, as recorded by the Miles Davis Quintet. As this language develops these concepts become both cemented and played with, as they could be played with in numerous different ways, and therefore creating a jazz language, with the use of melodic passages, harmonic and rhythmic ideas and instrumentation that was a reflection of African-American identity. For example, renowned jazz guitarist Larry Coryell states that

jazz is, in my view, it’s an African-American experience. You don’t have to be an African-American to play it, but you have to understand, you have to understand how it, the way it was conceived, and the way that certain important musicians...I mean they make all kinds of stuff that, you know like, people in general society would think are mistakes. Like, the first time I heard Miles Davis I thought he was just making a lot of mistakes, and then when I listened a little bit closer, it started to make sense.¹⁴

Coryell’s words reflect a sense that jazz language, with its unique use of harmonic and timbral dissonance, contrasting rhythmic ideas, and unique instrumentation was, at first to many listeners, “wrong”. This of course, implies a musical language that was “right”, something much more akin to the concepts of western European classical

¹⁴ irockjazzmusicTV, “Larry Coryell – Advice for Up and Coming Musicians”, Youtube video, 7:46, posted March 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7aOYbzabDE>

traditions, with complementary rhythms, accents on beats 1 and 3, timbral and harmonic consonance, dissonance used only as part of a cadential harmony. Even then however, it does not use the same extended harmonies and melodic concepts as jazz, where even the resolution to a I-chord or i-chord can have extensions such as the $\#11$, Maj^7 , Maj^6 on a I-chord, or the min^7 and $\#13$ on a i-chord – much more dissonant than the conventional Western European resolution to tonic harmony. The concept that these differences are right or wrong connects to the African-American experience, and black identity. Paul C. Taylor argues that race comes from a white supremacist ideology that attached the definition black to a particular social location that is lesser than that of whiteness, therefore sentiments of how jazz is “wrong” in itself speaks to the African-American experience of subordination, where African concepts of rhythm, dissonance, and improvisation manifest themselves in a musical language seen as lesser.¹⁵

Similarly, the argument that calling jazz or hip-hop part of African-American culture to imply ownership, and therefore a black individual owns it more than a white jazzman, is also a straw man. This implies the ownership of harmonic and rhythmic concepts, the idea of dissonance, and melodic passages, as opposed to an understanding, interpretation, and usage of these ideas. In reality however, the concept of ownership has nothing to do with why we put jazz and hip-hop under African-American culture. To make things clear I make the analogy of someone writing a book in a language that is not their first language, let’s say an anglophone writing in Spanish. To write such a book would not mean that the

¹⁵ Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, Malden: Polity, 2013, 90. I specify African-American experience here as opposed to black identity, as jazz’s roots are in African concepts of contrasting rhythms and the dissonance which could be argued that it is a reflection of the black experience, however, the social location which jazz finds its roots would be in the black experience of working class America, and therefore I use the term African-American experience as opposed to black identity.

anglophone now has exclusive “possession” of the Spanish language, nor does it mean the Spaniard does. Rather, the anglophone simply learned the rules of the language (a reflection of culture, customs, and traditions), and uses it. Though a Spaniard would have better knowledge of the identity reflected in the language, this does not mean they would inherently know the language, as that would mean learning the rules of the language (grammar, sentence structure, etc.) Similarly, to say jazz and hip-hop are part of African-American culture is to say that the musical language is a reflection of identity – a white jazzman or rapper could still easily have more knowledge of these musical styles than an African-American, as it is possible to simply learn the required musical language, and performance styles, while an African-American still has intimate, lived knowledge of African-American culture and black identity.¹⁶

So, if jazz and hip-hop help to reflect black identity and hold a place reflecting the African-American experience then what role of the connotations of superiority given to white “norms”? This again implies white supremacy, where Appiah notes why we should be getting rid of race, stating:

if one is to be black in a society that is racist then one has constantly to deal with assaults on one’s dignity. In this context, insisting on the right to live a dignified life will not be enough. It will not even be enough to require that one be treated with equal dignity despite being black: for that will require a concession that being black counts naturally or to some degree against one’s dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected as a Black.¹⁷

Now, to summarize thus far, we have a series of scripts for each racial identity, where the script of whiteness is seen as the norm, and seen as superior, and all others against it are, by definition

¹⁶ My thinking here is influenced by Tedx Talks, “Music as a Language: Victor Wooten at TEDxGabriolaIsland”, YouTube video, 18:30, posted May 30, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zvjW9arAZ0>

¹⁷ Appiah, 98.

viewed as abnormal, and due to racism, “scripts” such as blackness are in a constant fight, and therefore to fight for dignity against the backdrop of whiteness would be part of the script of blackness. So then, one would not be able to fight against the notion of being looked down upon, or marginalized by the norm, nor against the more blatant forms of racism, without accepting the script that defines one’s race group – so you pick your poison: either you combat racism and marginalization by identifying with a racial identity, which therefore means individual freedom being limited by group identity, or you simply let yourself be marginalized, and suffer at the hands of racism and discrimination.

Throughout *TPAB*, Lamar makes it clear that he sees blackness as something which benefits society as a whole, fitting with Du Bois’s argument in the “Conservation of Races” as to how the “negro message” would benefit the world, and races should not be done away with. Appiah’s take on eliminativist anti-realism would lead to not just the end of racial identities, but also the narratives which Lamar presents. The result would be further marginalization of narratives already pushed to the margins, and an increase of preventable suffering due to poverty and racism, as we would now lose the means to listen to these narratives and stories, which would help to bring such stories out of the margins.

The other issue here is that, according to philosopher and social constructivist Paul C. Taylor, race (a socially constructed concept) is a result of white supremacy attaching a definition to life chances and social location.¹⁸ This social constructivist definition doesn’t fall far from Appiah’s idea of a script for racial identities – at a fundamental level the script is a narrative form of an assigned definition. Chike Jeffers argues that if the existence of race rests on the

¹⁸ Taylor, *Race*, 90.

premise of the subjugation of non-white racial groupings, then getting rid of race would surely end racism, *however* it is not the most ideal way of dealing with racism. Jeffers argues that this idea only speaks to the political idea of race, not the cultural, and to eliminate it would mean to do away with the cultural aspects as well. Rather, it would be best to fight against the political subjugation of non-white races in the name of racial equality. This would mean that the cultural aspects which denote racial identity, such as music and dance, are still able to manifest themselves in the world, and therefore race still exists, yet the political notion of white supremacy is contested.¹⁹

In his seminal essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, writer and poet Langston Hughes describes the role of black artists in embracing blackness in art. This gesture presents a means of contesting white supremacy in the name of racial equality. Hughes describes a situation where a black artist wants to shun black art such as jazz in the name of embracing Eurocentric styles of music and art. In this example, a black artist has fallen under an internalized sense of degradation and does not include racial themes in their art, nor do they have any desire to be involved with any form of black music. Sentiments such as this would, as noted before, push marginalized expressions of blackness further to the margins. Furthermore, embracing blackness in art then, as Hughes notes, throws off sentiments such as “I want to be white”, therefore throwing away the degradation of a perceived superiority in whiteness, which then creates thoughts such as “why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful!”²⁰

¹⁹ Chike Jeffers, “The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look At Du Bois’s ‘The Conservation of Races’”, *Ethics* 123, no. 3 (2013): 403-426.

²⁰ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. by Robert Walser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56.

Therefore, artists present an integral role of expressing the marginalized narrative of blackness as a means of showing race pride and contesting white supremacy.

The question which follows then is what art can be used to present these narratives. Scholars such as Loren Kajikawa present an argument that demonstrates how hip hop and rap promote “highly visible (and often controversial) representations of black masculine identity”.²¹ The promotion of black masculine identity is a concept that echoes throughout hip hop culture and rap music such that most listeners and fans of the culture could quickly pick up on such an idea. Kajikawa identifies the centrality of the idea of authenticity to hip hop culture as a whole – an authenticity, he suggests, that is strongly linked with blackness. The music and culture also provide a narrative of race that is not homogeneous, and therefore allows for the flexible definition of racial identities needed to give freedom to create individual narratives as part of identity of the group, while still representing blackness. Also, African-American styles of music such as hip-hop and rap present a degree of flexibility that accounts for the changes in the idea of blackness. Kajikawa draws on Imamu Amiri Baraka’s (Leroi Jones) “conception of black music as a ‘changing same’...a model for musical aesthetics concretely grounded in African-American culture but flexible enough to be creatively reimagined across time and space”.²² Demonstrating the value of music to shaping understandings of race, Kajikawa argues that notions of race are based not just on phenotypic qualities, but also those that can be perceived sonically:

although it might seem counterintuitive, race is not simply an effect of sight...The way we see race is also mediated by our other senses. For example, although blind people acquire their knowledge about the social world through non-sight-based pathways – learning to hear, feel, smell, and taste, race – they continue to ‘visualize’

²¹ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, 5.

²² Kajikawa, 7.

race, describing people as black or white, despite never having observed the physical differences most people assume to be fundamental to racial distinction.²³

We may conclude that if music reflects identity, then identity can be heard, through musical language, with an example being jazz, as I argued previously.

We may also look to hip-hop's ways of representing race and tackling racism because we are currently and undeniably in a hip-hop era, an era where our culture – music, fashion, and even slang, draws from hip-hop culture. Following Kajikawa's argument about hip-hop's authenticity being linked with blackness, we see that blackness has managed to permeate popular culture and is thus being accessed, enjoyed, listened to, danced to, worn, loved, and in many cases, used and manipulated by non-blacks:

“like professional sports, rap is a cultural arena in which the most prominent actors are black even though the majority of its spectators are not. The genre's symbolic investment in blackness deserves closer scrutiny, especially because its projections of identity sometimes highlight and sometimes obscure the impact of such ongoing racial inequality”.²⁴

Hip hop presents a popular, widely consumed reflection on black identity that allows for individual freedom while still representing race, therefore challenging marginalization, and also creating space for strategies to tackle racism. Crystal Belle confirms how hip-hop allows this sense of freedom, stating:

Acknowledge the undeniable sense of freedom hip-hop manages to provide to Black men, particularly those from working class communities. It is a kind of freedom that is tied to intellectual growth and camaraderie.... hip-hop includes an array of material that fits into the consumerism of American society. Yet still, without hip-

²³ Kajikawa, 9.

²⁴ Ibid.

hop, many Black men who feel ostracized from institutions and local communities would not have an academic space to express themselves.²⁵

Therefore, hip-hop allows the necessary individual freedom, while still providing the required expression of the black experience. As stated by one of the biggest figures in hip-hop culture, Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson: “hip hop just isn’t playing rap music, its playing Cuban music, American music, jazz music, playing rock music, soul music, electronic, reggaeton, reggae, like its playing every genre of music, and putting it together – like that’s the real definition of what hip hop is”.²⁶ The blurring of lines between musical genres is central to hip-hop, making it a prime example for a non-limiting script of identity that allows for individual freedom. As other musical styles are used (jazz, rock, pop, etc.) they come together to create hip-hop. Therefore, hip-hop displays a musical language reflecting a non-limiting script, as many elements are constantly in use.

This also means that authentic representation of hip-hop must be an album that draws on numerous musical traditions and ideas. Lamar’s *TPAB* blurs the lines between funk, rap, R&B, and relies heavily on the language and rhetoric of jazz and jazz harmony to represent a celebration of blackness, a reflection of African-American identity, and a musical take on the non-limiting idea of a black script. Therefore, we turn to music, more specifically Lamar’s *TPAB* for a reflection of black identity that is not limiting in order to discuss issues such as racial identity, racism, class, and masculinity.

²⁵ Crystal Belle, “From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop”. *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (2014). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/10.1177/0021934714528953>

²⁶ Okayplayer – “Quest for Cuba: Questlove Brings the Funk to Havana”, YouTube video, 13:10, May, 7th 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj5tfuS3vJ8>

Furthermore, Cornel West refers to black music as the “best example of the Afro-American humanist tradition”. This tradition of philosophy views the Afro-American experience as dynamic: “both meek, and belligerent, kind and cruel, creative and dull...explaining its political predicament, preserving self-respect, and projecting its own special hopes for the future”.²⁷ This view is therefore integral to the examination of the black experience in the 21st century. If, according to West, music is the best representation of this tradition, then music is essential in the 21st representation of this view. Therefore, if hip-hop has the ability to reach non-black audiences, then this is the genre of music that is necessary in expressing these ideas to help combat racism.

But how are these narratives of race and poverty manifested through art? What exactly are the stories being told? These questions shall be addressed in the following chapter, where I analyse *TPAB*'s use of musical language through the lens of race theory and philosophy to understand and show how Lamar uses hip-hop to create artistic personae representing the experience of blackness, living in ghetto poverty, and how these experiences relate to the rest of the world.

²⁷ Cornel West, “Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience”, in *A Companion to African American Philosophy*, ed. by Tommy Lott and Pittman, (USA: Basil Blackwell Inc, 2003).

Chapter 3: Analysis of the Musical Language of *TPAB*

Part of why *TPAB* is integral to the discussion of race and poverty in the 21st century is through the musical representation of personae reflecting black identity, and the experience of poverty. These include: a personification of aggressive nihilism from racism, the field negro; Uncle Sam as a representation of the American dream; a personification of black pride, Barack Obama, and a discussion of race and standards of beauty from a woman's perspective. Analysis of musical language reveals how these personae are artistically constructed, and what they represent. I use this analysis to argue that the musical language of *TPAB* reflects a non-limiting script of black identity through the use of diverse musical concepts to construct different musical personae. Secondly, the use of jazz creates a frame of complexity and dignity to view different personae, and the personae are reflective of modern dynamics of blackness in the 21st century.

The idea of musical personae builds on arguments in Philip Auslander's "Musical Personae". Auslander argues that the perception of music is predominantly through social frames, cues, and gestures. These form different frames of performance surrounding classical jazz, rock, and many other styles of performance, which then shape how the audience perceives the music. For example, Auslander notes the effect of classical musicians wearing suits at a recital. The recital is set apart as a special event outside of everyday routines, and in combination with the attire, and conventions such as not clapping between movements, create an atmosphere of elitism and formality associated with the upper class.²⁸ This creates a frame with a particular representation through which classical music is perceived. Similarly, we see Lamar use images associated with West Coast rap, references to figures such as Trayvon Martin and Barack

²⁸ Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae", *TDR* (1988-) 50, no. 1 (2006): 100-119, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4492661>.

Obama, the image of Uncle Sam, and tropes such as the field negro to create personae reflecting on different dynamics of black identity and the experience of poverty.

A unique aspect of *TPAB* when it comes to the musical construction of these different personae is the use of jazz language. Justin A. Williams notes how the use of jazz in hip-hop can give the music an association with high art. The combination of these personae with jazz language is a gesture which, similarly to the classical musician wearing suits to establish a space of formality, connects hip-hop to jazz in a way which the personae being presented in *TPAB* are constructed using a black musical language associated with black culture, high art, and respectability. The result is that personae reflecting dynamics of black identity and poverty in the 21st century are presented with respect and dignity by the gesture of using a musical language from black artistic traditions.²⁹

Lamar's use of jazz rarely uses the swing traditions of the music, straying from neoconservative definitions of what constitutes jazz as "America's classical music".³⁰ Rather, he draws on modern jazz idioms that use jazz harmony such as bebop and altered scales, and fuses these ideas with electric bass and keys to get a modern jazz sound similar to that of Thundercat and Robert Glasper. Modern jazz's departure from the swing traditions allows for a melting pot of different sounds and influences. Lamar uses this as the basis for the musical language of *TPAB* to be representative of a non-limiting script of identity using a diversity of sounds to create a frame in which the narratives of black identity and the experience of poverty are viewed through a musical language associated with dignity and respectability.

²⁹ Justin A. Williams, "The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music", *Journal of Musicology* 27, no. 4, (2010): 435-59.

³⁰ Ibid.

By straying from the confines of the swing traditions of jazz, Lamar opens up a world of musical possibilities. This would be integral to how the album would create diverse musical personae, as this would require drawing on diverse musical language. This is where Lamar differs from his predecessors. Where artists like A Tribe Called Quest and Digable Planets used jazz in a way that was reminiscent of swing styles, i.e. using upright bass, horn sections, and upright/grand piano lines as a means of elevating their chosen styles of hip-hop, Lamar draws on a modern sense of jazz. Pioneered by artists like Miles Davis on his first electric album *Bitches Brew* this take on jazz draws on electric tones as opposed to the warm acoustic timbres associated with earlier forms of jazz, and uses this to create a melting pot of influences from bebop to R&B to funk and soul. Lamar draws on this by using artists such as Thundercat, Kamasi Washington, Robert Glasper and Terrace Martin to help provide *TPAB*'s jazz backbone. These artists meld jazz with myriad other styles in their own music, and also have been involved with numerous projects that help to display black music in its entirety, before allowing all these influences to translate into the music on *TPAB*. For example, jazz pianist Robert Glasper has been involved in projects that showcase bebop style jazz music such as his album *Canvas*, but he has also made albums such as *Black Radio* which put more emphasis on keyboards instead of just piano and was much more of an R&B/hip-hop record, which featured artists such as Erykah Badu and Lalah Hathaway, alongside rapper Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def). This take on jazz uses the musical intricacy and fast paced phrasing of bebop, alongside its dense harmonic components, and uses this in combination with many different styles of black music. The result of this gesture, which is predicated on Lamar's use of modern jazz, is uplifting blackness using a complex musical language associated with dignity, therefore creating a sense of black pride,

which is then combined with the numerous different styles that make up modern jazz to create diverse musical personae to represent a non-limiting script of black identity.

TPAB presents a complex web of personae and narratives, intertwined throughout the album. The representation of these personae begins with “Wesley’s Theory” where we hear Lamar perform the stereotype of the West Coast rapper, alongside Thundercat and George Clinton create a personification condemning his ostentatious lifestyle. Lamar then also presents a persona of Uncle Sam to represent the concept of the American dream. “Wesley’s Theory” continues into “For Free? (Interlude)” where Lamar is representing black identity rejecting white supremacy, where the narrative of blackness is elevated with a bebop style rhythm section, and white supremacy is represented by a woman with whom Lamar is in conversation, continually demanding that she stop taking advantage of him. In “King Kunta” Lamar compares himself to Alex Haley’s character of Kunta Kinte to represent black nobility under oppression. Lamar continues with this theme in “Institutionalized” where he describes the affects of such oppression on black identity. In “These Walls”, Lamar confronts his abuse of power as an artist, which leads into “u” where Lamar dons a persona confronting himself and his misuse of power. This creates a question of personal responsibility to make a difference in the problems of race and poverty discussed throughout *TPAB*. In “Alright”, Lamar uses the modal jazz tradition to deliver a message of reassurance to black America while adding a personification of empowerment to the script of black identity. The following track, titled “For Sale? (Interlude)” sees Lamar answer the question of personal responsibility and choose to return to his community to try to make a positive difference. This theme continues into the track “Momma” where Lamar expresses a sense of joy in returning home. “Hood Politics” then contains a persona of angry nihilism from antiblack racism, leading into a story of the importance of helping others in “How Much A

Dollar Cost”. The following track, “Complexion (A Zulu Love)” sees Lamar make a call for solidarity and resisting white supremacy by constructing a persona of Malcolm X’s concept of the field negro, and we hear a woman’s perspective on black pride and an expansion of the script of black femininity in the form of a verse by Rapsody. The album continues into a fiery persona of black pride in “The Blacker The Berry”. The next track, “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said)” shows Lamar turn away from the ostentatious lifestyle associated with West Coast rap. The album continues to “i” where Lamar represents a sense of empowerment and pleasure in black identity. The album then concludes with “Mortal Man”, where Lamar describes the internal conflict of being imperfect yet wanting to make a difference in the world, comparing himself to Nelson Mandela. Lamar ends having a conversation with Tupac Shakur on the state of race and poverty in America. Shakur’s persona serves as someone who Lamar is looking to for answers on how music can tackle these major issues, and perhaps the biggest figure in the traditions of West Coast hip-hop.

With such a complex web of narratives and stories on this album I have selected several tracks for a close reading in this chapter: “Wesley’s Theory”, “For Free? (Interlude)”, “Complexion (A Zulu Love)”, “The Blacker The Berry”, and “Hood Politics”.³¹ This is not to say that the other tracks do not warrant a close reading but these tracks display the musical personae that are most integral both in reflecting the script of black identity and to the discussions of race and poverty in the 21st century. These personae are: the stereotypical West Coast gangsta rapper living an ostentatious lifestyle, a figure both warning and condemning this lifestyle, and Uncle Sam representing the American dream (or, the American nightmare and of course noting that this

³¹ There are of course other tracks on the album with personae very important to this discussion, however an important part of those tracks are other performative elements such as dance and the use of the black body. For this reason, the close readings of these songs will be done in chapter 4.

persona is not a reflection of black identity, rather it is representing a power structure and the promise of American capitalism) on “Wesley’s Theory”; a persona of black identity elevated by bebop jazz demanding to be free from white supremacy in “For Free? (Interlude)”; a persona of black pride on “The Blacker The Berry”, personae both of angry nihilism and the black elite on “Hood Politics”; the field negro resisting white domination, calling out for solidarity, and woman’s perspective on black pride and standards of beauty on “Complexion (A Zulu Love)”.

Our analysis of the diverse musical language of the narratives of blackness begins with “Complexion (A Zulu Love)”. I choose to begin with this track since, as stated previously by Kajikawa, hip-hop is often used for “representations of black masculine identity”, yet on “Complexion” we hear a persona of black feminine identity reflecting on black pride, therefore marking a seminal persona to the album’s multiplicity of personae and discussions of non-limiting forms of identity.³² This persona is expressed as Lamar shares this track with another MC. Where Lamar’s verses find their artistic foundation in solidarity surrounding the colour line, the real highlight of the song is Marlanna “Rapsody” Evans’s featured verse.³³

Tricia Rose argues that “most discussions of rap’s sexual politics and black women rappers do not account for these real-life complexities” of “everyday life and protest”.³⁴ Rose states that “discussions of women rappers can be divided into two related positions: (1) women rappers are feminist voices who combat sexism in rap; and/or (2) the sexist exclusion or

³² Kajikawa, 5.

³³ Hailing from North Carolina, Rapsody has quickly become one of the heavy hitters of modern rap, with her albums *Beauty and the Beast* and *Laila’s Wisdom*.

³⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press), 1994, 149

mischaracterization of women's participation in rap music devalues women's significance and must be countered by evidence of women's contributions."³⁵

When interpreting Rose's argument, it appears that there is a negative script of black femininity in general social discourse, yet she says that within discourse on rap, women are still given positions that do not truly reflect "everyday life".³⁶ Rose goes further to praise examples of rap where there was a centrality of women's voices. In "Complexion," this sense of centrality is executed by Lamar inviting Rapsody to speak, instead of speaking for her, as he states during the transitional interlude, "where the homegirl Rapsody at? I need you to speak your mind real quick loved one!".³⁷ This creates a platform for the centrality of women's voices that Rose identifies as necessary in discourse on women in rap. Rapsody breaks away from the negative script of femininity in her verse with subject matter reflective of her "everyday life": how her skin colour affects how others see her, and how she sees herself.

As soon as Lamar's second verse ends, an abrupt shift in the beat sets up Rapsody's verse. Where producer and bassist Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner's signature modern jazz sound created the bass heavy, steady pulse for the musical foundation for the first half of "Complexion" the backdrop for Rapsody's verse becomes much more spacious, to the point it nearly feels half time.³⁸ This is accomplished by abandoning the four on the floor steady pulse of the beat designed for Lamar's verse, for a more typical hip-hop break beat. This change in rhythmic groupings makes it feel as though the tempo has changed, though in that, only the accenting pattern has changed. The beat bears the trademark "lilt" that drops the listener into the beat, in

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Complexion Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-complexion-a-zulu-love-lyrics>

³⁸ Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner is a producer and jazz bassist, who's electric style has become the foundation of modern jazz fusion

contrast to the way that Lamar's verse lets the ear coast over the beat with him as he lightly surfs through poignant lyrics on blackness and racial solidarity.³⁹ Rapsody's lilting, piano-centered beat drags the listener down under the waves to a place not of darkness, but of *blackness* where she divulges her artistic interpretation of the concept of complexion.

When analysing the difference between the contributions of the two MCs to the song, it is important to apply Kimberle Crenshaw's ideas surrounding intersectionality. Specifically, the intersections of race and sex, where "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated".⁴⁰ Rapsody discusses standards of women's beauty, and the role that complexion and race plays in these, creating (one of) the means of subordination endured by black women. Du Bois's idea of the physical characteristics of blackness being "stigmata of degradation" implies the inherent benefits (and dare I say *privileges*) with a lighter hue (i.e. complexion), one of these being a perceived scale of beauty tilted towards lighter complexion.⁴¹

Rapsody begins her verse with "let me talk my Stu Scott, 'scuse me on my Tupac/keep ya head up, when did you stop?".⁴² The initial references quickly make sense as Rapsody compares herself to legendary sportscaster Stuart Scott and rapper Tupac Shakur, in that Shakur had much darker skin than the light-complexioned Scott. Furthermore, Rapsody is making this comparison

³⁹ The "lilt" is a style of percussion made famous by Questlove on D'Angelo's *Voodoo*. This style is an intentional drag, where the drummer purposefully plays behind the beat to create a swaying groove with a deep pocket

⁴⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscriminatory Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics", *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 8 (1989): 140.

⁴¹ Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 2007, 81.

⁴² "Kendrick Lamar- Complexion (A Zulu Love) Lyrics", *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-complexion-a-zulu-love-lyrics>

to set the tone for her verse by talking her “game” (i.e. the Stuart Scott mentality) and her encouragement to “keep ya head up” (the Shakur mentality). More than just a positive turn of phrase however, Rapsody’s reference to Shakur’s song “Keep Ya Head Up” reminds us of its discussion of blackness and Shakur’s male perspective of black femininity. “Keep Ya Head Up” begins with a discussion of the connotations of blackness, as he opens the song with the lyric “they say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.”⁴³ This line is also used in the pre-chorus for Lamar’s “The Blacker The Berry”, whose theme is also seen in the lyric Shakur uses to follow up his opening line: “I say the darker the flesh, then the deeper the roots”.⁴⁴ This line adds a sense of pride in blackness, inspiring someone to, as Shakur says, keep their head up, and take pride in their blackness. This conception of black pride is seen in Lamar’s “The Blacker The Berry” in the form of fiery, confrontational lyrics, yet Rapsody’s expression of taking pride in blackness from a woman’s perspective takes a different musical form. Throughout her verse on “Complexion”, Rapsody makes references to the role which skin colour plays in standards of beauty, and the effect these standards had on her own self-perception, rapping that “12 years of age, thinkin’ my shade is too dark” and “bein’ light don’t make you smart, bein’ dark don’t make you stupid”.⁴⁵ Rapsody’s lyrics on the black body echo the concept of trying to expand from a limiting negative script of black identity.

Throughout her verse Rapsody recalls feeling ugly and dumb because of her blackness. This reflects both Appiah’s idea of racial identity sometimes involving being a negative script one accepts, and Tommie Shelby’s analysis of Du Bois’s ideas of a sense of lesser due to darker

⁴³ “2Pac – Keep Ya Head Up Lyrics”, *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/8207639>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Kendrick Lamar- Complexion (A Zulu Love) Lyrics”, *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-complexion-a-zulu-love-lyrics>

skin complexion. Rapsody highlights the specific ways that this ideology affects black women, much as Aimee Meredith Cox has argued that:

darkness and lightness have critical implications for how Black women are perceived and how they ultimately see themselves...in the works of early Black authors, biracial main characters were prevalent because they represented mediation between Blackness and whiteness as well as being thought to convey intelligence, beauty, and worth in comparison to darker-skinned Blacks....contemporary artists like India Arie sing about the beauty of brown skin and echo the sentiments of young Black women who challenge the association of dark skin with ugliness and badness and the association of light skin with beauty and goodness.⁴⁶

Rapsody's lyrics reflect her attempts to break free of the feminine experience of the negative script of internalized hatred. Racial theorist Paul C. Taylor notes that: "gender ideals have always been cast in racialized terms. True femininity, which is to say beauty, delicacy, and desirability to men became a trait that only white women could possess. This led to several interlocking (quasi-) feminine myths like those of the hot-blooded Latina, the Asian dragon lady, and the sexually voracious and hyper-fertile black woman."⁴⁷ Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins give further insight into the various tropes of black womanhood, such as the mammy, the jezebel, and the welfare mother – again, we see this in Cox's work, where the narrative of black womanhood is a negative caricature that is oversexualized, and submissive.⁴⁸

In her artistic narrative of "Complexion," we hear Rapsody reflect on these different representations of black femininity and then try push past them. The first musical gesture that foreshadows the change between her narrative and Lamar's is the change in beat. Where Lamar's verse relied on a steady pulse from a four-on-the-floor type groove, the beat made for Rapsody is

⁴⁶ Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2015, 260

⁴⁷ Taylor, 64.

⁴⁸ My thinking here is influenced by Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

much more stripped down, and the complex jazz harmonies and descending bass line from Thundercat's production give way to a more sparse musical space. Short bursts of piano are peppered throughout in the form of block chords which are slightly arpeggiated, creating short bursts of sound. These are then placed over a bassline (note that it is different from the more full descending bassline used for Lamar's verse, but it isn't the focal point of the beat), and the most key element of this moment in black musical space (other than the MC), that being the percussion. The drum pattern used also reflects the sparse nature of the rest of the beat, yet the heavy hitting bass drum combined with snare hits that are just behind time create a strong driving pulse to the beat that is anything but the passive caricature of black femininity that have previously defined the negative script, and its oversexualized take on black femininity.

Complexion (A Zulu Love)

Lamar's verse

Kendrick Lamar

6

10

©

Score

Complexion (A Zulu Love)

Evans's Verse

Marlanna "Rapsody" Evans

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Complexion (A Zulu Love)'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains four measures of music, each featuring a chord with a whole note value. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains four measures of music, each featuring a single eighth note followed by a quarter rest, also with a whole note value. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4.

©

Figures 1 and 2: My transcription of the beats for Lamar's and Rapsody's verses. Note the density of the space composed for Lamar versus that for Rapsody, resulting in a sense of freedom.

Instead, this musical space is powerful, driven by the slightly out of time, yet strong presence of the percussion. Over top of this Rapsody's voice is more than confident when she begins her verse. She speaks the first phrase itself ("let me speak my Stu Scott") with a confident swagger, in complete control of the strong, driven black musical space. An integral part to the airiness and free nature of this verse is the backing vocals woven into the beat. These vocals, performed by the great Lalah Hathaway further the feeling of airiness and freedom which Rapsody is adding to the script of black femininity.⁴⁹ The result of this is a musical space that reflects on the negative stigma of black femininity and the role that race plays in standards of beauty, and how members of this group see themselves.

Rapsody's verse shoots out of Lamar's. As Lamar's seemed passive, and warm, there is a sense of freedom in Rapsody's contribution to the work that is not heard in Lamar's verse. This is created by how harmonically, rhythmically, and lyrically dense Lamar's portion in comparison to Rapsody's. A key interaction occurs between these two musical spaces in the form of a transitional interlude between the two verses, where the key elements of each verse are blended into one another. This marks the transition between the artistic spaces for black masculinity and femininity. As the dense nature of Lamar's verse dissipates into the transition interlude, the result is that Rapsody's verse sounds *free* – it is propelled out of the interlude from the driving nature of the beat, and due to the immense sense of space, an airy sense of freedom is created. Combining this with the beat's propelling nature, and her confident phrasing, there is a shooting star effect to Rapsody's verse, as she confidently soars above the existing negative script of black

⁴⁹ Lalah Hathaway is a modern neo-soul/R&B singer who is widely regarded as one of the most important and talented voices of the genre. Her father is R&B legend Donny Hathaway.

femininity, and adds the elements of freedom and confidence to the script – the degradation of the darker hue to Rhapsody becomes a celebration of the darker hue.

In “On Being Ashamed of Oneself: An Essay on Race Pride”, Du Bois identifies two different takes on race pride, where one was of shame due to one’s blackness, the other of racial superiority.⁵⁰ This concept of pride seems similar to Appiah’s idea of a script which one must adhere to, yet in “Complexion” Rhapsody pushes past this and expands the script. Her musical sense of blackness and freedom does not chauvinistically celebrate blackness but rather removes it from the confined negative space where it was before. This musical space then becomes a place for Rhapsody to be free with her blackness, where the act of freedom is a new sense of pride in black femininity.

Where Rhapsody’s verse is sparse, free, and airy, Lamar’s verse is dense, both musically and lyrically, and he offers a different view of complexion, with a different colour to his verses. The song’s chorus states “Complexion (two-step)/ Complexion don't mean a thing (it's a Zulu love)/ Oh, Complexion (two-step)/ It all feels the same (it's a Zulu love)”.⁵¹ Thick vocal harmonies make their way into Lamar’s verse, in a doo-wop style of “ooh”s. These form a descending line, that combines with the complex bass work of Thundercat, and the steady groove to create a thicker, darker, sinking texture while Lamar’s lyricism floats on top. The first half states:

Dark as the midnight hour or bright as the mornin' sun
Give a fuck about your complexion, I know what the Germans done
Sneak (dissin')
Sneak me through the back window, I'm a good field nigga
I made a flower for you outta cotton just to chill with you

⁵⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, “On Being Ashamed of Oneself: An Essay on Race Pride”, in *Crisis*, (Crisis Publishing: New York), 1933

⁵¹ Complexion Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-complexion-a-zulu-love-lyrics>

You know I'd go the distance, you know I'm ten toes down
Even if master listenin', cover your ears, he 'bout to mention.⁵²

At first listen, Lamar's dense lyrical style in this moment reflects on how he rejects or wishes away any sort of colour division, in keeping with the postmodern ideology of race – summed up in statements such as “I don't see colour”, as analyzed by Paul. C. Taylor.⁵³ However, deeper consideration indicates that Lamar is not speaking to postmodern colour blindness, but rather at the idea of complexion within a race. To clarify, “complexion, it don't mean a thing” isn't Lamar refusing to see distinctions among people who are black, white, Hispanic — rather, he looks at black people, and states, that within this group, colour doesn't matter.⁵⁴ His statement is about intraracial colourism rather than differences among racial groups. This message in the lyrical content is supported by musical language.

Looking further into Lamar's lyricism, he begins with the line “dark as the midnight hour or bright as the morning sun” - though poetic, a fairly simple message, as it just provides a premise for acknowledging differences in colour, and how he doesn't “give a fuck about your complexion”.⁵⁵ With the lines “sneak me through the back window, I'm a good field nigga/ I made a flower out of cotton just to chill with you,” Lamar dons a complex character, the “good field nigga,” a persona of resistance, reflecting the rhetoric of black power and black solidarity.⁵⁶ Activists such as Malcolm X often spoke on the difference between the house negro and the field negro, and the ways that both reflect the brutal dehumanization of slavery.⁵⁷ A key difference

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Taylor, 76.

⁵⁴ Genius Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-complexion-a-zulu-love-lyrics>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ My thinking here was influenced by: Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, (New York: Grove Press), 1965.

between the two is that the house negro would typically be characterized by servility, according to Kehinde Andrews:

The House Negro was depicted by Malcolm [X] as playing up to the master, of not being prepared for the necessary radical politics. In contrast, Field Negroes were the masses who hated the master, wanted to destroy the plantation and escape to freedom. For Malcolm then, to become Black was to identify with the Field Negro, or the Black masses, and want to separate from mainstream America.⁵⁸

Andrews goes on to analyze the house negro as one under enslavement, yet embracing the humiliation of servitude, in order to avoid the harsh outdoor work of the field negro and enjoy the relative privileges of living in the master's home. Andrews states that:

the House Negro is being bought off, tricked into accepting oppression by the master bestowing benefits on them that are withheld from the Field Negro. Were the master to treat all the enslaved equally harshly, there would be constant revolt, so the House Negro is elevated into a buffer position between the master and the Field Negro⁵⁹

Thus, the house negro embraces submission, plays by the rules, and though the rules dehumanize, they ensure better living conditions, food, and not "catching hell" from the plantation master.⁶⁰ "Catching hell" is inflicted upon the field negro who endures brutal plantation labour, which foments greater rage towards the plantation and master. Andrews summarizes Malcolm X's thoughts on the field negro, asserting that this resistance to and rejection of imposed white ideologies of blackness define black authenticity.⁶¹

Lamar is representing a similar idea, we must note what a "good field nigga" would be, in contrast to a "negro". According to R.A.T Judy, the use of the term "nigga" in hip-

⁵⁸ Kehinde Andrews, "From the 'Bad Nigger' to the 'Good Nigga': an unintended legacy of the Black Power movement", *Race and Class* 53, no. 3 (2013), 22-37 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813508268>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

hop is a reflection of authenticity, which ties into how the field negro asserts a sense of resistance.⁶² Judy states that “nigga defines authenticity” due to this sense of resistance.⁶³ Judy argues that the term nigga implies a sense of being antiestablishment, and the desire for autonomy, free of white dominated political structures.⁶⁴ Mark Anthony Neal states that the use of the word nigga “relates to concepts of blackness as mobile, fluid, adaptable, postmodern, urban, and embodying various forms of social and rhetorical flow that are fully realized within the narratives of hip-hop”.⁶⁵ Combining this with Andrews’s idea of the field negro, we get a unique narrative of blackness in hip-hop. Neal, interpreting Judy’s argument states that niggas refers to the labour of black popular culture, versus the labour of black bodies.⁶⁶ This split makes Lamar’s “good field nigga” a persona of resistance and black authenticity that is representative of the labour of black culture (tying into the album’s theme of being pimped out). Furthermore, the “good field nigga” representing a form of resistance and authenticity also represents Malcolm’s thoughts on displacing the white master, and therefore in the context of hip-hop, representing a resistance to ideologies of white superiority. By artistically representing this persona, Lamar is able to bring it into the conversation of modern dynamics of racial identity and power structures in the 21st century, therefore making this persona essential in 21st century music.

⁶² R.A.T Judy, “On The Question of Nigga Authenticity”, in *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 114.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Mark Anthony Neal, “NIGGA: The 21st-Century Theoretical Superhero”, *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2013) 556-563, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/10.1111/cuan.12025>. How these conceptions are realized comes back to the quote by Questlove in chapter 2, where real hip-hop is a mix of many different genres, thereby allowing a non-limiting script, and a multiplicity of conceptions of blackness, including the concept of “nigga”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

According to Andrews, the “bad nigger” represented a feeling of resentment that turned into a rebellious sense of anarchism which inspired fright in both blacks and whites alike.⁶⁷ Lamar clearly does not have any sense of aggression or nihilism in this musical space, rather Lamar embodies a calm, welcoming persona that still reflects a sense of resistance to a system of white domination. Combining Lamar’s lyrical idea of being “a good field nigga” with the musical space generated by the thick, warm jazz harmonies, and constant sense of motion through a descending bass line we get a musical space that speaks to a sense of solidarity. This is done by the warm sense of different timbres, rhythmic patterns, and harmonies layered together to create a space filled with a variety of different musical colours, not dissimilar from Lamar’s discussion of different complexions, and the role these divisions play in preventing a feeling of black solidarity.

So, looking at the two musical spaces, where Lamar’s verses are centered on (from an artistic standpoint) different colours and textures coming together, and Rapsody’s is centered on a sense of freedom, there is an important double entendre which Rapsody makes around the idea of colour.⁶⁸ The first meaning, depicted both lyrically and musically, is the idea of complexion as grounds for division and degradation. The second is gang violence in LA: Rapsody’s last line “blues and Pirus, no colours ain’t a thing”, refers to the blue Crips, and the Piru Bloods, a set of the Bloods gang specific to Lamar’s area of Compton. Lamar also acknowledges the danger of divisions by complexion, how these can turn violent, and the need for solidarity by referencing the Willie Lynch Theory.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Andrews, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813508268>

⁶⁸ In a sense, this idea speaks to hip hop music as a microcosm, where different ideas are taken (through different backgrounds, sampling, etc.) and made together in an amalgamation of sorts

⁶⁹ Complexion Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-complexion-a-zulu-love-lyrics>

Willie Lynch's speech, though now confirmed to be a complete hoax, detailed tactics to destroy the minds of slaves by fostering divisions between them, thereby crippling them and ensuring dependence on the slave master. The metaphor is a powerful one that supports Lamar's rhetoric, it gestures to the fostering of divisions between black people as a means of control for a profit. In the context of *TPAB*, it represents how divisions are holding back black people, and identifies hierarchies of colour as one of the most insidious divisions. As Rapsody states that colours "ain't a thing" and Lamar calls for the Willie Lynch rule to be "reversed a million times" a comparison of the divisions of the Willie Lynch rule and gang violence is made.⁷⁰ Thus, Rapsody's clever word play on colour takes the idea of skin colour dividing black people and compares it to gang colours – a division resulting from racist socioeconomic barriers and a feeling of disenfranchisement that now has turned to extreme violence in the form of gangs. Tommie Shelby identifies the importance of black solidarity in fighting anti-black racism, and Rapsody and Lamar make a similar case here by trying to look past intraracial divisions, be it due to skin colour or gang colour.

Lynch also stated that sex (read binary gender) can be used as a way to divide blacks to maintain control, and this hierarchy of anti-black black beauty standards that also perceives black women as lesser is another manifestation of this idea. In "Complexion," both MCs push past this negative script by lyrically questioning and rejecting the negativity. Musically, Lamar's warm harmonious space conjures a sense of togetherness, stability, solidarity and resentment to antiblack racism, expanding the existing script of black identity. In turn, Rapsody rejects the inferior script of black femininity and creates a

⁷⁰ Ibid.

musical space that is filled with freedom, assertiveness, and a confrontation of antiblack institutional ideologies. Thus, “Complexion” creates two personae that both reflect on black identity, and also create a non-limiting form of identity through the musical constructions of these personae.

Within the constructions of the personae in “Complexion” we hear Rapsody reject a sense of black inferiority and Lamar display resentment to antiblack racism, and therefore call for black solidarity. Tommie Shelby describes numerous strategies to accomplish this, such as Black Militancy, and the integral role confrontation plays in it. Specifically, the framework of Black Militancy requires a level of confrontation of institutional power that would be “willing to use political methods that whites might find unacceptable or even offensive if black liberation requires as much”.⁷¹ This is separate from Andrews’s idea of what would constitute the persona of the “bad nigger” which he associates with the imagery of gangsta rap.⁷² The “bad nigger” has a rebellious sense of resentment that turns into aggression, and nihilism, scaring both blacks and whites.⁷³ To represent such a persona would add integral depth to representations of black identity, by displaying the result of antiblack racism turning into a sense of aggression. Here, we turn to how Lamar represents this persona in the song “Hood Politics.”

The song begins with a phone call where an individual is trying to contact Lamar, but he isn’t replying. The musical space is fairly uneventful, an R&B groove plays in the background. The individual seems to be mocking Lamar’s sense of dress, implying a sort of lack of authenticity, i.e. a lack of blackness in Lamar’s “no socks, skinny jeans n’ shit”,

⁷¹ Shelby, 98

⁷² Andrews, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813508268>

⁷³ Ibid.

implying a restricting script of black identity, enforced musically by the corny R&B groove that reeks of elevator music, as if mocking Lamar's lack of authenticity (read expanding the script of blackness).⁷⁴ To call the MC's response fiery would be an understatement. The beat changes, instantly transforming the feel of the song. The mocking elevator groove is replaced by a simple minor riff that creates a sense of intimidation. It is important to note that the feeling of intimidation and menace is different from that created by the trap sound, as that was created to reflect wealth and power in conspicuous consumption, which I call the Veblen sound.⁷⁵ This sound used in trap was designed to make subjects such as drug trafficking and poverty seem like an upbeat party, similarly to Thorstein Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption where goods are purchased with the goal of coming off as high class and wealthy.

Here Lamar is representing Andrews's idea of the "bad nigger". As the beat kicks in, there is a constant sense of the aggression Andrews describes, reflected in the music, beginning by stating "I've been A-1 since day one, you niggas boo boo!" He then continues to drop a series of aggressive insults, rhythmically displacing "boo boo" (meaning feces) every time, displaying his effortless control of time and phrasing that goes into his signature flow.⁷⁶

As each verse passes, Lamar's approach to the music here is pure aggression and confrontation, and makes it clear that he is representing the "bad nigger" persona. The first verse begins with him spitting "I don't give a fuck about no politics in rap my nigga".⁷⁷

⁷⁴ "Kendrick Lamar- Hood Politics", *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-hood-politics-lyrics>

⁷⁵ Dilshan Weerasinghe, "I Put On For My City: The Atlanta Trap Scene and the 'Veblen Sound'", paper presented at Legacies and Futures: The Pasts and Futures in Music, Montreal, May 2019.

⁷⁶ Hood Politics Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-hood-politics-lyrics>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Lamar's aggressive style combines with the menace of the beat, and the confrontational, nihilistic lyrics speak create a musical script of the "bad nigger" that arises from antiblack racism. There is clear irony here, as Lamar is well known for his political activism, yet here the persona he expresses is angry and nihilistic towards political involvement.

Another interpretation of this line would be Lamar looking at the power he holds, the legacy of hip-hop rivalries (such as the East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry), and how he has the ability to start up another feud, but chooses not to. For example, later on the song he states "'less you askin' me 'bout power, yeah I got a lot of it, I'm the only one next to Snoop that can push the button. Got the Coast on standby "K-Dot what up? I heard they opened up Pandora's box".⁷⁸ In these lines, Lamar confirms a knowledge of his own power as an artist, and his place among West Coast legends such as Snoop Dogg, and how he could use this to create chaos. Combining this with the song's opening lyric about "politics in rap", Lamar is asserting that he doesn't care to use this power for the purpose of chaos and starting feuds. Tying this into Andrews's concept of the "bad nigger", he is adding further depth to the persona by expressing that this personification of nihilism does not have an end goal of chaos.

Lamar's persona explicitly expresses a lack of trust in either American political party in the second verse – another representation of the nihilistic, confrontational (though quite intelligent) persona Andrews describes:

Streets don't fail me now, they tell me it's a new gang in town
From Compton to Congress, set trippin' all around
Ain't nothin' new, but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-licans
Red state versus a blue state, which one you governin'?
They give us guns and drugs, call us thugs

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Make it they promise to fuck with you
No condom, they fuck with you, Obama say, "What it do?"⁷⁹

Breaking down these lines, Lamar compares the gang violence plaguing Compton to the function of the American government, the vilification of black men, and how neither side seems to really be dedicated to helping address the issues of black ghetto poverty. Murray Forman analyses how Compton has been represented in hip-hop, and the rhetoric foundation of representing a neighbourhood. Name dropping Compton, Lamar is not just referring to the geographic location of the city, but rather he is bringing up a space that is “simultaneously real, imaginary, symbolic, and mythical”, as this representation of Lamar’s hometown brings in how he imagines his environment, and how it relates to his “sense of self”.⁸⁰ Combining this with his persona on this track, he is taking the image of Compton to mean a place completely separate from institutional power (i.e. Congress), yet simultaneously bringing up an overlap between the two, comparing political parties to Bloods and Crips. Here, Lamar is aggressively tearing into the whitewashed American government and compares them to a violent street gang. However, with the idea of “Hood Politics” representing the persona of the “bad nigger” and having numerous examples of musical rhetoric consistent with the confrontational framework of black militancy, the most interesting lyric is the reference to President Obama.⁸¹ It is quite unlikely that Lamar is critiquing America’s first black president, as Lamar has stated his respect for Obama,

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Murray Forman, “‘Represent’: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music”, in *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 217

⁸¹ It is important to note that government systems can be white washed, and systems of white domination can still be in place even while a black president is in office, due to how race is materialized from being placed in a hierarchy to perceptions that effect one’s consciousness, to how one acts or is forced to act in the world, as stated by Charles Mills in California State University Fullerton – “Charles Mills on Materializing Race”, YouTube video, 44:27, May 3rd, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtU5TjPiyO0>

and they share the same view points on many issues. This leaves us with an interpretation, keeping in mind Lamar's performance persona, where Obama is a representation of the black elite.

According to Ta-Nehisi Coates, President Obama and the Obama family represented "the best of black people, the ultimate credit to the race, incomparable in elegance and bearing".⁸² Combining this with the black slang Lamar references ("Obama say 'what it do?'" slang for "what's up?") it is clear the MC is posing a question to Obama. Through the lack of trust of elite politicians, Lamar is questioning whether Obama was any different in helping black communities. This important reference ties in Lamar's persona of nihilism with 21st century politics and discussions of race. using him as an image of blackness that has roots in, and the respect of, hip-hop culture. Coates states:

The ties between the Obama White House and the hip-hop community are genuine. The Obamas are social with Beyoncé and Jay-Z. They hosted Chance the Rapper and Frank Ocean at a state dinner, and last year invited Swizz Beatz, Busta Rhymes, and Ludacris, among others, to discuss criminal-justice reform and other initiatives. Obama once stood in the Rose Garden passing large flash cards to the Hamilton creator and rapper Lin-Manuel Miranda, who then freestyled using each word on the cards. "Drop the beat," Obama said, inaugurating the session. At 55, Obama is younger than pioneering hip-hop artists like Afrika Bambaataa, DJ Kool Herc, and Kurtis Blow. If Obama's enormous symbolic power draws primarily from being the country's first black president, it also draws from his membership in hip-hop's foundational generation.⁸³

Lamar's persona becomes a powerful critique of institutional power in the 21st century, consistent with the trope described by Andrews.

⁸² Ta-Nehisi Coates, "My President Was Black: A history of the First African American White House – and of What Came Next", The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/>

⁸³ Coates, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/>

This is confirmed by the musical passage following the lyric “Obama say ‘what it do?’”.⁸⁴ This passage descends into complete chaos, as a low menacing, distorted and demonic voice keeps reciting the previous lyric over top of a beat comprised of a descending melody and a woman screaming in terror. The textures are dark and dangerous, as the trippy, distorted melody repeats over and over with the high-pitched screaming ringing over top, and the demonic voice reciting Obama’s blackness over top. This sonic hell is distinct from the rest of the album. The musical language in this space, Lamar’s angry, nihilistic musical persona throughout this track, showing a disdain and distrust for the black elite. The core of “Hood Politics” is Lamar trying to represent a feeling of pure disenfranchisement and aggressive nihilism, resulting from antiblack racism and economic marginalization from predatory capitalism in the dynamics of the 21st century, This presents a persona that is again integral to the discussion of race and poverty – the persona of angry disenfranchisement.

Thus far, *TPAB* has presented numerous different takes on the narratives of blackness – from the resentful field negro striving for a sense of solidarity and togetherness to unite against antiblack racism, to a black man examining how they view black women due to the connotations of darker skin, a woman’s perspective on how she views herself and how others view her, the angry nihilistic persona that feels disenfranchised due to antiblack racism, and a figure representing the highest of the black elite being questioned for what he will do for black America. These personae reflect on black identity in a sense that is non-limiting by presenting a multiplicity of narratives from different angles, displaying different effects of antiblack racism, and different ideas around empowerment.

⁸⁴ Hood Politics Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-hood-politics-lyrics>

Though “Hood Politics” displayed a fiery nihilistic critique of American white power structures, this begs the question as to what is the expression of a persona which confronts systems of racial domination, yet not in a nihilistic fashion. This would add further depth to the reflection of a non-limiting script of black identity, and the expression of the discussions surrounding race and poverty. Here, we turn to “The Blacker The Berry”.

On this track, Lamar represents a new persona, reflecting on black power...or rather, at first he seems to be. The song begins with the following stanza, before the beat kicks in:

Everything black, I don't want black (They want us to bow)
I want everything black, I ain't need black (Down to our knees)
Some white, some black, I ain't mean black (And pray to the God)
I want everything black (We don't believe)
Everything black, want all things black
I don't need black, want everything black
Don't need black, our eyes ain't black
I own black, own everything black⁸⁵

The parenthetical lyrics sung by Lalah Hathaway gesture to the other traditions of black music such as neo-soul and R&B, representing a non-limiting script of black identity, alongside the rejection of the white norms, as discussed in chapter two. In combination with the lyrics recited by Lamar give a lyrical representation of Du Bois’s idea of the double consciousness within the minds of black people, where the lyrics describe a constant rejection and reclaiming of blackness. Du Bois notes in the *Conservation of Races* that the negro message still has to be delivered to the world, and notes further in *The Souls of Black Folks* that to be black and to be an American require two different states of

⁸⁵ “Kendrick Lamar- “The Blacker The Berry”, *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry-lyrics>

consciousness that black people must reconcile.⁸⁶⁸⁷ We can see this battle playing out in the lyrics above, as Lamar seems to switch between different mind sets for the first half and latter half of each lyric. For example, the phrases beginning each line (“Everything black”, “I want everything black”, and “some white, some black” for example) represent a clear state of a black consciousness, claiming a musical space of black power as Lamar authoritatively states each lyric, driving towards the last syllable, polyrhythmically dancing over the dark musical accompaniment, where the word “black” always lands on a strong beat. The latter halves of the lines (“I don’t want black”, “I ain’t need black”, and “I ain’t mean black”) represent a more American consciousness (noting this would mean narratives where whiteness would be a norm), in which Lamar draws out certain words, and uses a less authoritative phrasing. For example, words like “want”, “need”, and “mean” are stretched out in a much higher pitched voice. Though the word “black” still lands on a strong beat, the drawn out words before take away the feeling of empowerment, resulting in a feeling of questioning, as if Lamar is quite literally contemplating doing away with blackness. Combining this with Hathaway’s firm yet soulful confirmation of the rejection of white norms, “The Blacker The Berry” begins with myriad mindsets presented and stirred all together into what Du Bois called the greatest gift of the negro message: music.

Lamar begins every aggressive verse stating “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015”. The significance of beginning each verse with the same line reflects that in each verse Lamar is in some sort of battle with his own consciousness, and calls himself (or rather, the persona which he is presenting) hypocritical. Is this a further musical personification of Du

⁸⁶ My thinking here is influenced by Du Bois, W. E. B, *The Conservation of Races*, 2004.

⁸⁷ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 2-3

Bois's double consciousness? Perhaps so, but the musical language seems to err on the blacker mindset than that of the American, and the idea of hypocrisy (potentially) representing the battle between the two. The idea of Black Power, in its roots in the philosophies of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles Hamilton is, in essence, group autonomy: "concentrated and thereby increased political power would enable blacks to exert greater influence on, and even control, the operation of those institutions that have the greatest impact on their well-being and freedom. Such political power would allow blacks to exercise significant autonomy over their own lives", i.e. the group autonomy of Black Power.⁸⁸ We can see this represented in the musical rhetoric, and Lamar is clearly aggressively and openly confronting someone or something. But with such musical rhetoric consistent with these philosophies what does it mean for Lamar to call himself a hypocrite at the beginning of each verse?

Lamar reveals this at the end of the song with the lyrics:

So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers
Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers"
Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day
Or eat watermelon, chicken, and Kool-Aid on weekdays
Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements
Or watch BET 'cause urban support is important
So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street
When gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?
Hypocrite!⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Shelby, 109.

⁸⁹ The Blacker The Berry Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry-lyrics>

Essentially, Lamar sees a hypocritical view in his community, where people are quick to jump to action when it comes to white-on-black violence such as the murder of Trayvon Martin, or acts of police brutality, – yet do not take the same level of action when it comes to rectifying the issues of gang violence in Compton. To be more specific, this whole song has been structured to seem as if Lamar (or rather the persona he is representing) is directing his anger outwards, towards white American institutional power, towards the police force, and towards an agenda that continues to murder innocent black people. However, Lamar’s last set of lyrics completely change the entire meaning of the song, as he makes it clear that though police brutality and violent antiblack racism are issues to be addressed, he brings up a rather conservative point of view of directing his anger towards the issue of gang violence. The discussion of gang violence versus violence due to acts of racism, and the mention of Trayvon Martin ties the music into conversations of race in the 21st century, such as Black Lives Matter, which is integral to the representation of race and politics in the 21st century.

A transnational sense of blackness is also introduced on “The Blacker The Berry” with the chorus being sung by Assassin, a black Jamaican artist. The chorus brings in a comparison of traditional symbols of West Coast rap, such as cars and jewelry but the chorus reveals the core of the song: black pride, where the chorus states:

Ah say dem treat wi like a slave, cah' wi black
Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black
I man a say dem put me inna chain, cah' we black
And watch ya now, mi gold chain full of rocks
How you no see the whip, left scars 'pon wi back
But now we have a big whip parked 'pon the block
How dem a say we doomed from the start, cah' we black

Remember this, every race start from the black, jus 'member dat.⁹⁰

Dissecting these lyrics, Assassin takes pride in wearing a gold chain and throws of the degradation of the chains of slavery (or perhaps incarceration), and the slave master's whip is now a whip, meaning a car, therefore throwing off the shame off slavery, and taking pride in black identity. But perhaps the most interesting line is the last, due to this strong stance on black pride, where Assassin again throws of the degradation of blackness, and takes pride in blackness being the origin of civilization, stating "every race start from the black". This results in a song that centers on black pride in the 21st century, while providing commentary on modern issues surrounding race, all the while throwing off the negativity associated with blackness.

Thus far, *TPAB* has given us a strong personification of black pride, a woman's perspective on how the connotations of blackness affect how she sees herself, an angry, nihilistic, angry personification of blackness resulting from antiblack racism, and numerous other artistic representations of the black experience. However, there are two tracks on the album that look at these conceptions of blackness with different personae that are integral to this discussion. These are the West Coast rapper representing an ostentatious lifestyle, a condemnation of the lifestyle, and Uncle Sam representing the American Dream. A representation of these personae gives further reflection on a non-limiting script by presenting a dynamic of wealth and status that is misused, and a resulting critique of this misuse. These, in combination with a persona of Uncle Sam further reflect a non-limiting script of black identity as it represents a persona misusing status and power, and how this

⁹⁰ The Blacker The Berry Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-the-blacker-the-berry-lyrics>

could be “pimped out” by predatory American capitalism. For this discussion, we turn to “Wesley’s Theory” and “For Free? (Interlude)”, the album’s first two tracks. I address these two tracks together as “Wesley’s Theory” actually ends several seconds into “For Free? (Interlude)” following an abrupt cut off and a saxophone cadenza, connecting the two songs.

“Wesley’s Theory” begins with a sample of a Boris Gardner song, reciting the phrase “every nigger is a star” continuously, though the tone of the sample is made to sound as if a record is playing in the background.⁹¹ Lamar beginning the album with this sample speaks to several different foundational ideas of *TPAB*. The first representing the idea of potential, which he brings up again at the end of the album when discussing the metaphor of the butterfly. The second possible meaning has to do with the metaphor of being “pimped”, where Lamar is using this phrase to discuss how blackness is used to generate stardom and profit in the music industry. The song then drops into a dark heavy space, packed with minor harmonies and clashing timbres, even Thundercat’s typically soulful, modern jazz sound on bass is distorted into a near unrecognizable dark series of menacing lines. Above the sonic chaos, the voice of producer and jazz trumpeter Josef Leimberg rings out, in an almost Godlike tone. The overall effect of this sonic space is a dark nightmare-ish musical world, and Lamar’s first few lyrics (more sung than rapped) add further to the effect of a dark nightmare, where Lamar’s vocals, layered into harsh harmonies, appear distorted as well, as he recites lyrics using the metaphor of sex to discuss how fed up he had become with rap and stardom. This makes the reasoning for such a sonic nightmare apparent – it is a space to represent Lamar struggling with, and

⁹¹ “Kendrick Lamar- “Wesley’s Theory”, *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-wesleys-theory-lyrics>

struggling though, myriad issues such as his role as an artist, his duty to his community, what is going on his community, and his identity, as he begins to musically reflect on all of these.

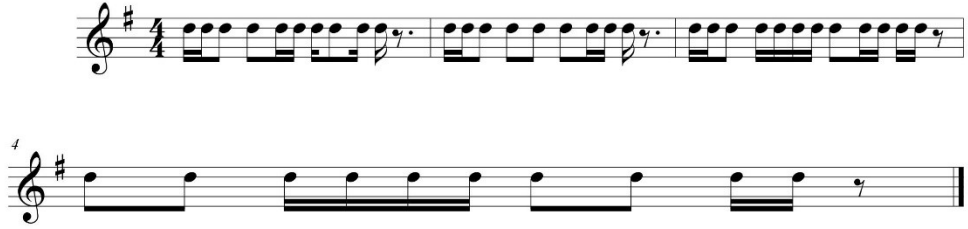
His first verse shoots over top of the dark cloud of sound, where the first lyric (“when I get signed, homie I’m a act a fool”) is key, as it sets the tone for the verse, as Lamar’s lyrics describe what many think of as the stereotype of an LA gangsta rapper, describing guns, gangs, and chains, ending with the line “uneducated but I got a million dollar check like that”.⁹² Here Lamar uses a choppy style of flow, quite different from the intricate jazz-like phrasing we associate his style. Combining this with the fact he declares himself a fool before he begins this verse, Lamar appears to be mocking the image of West Coast rap, filled with its low riders, bling, guns, and gangs. Another interpretation of this line would be Lamar using slang to mean he’s going to go wild and spend lots of money. With this interpretation, Lamar is using the imagery of West Coast rap and short choppy phrasing to create the personification of the West Coast traditions of rap.

The fact Lamar is specifically referring to the West Coast is confirmed by the fact the chorus features George Clinton singing with Thundercat. Clinton, and his legendary 1970s band Parliament Funkadelic, also known as P-Funk, provided an important musical framework for West Coast hip-hop to the point that one of the West Coast’s subgenres became known as G-Funk. One of the biggest artists to emerge from the G-Funk subgenre is Andre Young, more famously known as Dr. Dre. To say that Dre has become synonymous with West Coast rap would be an understatement, as he has worked on some

⁹² “Kendrick Lamar- “Wesley’s Theory”, *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-wesleys-theory-lyrics>

Wesley's Theory

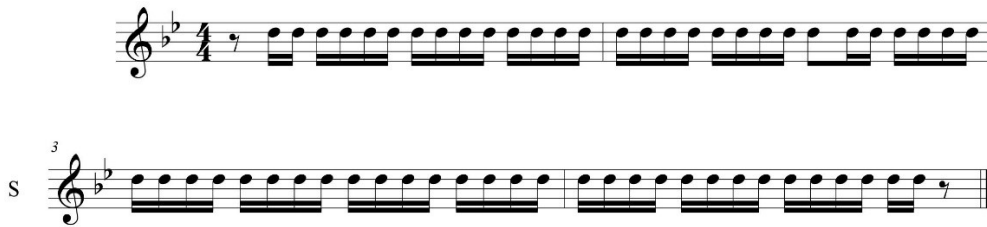
Kendrick Lamar



©

Alright

Kendrick Lamar



©

Figures 3 and 4: My transcription of Lamar’s phrasing on “Wesley’s Theory” and “Alright”. Note the much choppy phrasing in “Wesley’s Theory” versus the fast paced, virtuosic style of flow in “Alright”, where the latter is what is typically associated with his style.

of the most iconic albums to shape the West Coast sound, such as Tupac's *All Eyez On Me*, Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle*, NWA's *Straight Outta Compton*, his own solo album *The Chronic*, and not to mention founding one of hip-hop's most iconic labels in Aftermath Entertainment. One of Dre's signatures with his production would be a high pitched synth, that evokes the aesthetic of Parliament-Funkadelic: for example, the tone and shape of the melody of the synth line 3 minutes into Parliament's "Mothership Connection" is echoed by the synth in Dre's "Nuthin' But a G Thang", or Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice".⁹³ In "Wesley's Theory", we hear a similar synth sound, and it is worth noting that executive production for the album was done by Dre, and it was also released on Aftermath in addition to Lamar's label Top Dawg Entertainment.⁹⁴ The use of the "Dre Synth" and the P-Funk style of style of spacey, experimental sounds for the beat, and layered vocals give the song a new take on the West Coast sound – one that is nightmare-ish and looks and looks at the existing trope of the black male West Coast rapper, and puts it in a space of musical chaos.

Thus far in the song we have heard Lamar present himself as torn on what his role is, question the role of the stereotypical West Coast rapper, yet his artistic narratives go further when the song hits the chorus, as the legendary George Clinton sings alongside with Thundercat "we should never gave, we should we should never gave niggas money, go back home! Money, go back home!". This is recited in a disapproving, lower-pitched

⁹³ rossrec – "Parliament – Mothership Connection", YouTube video, 6:15, Oct. 1, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSERB93GYfw>. swagg435, "Dr Dre – Nuthin But A G Thang (HQ)", YouTube video, Dec 24, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPa59XcS6pQ>. SnoopDoggTV – "Snoop Dogg – Gin and Juice", YouTube Video, 4:24, June 30th, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWCZse1iwE0>

⁹⁴ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, (Oakland: University of California Press), 106

tone, creating a second character in the song condemning Lamar's ostentatious gangsta rap persona depicted in the first verse. To tie in the traditions of the West Coast, Lamar goes even further than just using Dre's G-Funk sound, he samples an interview with him. This also places Lamar as the necessary next step in the lineage of West Coast rap in the 21st century. The "go back home" chorus is also a reference to a legendary episode of *Chappelle's Show*, where Charlie Murphy describes what one can only assume to be a true story of Rick James visiting him and his brother Eddie, and destroying his couch.⁹⁵ The Murphy brothers responded by holding James down, and beating him up. Dave Chappelle, playing Rick James, crawls away, yelling "they should've never gave you niggas money!".⁹⁶ Lamar referencing one of the most famous *Chappelle's Show* moments represents not just a condemnation of an ostentatious lifestyle but also a warning of the destruction that occurs when living such a lifestyle.

Now, Lamar has presented several different musical takes on the West Coast sound and what it represents, one of questioning its value, one condemning it, and one of its founders. Lamar then jumps into his last verse on the song that begins with a few lines that appear several times throughout the album: "what you want you, a house a car? 40 acres and a mule? A piano, a guitar?/ Anything see my name is Uncle Sam I'm your dog, motherfucker you can live at the mall". When heard through headphones, each phrase flips back and forth between each ear, as if this demonic Uncle Sam persona is right behind you, tempting you with the same promises (read lies) he's telling to Lamar, promises of material wealth, musical fame, and most interestingly the old promise of 40 acres and a mule – the

⁹⁵ "Kendrick Lamar – Wesley's Theory Lyrics", *Genius Lyrics*, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-wesleys-theory-lyrics>

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

long promise never delivered to freed slaves following the Civil War. This differs from a script of blackness, as Lamar is using the metaphor of Uncle Sam i.e. the personification of American capitalism, to representing the “pimp” taking advantage of the butterfly. The following verse sees Lamar take this idea further as he describes how he (acting as the pimp) is going to take advantage of Lamar, a black artist, for money, and at the end claiming “I’ll Wesley Snipe yo’ ass before 35”, referring to Wesley Snipes having to go to court to pay the IRS, an ordeal which resulted in him receiving the maximum prison sentence for failing to file tax returns. This modern pop culture reference helps to anchor the music in a particular space and place in the 21st century. Perhaps more important is the personification of Uncle Sam. This emblem of the American dream is essential in the discussion of race and poverty in the 21st century, and the role which American capitalism plays in systems of economic and racial dominance.

To summarize, “Wesley’s Theory” uses a dark, nightmare-ish take on the West Coast traditions of rap to tie Lamar to the legacy of hip hop from his community, yet also present a different story line, one that questions the traditions of the subgenre, and puts this trope in relation to how others outside the community with this as their reference point as to what blackness is, and even how the American dream (or, as Malcolm X would say, the American nightmare) has pimped out blackness. Connecting this to “For Free? (Interlude)”, Lamar uses this idea of being pimped out even further, where throughout the song he is arguing with a woman who wants more money from him, claiming he never did anything for her. Her tone is angry, whereas Lamar replies with the fast-paced, Coltrane like phrasing we associated with his jazzy style stating “this dick ain’t free”. With the pimp

metaphor, Lamar is not just using gratuitous vulgarity, but representing blackness being used, and wanting what it has long been owed.

Every time the woman questions his worth and his use, Lamar's reply is jazz, as the quartet blares in the background in place of a hip-hop beat, and he flies overtop, just virtuosic as any bebop great. Jazz, particularly bebop, has long been heralded as high art in black culture, and Lamar uses this to reply every time the woman tries to put him down. He replies with lines such as "I need 40 acres and a mule, not a 40 oz and a pit bull", i.e. the promise made to black America versus a stereotypical image of ghetto poverty. He ends the verse saying "oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich, now my dick ain't free" – clearly hammering home the message of the song, and one of the album's many messages: black America wants what they are owed for their contributions to the country through art, culture, and building the American empire by being used by the evils of slavery and toiling as part of the working class. The woman ends by shutting Lamar down saying "I'ma get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up, you ain't no king!"

Lamar's fiery response will come in the form of "King Kunta," perhaps the album's most famous song. "King Kunta" not only presents further musical personae reflecting narratives of black identity, but brings in a new artistic element presented through music videos, that being dance. Here I've discussed how several tracks on *TPAB* present musical language and lyrics describing various different takes on blackness and poverty in America through the use of different personae. These musical elements help make *TPAB* one of the most seminal artistic works in the discussion of race in the 21st century. But these stories go deeper when examining how Lamar used performative elements such as dance in his music videos and iconic live appearances such as the 2016 Grammys, and on Saturday

Night Live. In chapter four I will consider how Lamar uses lyrics in combination with the use of the body, dance, and performance to present these narratives in songs such as “i”, “Alright”, and “King Kunta” to further reflect on non-limiting scripts of black identity.

Chapter 4: Performative Elements of Dance and Black Pride

TPAB goes further than just music in terms of how the album presents a script of blackness in a modern context, as an important part of the work is the use of the performative elements of dance and the black body. Here I will study the music videos for the songs “King Kunta”, “Alright”, “i”, along with Lamar’s 2016 *Grammy Awards* Performance, and his *Saturday Night Live* performance on November 15th, 2014 and how these use the black body ideas of aesthetic and performance to create a space of blackness that both reflects a modern script, ties it into the historical ideas of blackness, and also pushes past this into a new script of black identity. This analysis and discussion is integral, as I argue that *TPAB*’s performative elements help to enforce the musical elements of the album, and are essential in the work being a seminal musical moment.

The performative analysis is informed by Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzales in *Black Performance Theory*. DeFrantz states that “for hip-hop’s first generation of scholars and journalists, hip-hop claimed expansive space as a necessary voice of expression for the disenfranchised”.⁹⁷ DeFrantz goes further, stating that hip-hop dance reflected a sense of pleasure and power.⁹⁸ He states that pleasure, in the context of hip-hop dance, refers to “pleasure with aesthetic purpose as well as social function. What hip-hop dance styles manage to do, in their organization of physicalities and dispersals of energy, is to combine the joy of controlling an emotional and physical self in a blankly powerful manner that suggests social dynamism”.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Hip-Hop Habitus v.2.0”, in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 226.

⁹⁸ DeFrantz, 229

⁹⁹ DeFrantz, 230

He states that “hip-hop dancing gathers energy as it broadens its contours and revels in its own accomplishment as an aggressive, masculinist style that conditions its dancers to demonstrate their power.”¹⁰⁰

Lamar’s use of dance can be put into two categories, those in the music videos for *TPAB* tracks, and those of his live performances, yet both reflect DeFrantz’s ideas of power and pleasure. According to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, skin colour itself can be a performance: “the idea that skin – black skin – can be a costume is an extension of the idea that white skin is the norm and other skins are deviations”.¹⁰¹ Gottschild goes on to detail how exoticized black skin became such that it almost became an item of clothing, noting how in travel magazines, nude black bodies had a “kind of neutralizing coating...as if not naked at all. White women’s bodies, on the other hand, felt so bare in their whiteness as if robbed of a protective cover – really, really naked”.¹⁰² The role which the black body plays goes further with the example of hair. Gottschild notes how hair reflects a sense of blackness:

“[h]air is, indeed, an important signifier. Since the 1960s, coifs that represented political and cultural liberation for African Americans – Afros, cornrows, puffs, twists, locks – have been adopted/adapted by whites to represent their own freedom movement. Carefully constructed cornrows may have signified order and adherence to communal values in traditional African cultures, but on the other side of the Atlantic they expressed sociocultural protest for the African American activist, businessman, or professor (male or female) and raunchy radicalism or primitive sexuality for whites.”¹⁰³

Though Gottschild describes hair used as a means of “sociocultural protest for the African American activist”, she also notes that it has been used as a means of racist humiliation.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Cool to Cool*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 42

¹⁰² Gottschild 43

¹⁰³ Gottschild, 207

Gottschild describes how black hair has consistently had negative connotations (kinky, nappy, etc.), and has been seen as ugly when compared to white standards of beauty and has even been historically referred to as wool as opposed to hair, in the dehumanization of black people to justify practices of subjugation such as slavery.¹⁰⁴

Analyzing both sides of what natural black hair represents, an interesting dichotomy is formed, one positive, one negative. The difference between these two is where it is a negative symbol it is through the lens of whiteness as a norm, and the positive being a response to negative ideas of blackness through the lens of whiteness as a norm. As whiteness and white standards of beauty become set as a norm, then phenotypic characteristics associated with blackness such as natural black hair, darker skin complexion, thick lips, etc. become, according to Tommie Shelby, “stigmata of degradation”, i.e. signs of “inferior social status”, forming Du Bois’s idea of the veil, a dynamic of racism that separates blacks from whites.¹⁰⁵ The other side of this dichotomy is a response to “the veil”, where black hair now becomes a symbol of resistance against “the veil”. For, if “the veil” deems black phenotypic characteristics as negative symbols and white phenotypic characteristics (lighter skin, straight hair, etc.) as positive, then this implies that phenotypic symbols of blackness would have to be done away with to not be considered as lesser. Gottschild gives the example of a high school girl who is considered unattractive because of her natural hair and therefore spends her time with her friends straightening her hair.¹⁰⁶ This internalized sense of degradation is brought on by the white gaze. Thus, natural hair becomes a symbol of protest as it implies rejecting whiteness as a

¹⁰⁴ Gottschild 209

¹⁰⁵ Shelby, 83. Note that here, Shelby is analysing Du Bois.

¹⁰⁶ Gottschild, 211.

norm, and as a superior standard of beauty. The connotations of natural hair promote blackness as no lesser than whiteness – an act of rejecting the attempted humiliation of “the veil”.

Gottschild notes a performance where a split hairstyle was used by a dancer to symbolize the different connotations around hair and the black body.¹⁰⁷ Kendrick Lamar used a similar idea on his performance of “i” on *Saturday Night Live* on November 15th, 2014 to state a particular message and purpose.

“i” was one of several early singles released from *TPAB*, so Lamar performed the song prior to the album’s release. This performance of “i” presented how the black body can be used as a symbol of resistance to 21st century ideas of racism. Lamar begins the performance with this stanza before the official beginning the song:

Livin’ in America (livin’ in America)
Thuggin’ in the trap (thuggin’ in the trap)
Livin’ in a groove (livin’ in a groove)
Watchin’ the TV (watchin’ the TV)
Dedicated to the homies in the pen, hit me!¹⁰⁸

The parenthetical lyrics here are sung by back up singers, creating a call and response pattern, a classic characteristic of African-American music that made its way from West African music to African-American spirituals to swing and jazz, all the way to hip hop.¹⁰⁹ Lamar’s dedication is interesting as well, as it makes it quite clear who this performance is for. The band then kicks in, and the song begins.

¹⁰⁷ Gottschild, 215.

¹⁰⁸ “Kendrick Lamar – i (SNL Live)”, *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/158814764>

¹⁰⁹ David Mills, “An Off-Key Blues Aesthetic: Art Exhibit Loses Focus”, *Emerge* 1, no. 3 (1990): 66

“i” is based on a sample of the legendary track “That Lady” (1993) by The Isley Brothers.¹¹⁰ The song alternates between a i⁷ chord and a iv⁷ for the majority of the song, peppering the whole work throughout with bluesy pentatonic guitar lines. The Isley Brothers represent an important sense of black identity, as R&B holds its own place in the expression of blackness. Lamar’s verse begins with a theme that is central to “i”, that being a confrontation of the self:

I done been through a whole lot, trials tribulations but I know God
Satan wanna put me in a bowtie, pray that the holy water don’t go dry
As I look around me, so many motherfuckers wanna down me
But enemigo never drown me, in front of a dirty mirror they found me.¹¹¹

As Lamar recites these lines, the flashing lights of the stage illuminate his face, and the first aspect of the use of the body is brought to light: the blacked-out eyes created by black contact lenses. Various different blogs and reports, including an interview with RZA claim this was a tribute to late Wu Tang Clan member ODB (Ol’ Dirty Bastard) and current member Method Man.¹¹²¹¹³ Lamar’s gesture shows homage to one of the most famous crews in hip-hop culture. Wu-Tang were known for their menacing style of rap, yet Lamar uses this to reflect on their style as confrontational, and places within the frame of black empowerment.

¹¹⁰ The Isley Brothers, *Live!*, Elektra Records, 1993.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² “Was Kendrick Lamar’s SNL Performance a Tribute to Method Man & ODB? RZA Speaks (Video)”, *Ambrosia for Heads*, <https://ambrosiaforheads.com/2014/11/was-kendrick-lamars-snl-performance-a-tribute-to-method-man-odb-rza-speaks-video/>

¹¹³ Though with respect to the eyes, this is a hard conclusion to come to, as ODB had anything remotely close to blacking out his eyes, rather it is much more likely that this was a tribute to another Wu Tang member, Method Man, in particular the era of his first solo record, *Tical*, as this SNL performance was on the anniversary of the album’s release. Evidence for this is clear as during this era of his career Method Man wore what appeared to be a white contact in one eye, which can be seen in music videos for songs off *Tical* such as the single “Bring The Pain”

The effect of Wu Tang's "dead eye" is one of disturbing fright. As Method Man angrily stares down the camera, aggressively rapping bar after bar of confrontational lyrics the white eye gives off the effect that something is genuinely wrong with him, like there was some sort of experiment gone wrong, or as if he is possessed. Either way, the effect the dead eye has as Method Man stares down the camera is *madness*, as if this was a person that was unpredictable, confrontational, and, as Wu Tang would say "ain't nothin' to fuck wit".

But what role does the haircut play in this? For this performance, the MC had one side of his hair up in a natural afro, the other done in braids. This is a haircut Method Man was known to sport often during the *Tical* era – a similar cut can be seen in the music video for "Release Yo' Delf", where he has corn rows down the middle of his head, and a natural afro on either side – again giving off the idea of madness.¹¹⁴ Though the blacked out eyes were not a tribute to ODB, I would argue Lamar's hairstyle choice here is simultaneously a tribute to *Tical* era Method Man and to ODB. This is drawn from the date of the performance not only being the anniversary of *Tical* but also being what would have been ODB's birthday, and ODB also having a long standing reputation for eccentric haircuts like the one Lamar sported, and even more eccentric body language while performing. Again, this all comes back to the idea of madness, and performing as if possessed. ODB's wild performance antics, and wild style of flow was something signature to the MC, as he would often flail his arms around and constantly be jerking his body around wildly, giving

¹¹⁴ MethodManVEVO – "Method Man – Release Yo' Delf", YouTube video, 3:44, October 8th, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZlhbx3yGkQ>

off a sense that this man (similarly to Method's white eye) was wild, insane, and not to be confronted.

All this comes together to give several different effects to Lamar's image here. Firstly, it gives off the effect that Lamar himself is possessed as he imitates ODB's frantic body movements, eccentric hairstyle, and the addition of blacked out eyes (his take on Method's white eye). This idea of madness is also lyrically reflected when Lamar states "everybody lookin' at you crazy". Therefore Lamar uses the negative connotations of black hair used by Wu Tang Clan to come across as wild and aggressive to create a performance space where he too seems possessed. Lastly, it gives the song a deeper meaning.

"i" is a song about confronting one's self and affirming one's self. As Lamar gives off the image of confrontational, mad possession using a particular haircut, there is a sense of spirituality, and duality invoked. Another possible interpretation of the half-done haircut would be that it is a work in progress, and is a response to seeing the flaws within oneself, and being in the process of rectifying them, all the while being forgiving and loving of the negativity one sees in themselves. For example, the lyric "in front of a dirty mirror they found me" relates directly to confronting how one perceives one's self.¹¹⁵ Gottschild notes how integral "soul" is to black performance, and black bodies in performance, and notes that soul power in the context of hip-hop performance can be translated into a confident, angry energy.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Carl Paris notes the role that the spirit plays in black performance, and how integral ideas of spiritual possession, as if the performance was

¹¹⁵ *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/158814764>

¹¹⁶ Gottschild, 231.

coming from some deep spiritual plane.¹¹⁷ Combining these concepts with Lamar's Saturday Night Live performance, a unique interpretation of the MC's Wu Tang homage is formed.

Lamar dons this look of mad possession look to pay respect to Wu Tang, who were just about as menacing and intimidating of a hip-hop crew as you could get. Such a representation of angry, confrontational energy is consistent with Gottschild's idea of soul being represented in angry confidence— which Lamar is representing with a particular haircut. Furthermore, a core lyrical theme in “i” is self confidence, as Lamar states “everybody lack confidence, everybody lack confidence/ How many times my potential was anonymous? How many times the city makin’ me promises? So I promise this – I love myself”. Combining this with the haircut and the concept of “angry confidence” Lamar is also lyrically representing Gottschild's idea of soul that is integral to black performance. With the theme of “i” being a positive confrontation of one's self to give a sense of self empowerment, Lamar further directs the integral idea of “soul” towards negative caricatures of blackness, and of one's self, donning the haircut to signify confrontation and resistance. The result is an angry, possessed Lamar drawing on a deep sense of confrontational black performance spirit to feel empowered, reflecting ideas of black soul and spirit in performance, translating the fiery spirit of Wu Tang Clan into burning down negative caricatures of the black self. While drawing on this performance energy, he hammers home this idea with the chorus of the song:

(I love myself!)
Uh, when you look at me, tell me, what do you see?

¹¹⁷ Carl Paris, “Reading ‘Spirit’ and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson”, in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez I (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 99-114.

(I love myself!)
I'll put a bullet in the back of the back of the head of the police
(I love myself)
Illuminated by the hand of God, boy think they high
(I love myself)
One day at a time, sun gon' shine.¹¹⁸

This performance gives a clear example of black soul and spirit in performance, and by using hair as a symbol of confrontation, anger, and resistance, he directs his fire at a negative caricatures of blackness, ideas of submission and self hatred, and speaks of fighting back against racism, giving the promise that the “sun gon’ shine”, as he empowers himself. This expression of throwing off self hatred is a necessary addition to 21st century notions of blackness.

Such an idea of black self empowerment goes further in the music video for “i”, where Lamar has a version of the song and an interpretation quite different from the album version, and the *Saturday Night Live* performance, that being a change in the chorus lyrics to:

And I love myself
(The world is a ghetto with big guns and picket signs)
I love myself
(But it can do what it want whenever it want, I don't mind)
I love myself
(He said I gotta get up, life is more than suicide)
I love myself
(One day at a time, sun gon' shine)¹¹⁹

These lyrics speak more to the idea of rejecting self hatred imposed by living in ghetto poverty, though it lacks the confrontational soulful energy and imagery of the SNL

¹¹⁸ “Kendrick Lamar – i (SNL Live)”, *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/158814764>

¹¹⁹ KendrickLamarVEVO – “Kendrick Lamar – i (Official Video)”, YouTube video, 4:42, Nov. 4th 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aShfolR6w8>

performance. Instead, the music video (directed by Alexandre Moors and the director team Lamar often works with called The Little Homies) relies heavily on dance to represent Du Bois's idea of the Talented Tenth. The video shows a fight breaking out (something that happens on the album version as well), and the song begins. As the fight breaks out in what appears to be a club, Lamar leaves, and starts running through the streets of a neighbourhood in ghetto poverty. He runs past images of men being stopped by police, images of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide, and keeps running, reciting lyrics about how he promises to love himself. Yet as Lamar runs, slowly but surely, people living in the neighbourhood start running after him, dropping the liquor bottles, putting down a gun that was about to be used for suicide, even kids witnessing domestic violence escape out of the backyard of a house and run after Lamar.¹²⁰ This is a perfect example of Du Bois's idea of The Talented Tenth, a group of exceptional black leaders that would "lead the black struggle for freedom and equality", for Lamar's performance of empowerment in the face of ghetto poverty makes others follow suit, leading to a massive crowd running with him. Though Lamar does not represent the bourgeoisie eliteness associated with the Talented Tenth, but he still meets Du Bois's criteria of the responsibilities of black leaders.¹²¹

Dance enters in as part of the song's breakdown, prior to the final verse, where we can see many of the elements of hip-hop dance that DeFrantz discusses reflected here.

DeFrantz reflects on how hip-hop dance reflects "dynamism, power, and control".¹²² The

¹²⁰ KendrickLamarVEVO – "Kendrick Lamar – i (Official Video)", YouTube video, 4:42, Nov. 4th 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aShfolR6w8>

¹²¹ Shelby, 78-79.

¹²² DeFrantz, 229.

motions of the dancers in the video are consistent with DeFrantz's concept of a mode of black dance performance in hip hop, where the dancers: "tie a persistent weightiness to the pleasure of bringing it down to the ground. Hip-hop dancing gathers energy as it broadens its contours and revels in its own accomplishment as an aggressive, masculinist style that conditions its dancers to demonstrate their power."¹²³ In the context of the video's meaning, the representation of The Talented Tenth, here, dance is playing a vital role in demonstrating a performance of empowering others. DeFrantz states how black social dances offers a "feel good", cool aesthetic, where pleasure is one of the central aspects. The song's break down shows many smiling faces dancing, with a strong sense of power and energy, as if the barriers of ghetto poverty had been overcome through following the Talented Tenth (i.e. Lamar), yet there is a whimsical nature to it as well that is also consistent with DeFrantz's idea of the role pleasure plays in black dance.¹²⁴ We can conclude from all of this that the music video for "i" not only performs the role of the Talented Tenth in uplifting black people out of ghetto poverty, but also uses dance to represent black empowerment and pleasure derived from being in a space of empowerment.

Conversations about dance on *TPAB* cannot be without the album's two most popular tracks, "King Kunta", and "Alright", both using dance for a similar purpose of empowerment, yet the nuanced differences between the two come with how dance is used in combination with the songs themselves.

¹²³ DeFrantz, 230

¹²⁴ Break down here is defined as the moment in the song, typically after the second chorus where the song is "broken down" into its core elements of percussion, bass, and sparse chord voicings, removing all other elements.

“King Kunta” is a response to the album’s previous track, “For Free? (Interlude)”, which ends with a woman telling Lamar “I’m a get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up”, and “you ain’t no king!”.¹²⁵ Lamar’s first lyric in reply sets the tone for the song: “I got a bone to pick! I don’t want you monkey mouth muthafuckas sittin’ in my throne again!”.¹²⁶ This line suggests that Lamar was at some point considered a king, but now his throne has been taken. This justifies why he would be comparing himself to Kunta Kinte, hence the title “King Kunta”).

In Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* Kunta Kinte was a Mandinka warrior and son of a chief, who was captured and sold as a slave and brought to a plantation in Virginia.¹²⁷ Kunta continually rebelled till he was beaten into submission, accepted a slave name, and even had his foot cut off for trying to escape. In some ways, Alex Haley’s Kunta Kinte represents a figure of rebellion, constantly fighting back against antiblack racism. However, taking into account the fact that Kunta finally accepted slavery, he then becomes a persona of black nobility being enslaved by racism. Lamar reclaims this space of nobility throughout the song with the chorus:

Bitch, where were you when I was walkin’?
Now I run the game, got the whole world talkin’
King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him
Kunta, black man ain’t takin’ no losses
Bitch where were you when I was walkin’?
Now I run the game, got the whole world talking

¹²⁵ “Kendrick Lamar- For Free? (Interlude) Lyrics”, Genius Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-for-free-interlude-lyrics>

¹²⁶ KendrickLamarVEVO – “Kendrick Lamar – King Kunta”, YouTube video, 3:57, Apr. 1st 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRK7PVJFbS8>

¹²⁷ My thinking here is influenced by Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, New York: Random House, 1976.

King Kunta everybody wanna cut the legs off him

When you got the yams (what's the yams?)¹²⁸

Here, Lamar lyrically affirms the same concepts as DeFrantz's idea surrounding power. By comparing himself to Kunta, he removes any shame of slavery from the black experience, and represents a figure of nobility, where the shame belongs to antiblack racism.

Furthermore, he references having "the yams" (a symbol of power, drawing on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*), and later in a verse saying "you can smell 'em when I'm walking down the street", a nod to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where the protagonist smells yams and it takes him back to his roots, implying a sense of authenticity being represented by the yam.¹²⁹ This ties into material discussed in chapter two, where resistance to white supremacy is central to black authenticity. With Lamar representing a figure of noble black authenticity in this song, the use of dance reflects the similar ideology of power, where dancers display the "weightiness" described by DeFrantz, many body movements keep a low center of gravity, and are seen doing things as simple as bobbing their heads and moving their hands along with the beat. The result of this is a simplistic yet effective reflection of power, as the dancing comes off as the aggressive, masculinist style DeFrantz describes, a style reflecting power. This in particular is enhanced knowing that the dancing is happening in, for the most part, groups. As these groups move together, typically with Lamar as the focal point, it further accentuates the effect of masculinist power.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ "Kendrick Lamar- King Kunta Lyrics, Genius Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-king-kunta-lyrics>. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (London: Penguin Press, 1994). Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (Random House: New York, 1952)

Dance and imagery reflecting power is also seen in the video for “Alright”.¹³⁰ The video begins with dark imagery of violence: glass being smashed, police throwing young men to the ground, buildings being burned, people fighting and screaming, all while money is being thrown around. These images, along with a monologue performed by Lamar give off a feeling of terror to begin the video. The images of terror end showing Lamar and several others in a car, which, as the camera zooms out, is revealed to be carried by police officers. The image of four young black men being carried by four white police officers, like servants carrying a palanquin for royalty, evokes a feeling of power that is central to hip-hop, this time a very clear image of black power over a representation of institutional authority in the form of police officers. Similar imagery is peppered throughout the video, such as Lamar driving rapidly around a police car, throwing money in the air, and kids dancing on top of a police car.¹³¹ DeFrantz notes the role that hip-hop dance plays in expression for youth:

For young people discovering an awareness of their own physical, emotional, and desirous capacities, hip-hop dances combine the need to explore along each of these axes to a demonstration of strength and control bound up with unprecedented pleasure – a pleasure not to be found in other aspects of daily life. Hip-hop dances answer a need for creative release that allows aesthetic contemplation to young people who could then recognize each other’s artistry in process.¹³²

Throughout the video, the aspect of pleasure is clear, as Lamar flies around Compton with a huge smile on his face, crowds of youth smiling and waving their hands to the music, and kids running and riding bikes while smiling and laughing, all the while cash is

¹³⁰ Video directed by Colin Tilley, 2015.

¹³¹ KendrickLamarVEVO – “Kendrick Lamar – Alright”, YouTube video, 6:55, June 30th 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY

¹³² DeFrantz, 230.

being thrown around. There is a clear sense of joy throughout the video, true to it's message of "we gon' be alright".¹³³ There is much more intricate dance interspersed throughout the video as well that is important for analysis. These moments display youth performing highly complicated, and in some cases nearly impossible looking kinesthetic movements. Sometimes these moves resemble ballet, sometimes classic breakdancing, and sometimes popping and locking. Scholars such as Katrina Hazzard-Donald note the physical complexity of popping and locking's various different jerking and freezing body movements.¹³⁴ These movements are consistent with DeFrantz's idea of how hip-hop dance allows a creative release, and allows exploration of both the physical and emotional through dance, as each dancer displays "strength and control bound up with unprecedented pleasure". Many of these dances in the music video are done in front of a boombox, with a wall of boomboxes in the background. The use of dance and the image of the boombox are classic hip-hop imagery, as Michael Holman notes how boomboxes would be brought into parks on weekends for breakdancing parties.¹³⁵

The use of the complex kinesthetic movements used to express and explore creativity both physically and emotionally in combination with classic hip-hop imagery, and images of power in the face of institutional authority, hammer home the message of empowerment. Katrina Hazzard-Donald analyzes how dance in hip-hop culture is used as a means of empowerment, by making black youth feel a sense of belonging in dance circles, to fight the alienation of a racist society.¹³⁶ A very clear example of this idea of empowerment can

¹³³ Kendrick Lamar VEVO – "Kendrick Lamar – Alright", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY

¹³⁴ Katrina Hazzard-Donald, "Dance in Hip-Hop Culture", in *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 509

¹³⁵ Michael Holman, "Breaking: The History", in *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 31

¹³⁶ Hazzard-Donald, "Dance in Hip-Hop Culture", 512

be seen at one point in Lamar's video when a young black man is seen popping and locking, and nodding his head, wearing a shirt that reads "100% real negus", a term that also is seen in the album version of "i" where negus is a royal title in Ethiopian language of Ge'ez.¹³⁷ Hazzard-Donald interprets head nodding in hip-hop dance as "the vision of an inside observer who is simultaneously on the outside" as he if is observing a "secretly observed universal truth".¹³⁸ This particular moment in the video is an example of the role of hip-hop dance in empowering black youth, turning the alienation of racism into a social practice with its own secret code of movements and gestures, making these youth feel like kings (i.e. "negus") in the face of institutional power and a racist society.

The usage of dance in Lamar's video's and *Saturday Night Live* performance reflects empowerment, belonging, and a confrontation of racism. At 2016 *Grammy Awards* Lamar furthered these ideas with dance, delivering what was perhaps his most powerful performance to date.

The first sonic event the listener hears when the performance begins is the eerie horn section repeating a melodic pattern loosely in the realms of Bb minor, though there is so much chromaticism (for example the ascending turnaround lick, a straight chromatic scale). The horns appear to be arranged in an interesting manifestation of a technique used in jazz improvisation, known as the use of "target notes". When improvising, a soloist would add chromaticism, or extraneous choices of harmony (i.e. "planing") overtop of chord changes as a means of leading towards a chord tone, thereby resolving the line, or resolving to the myriad extensions in jazz harmony to create dissonance or add colour.

¹³⁷ KendrickLamarVEVO – "Kendrick Lamar – Alright", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY

¹³⁸ Hazzard-Donald, "Dance in Hip-Hop Culture", 513

Lamar's horn section opens the performance presenting this idea, only with one slight edit, the line seems to always be drawing the listening towards a target note, but then quickly twisting somewhere else, then ending on a chromatic line, before repeating the passage (even when repeating, there still doesn't seem to be a clean sense of resolve). This creates a sombre timbre, hammered home by the sound of Lamar and his crew walking on stage, the tinny sound of chains clanking on the ground as the crew sets the stage for the performance. Sonically, he is presenting a musical depiction of *suffering* through the spinning, minor tonality with target note ideas with missing target notes, and a sound that listeners of any background will associate with enslavement and oppression – the sound of prison chains. This is matched by the performative element, as the crew walks somberly on stage, limping in chains. It is integral here that the aura of menace is heightened by the performative elements of the crew limping and wearing chains and prison uniforms. Lamar then delves into the first verse of “The Blacker The Berry”.

In the context of the *Grammys*, this song choice is an interesting one, as it definitely was not one of the hits that got its fair share of radio play. As the verse progresses, he then brings up stereotypes about the black body:

Came from the bottom of mankind
My hair is nappy, you know that it's big, my nose is rounded wide
You hate me don't you, your plan is to terminate my culture
You know you're evil, I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey
You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ “Kendrick Lamar 2016 Grammy Performance”, Streamable, <https://streamable.com/2mos>

Unpacking these lyrics, he brings in the phenotypic qualities which we *socially* have come to denote as black, like nappy hair, facial features such as a rounded nose, and even touches on the stereotype of Black men having large penises, with the line “you know that its big” (the original, uncensored line was “my dick is big”). Similarly to using the Wu Tang haircut as an act of angry defiance, Lamar brings up ideas of the black body as a means of confrontation and self empowerment, stating “I want you to recognize that I’m a proud monkey”.¹⁴⁰

Steve Waksman’s “Black Sound, Black Body: The Electric Guitar and the Meaning of Blackness”, brings up the idea of the black aesthetic, and how it relates to Black art and music, in a similar fashion to the Black Power Movement, as “your ethics and your aesthetics are one”.¹⁴¹ Waksman quotes jazz critic Ron Wellburn in his discussion on Black music, even going so far as to bring up specific points that “reflect the true meaning of Blackness: orality, physicality, emotionalism, spirituality, improvisation as a style of creativity that was derived not from rational calculation but from immediate lived experience.”¹⁴² With this musical representation of the idea of blackness, we can see Lamar’s performance as drawing on the oral traditions of a West-Coast MC where the emotionally charged nature of this performative space revolves around the image of black bodies in chains.

Lamar enters the stage with his crew, and wraps his chains around the mic stand. As Lamar begins his fiery flow, the band punctuates random power chord shots, that appear to have no harmonic relationship (though seeming to be loosely within the realms of Bb minor), he builds up towards the chorus, stating “as we proceed, to give you what you need/ trap our bodies can’t trap our minds”, casting the chains off defiantly, before entering into the chorus of the

¹⁴⁰ “Kendrick Lamar 2016 Grammy Performance”, Streamable, <https://streamable.com/2mos>

¹⁴¹ Steve Waksman, “Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the Electric Guitar, and the Meaning of Blackness, *Popular Music and Society* 23, no. 1 (March 1999): 81

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

song. The meaning of such a physical gesture is obvious – the idea of casting off oppression, inequality, and, as reflected in the idea of the Black Aesthetic Movement – “the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world”.¹⁴³ The symbolic image of this is the black body in a prison uniform, bound in chains, and crew members throwing the uniforms to the ground, and along with Lamar. However, this is by no means a novel idea, rather this echoes Michael Jackson’s music video for “They Don’t Care About Us” (2009), which also speaks out against the injustices suffered by humanity, by portraying images of war, murder, and police brutality. Lamar’s nod to the king of pop brings up the idea of authenticity, something which Waksman states as integral to the performance of blackness – yet his performance idea is clearly not original. Rather, this performative element helps to attach Lamar to a lineage of black artists that spoke up against similar issues, using the symbol of casting away chains from the black body.

Before we delve into this analysis of “Alright”, the next song Lamar does in the medley, it is important to look at the transition between the two songs. Lamar stumbles away from center stage as pounding djembe rhythms begin. The djembes hold a fairly constant, repetitive beat, whilst the improvisatory musical elements occur over top of it. The pounding of the djembes creates a sound closely associated with the African style, again musically referencing the idea of blackness, but this time through his choice of instrumentation. Over top of this, the alto sax wails high pitched lines with a highly improvisatory feel (to think these lines were composed seems quite unlikely due to the sporadic nature of the horn parts). Displaced, almost drunkenly to accompany Lamar’s stumbling, is the hook for “Alright”, entering in over top of the combination of two musical black worlds (the African djembe and the jazz aura of the saxophone), stating

¹⁴³ Ibid.

(and repetitively so) “we gon’ be alright”, and Lamar cries out with the first lyric of the song “uh and when I wake up, I recognize you lookin’ at me for the pay cut”. The Lamar’s physical act of stumbling coincides with the different auras of the djembe and the saxophone, as if he is lost between two black performance worlds, one of the African, one of the African-American.

When Lamar dives into the pre-chorus and chorus of the song, describing the pain endured by Black America (“we’ve been hurt, been down before/ when our pride was low, lookin’ at the world like where do we go?”), and the violent hate crimes committed (“they wanna kill us dead at the preacher’s door”, note that this is a revision of a line, where the original album version states “we hate po-po, when they kill us dead in the streets for sure”). Lamar’s flow gets choppy and more syncopated as he enters into the song’s chorus, proudly stating, once again, “we gon’ be alright!” This song is speaking to, and for Black America, stating that such hateful racist attitudes towards their race are not novel to them as a group, and through all of it, they’ll be alright. As the chorus of the song hits, Lamar is surrounded by dancers both wearing the prison uniforms, and traditional dress for African dance. The choreographed dance moves represent a sense of joyous freedom accomplished by many of the dance moves involving a grand leaps into the air the chorus of “we gon’ be alright” rings out. Throughout the majority of the dance however, we see the type of movements which DeFrantz notes as characteristic of hip-hop dance and its representation of power, staying low to the ground, and aggressive rhythmic movements. Kara Mack, the dance choreographer for the African dance portion of the show, stated how important it was for African dance to be presented in the mainstream light of the *Grammy Awards* alongside the hip-hop based work by renowned dance choreographer Fatima. The gesture of combining this performative element with the melting pot of sounds and artistic ideas in Lamar’s music is that yet another representation of blackness is added to the script of

identity, and therefore pushing it to become more non-limiting to include notions of blackness outside of what is denoted as African-American. Mack states:

during the chorus when Kendrick says, “We gon be Alright...”, I used one of the Afro-Cuban steps for Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. So when I broke down the meaning of the movement and the ‘fire’ they were suppose to bring, everyone took it to the next level. When I told the ladies that we were doing traditional Lamba steps, that are in dedication to the oral historian or ‘griot,’ when we circle Kendrick and because he is Black peoples’ griot¹⁴⁴

Mack’s use of Afro-Cuban dance adds further depth to the hip-hop portions of the performance, and therefore helps to tie the place and meaning of Lamar’s hip-hop performance into the context of black artistic traditions designed to empower and honor black storytelling.

Musically, “Alright” doesn’t deviate from two chords for the entire song, alternating between a G#add9 and a Gadd9. This alternation between two chords with a chromatic relationship is drawn from the modal jazz tradition, with songs such as “So What” by Miles Davis (1954), or “Impressions” by John Coltrane (1963), both of which featuring alternating between two chords over a 32 bar AABA form. The idea of authenticity in this context is worthy of note, as in essence, Lamar is drawing from the jazz tradition, and flipping it around to empower Black America, while also, due to the conservative nature of the *Grammys*, telling them no matter what they do, Black America will persevere. Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” introduces the concept of aura with respect to the reproduction of art, stating that “the unique value of ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use”.¹⁴⁵ If we are viewing modal jazz as the musical “location of its

¹⁴⁴ “Kendrick Lamar’s Choreographer talks Grammy Success”, 7th & Lotus, <https://7thandlotus.com/2016/02/kendrick-lamars-choreographer-talks-grammy-success/>

¹⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, In *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 6.

original view”, i.e. the origin of alternations between chords with a chromatic relationship within the Black musical tradition; according to Benjamin, the harmonic progress (or, the “changes” to use a jazz term) of “Alright” is a destruction of the aura of the modal jazz canon, by removing it into a different, modern context.

However, what separates “Alright” from its famous jazz counterparts is that in both “So What” and “Impressions”, the song starts on the i-chord, and then moves *up* to the flat ii-chord, as opposed to “Alright” which begins on the flat ii and moves downward. Therefore the concept of reproduction here, firstly is not necessarily even reproduction – but rather *recontextualizing*, as though it is the same musical concept, it is by no means a direct sample, therefore not a reproduction, nor destruction of aura in any stretch of the imagination – rather Lamar is drawing on an artistic idea to not only help to musically represent the concept of blackness. From the listener’s point of view, they would hear Lamar (or rather, his live band’s) use of modal jazz harmony, and though maybe some trained listeners may have a light bulb go off in their mind’s as it reminds them of Coltrane’s wailing tenor lines, but what most likely would happen is a feeling of constant tension and release for the listener. This musically helps juxtapose the statement (“we gon’ be alright”) that Lamar is making at such a conservative awards show, musically showing the unsteadiness of Black America due to centuries of racist treatment, where the phrase begins on the tension heavy flat ii chord, then the second repeat of the phrase, resolving to the i-chord, almost as if he is asking a question and answering it with the same phrase (“we gon’ be alright?” as an unsure question, before resolving to the i-chord and musically affirming yes – “we gon’ be alright!”).

Lamar finishes off his performance with an (at the time) unreleased verse. The bulk of this lyrical content can be found on “untitled 05” which would be released on his album *Untitled*

Unmastered, a record which was made up of songs that were outtakes from *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

For the first time in the performance, Lamar is isolated on stage. Again, he begins, stumbling to the mic, and begins the verse, but adding a few new bars of lyrics:

“It’s been a week already, got me weak already
Got me at peak, possibility of what could be
Situation is heavy, I’ve got to prove
On February 26th, I lost my life too
It’s like I’m here in a dark dream
Nightmare, hearing screams recorded
Say that it sounds distorted, but they know who it was
That was me yelling for help when he drowned in his blood
Why didn’t he defend himself, why couldn’t he throw a punch?
And for our community, do you know what this does?
Add to a trail of hatred, 2012 was taped for the world to see,
Send us back another 400 years, this is modern day slavery”¹⁴⁶

These lyrics describe the murder of Trayvon Martin, a black 17 year old boy who was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a member of a local neighbourhood watch program, who was later acquitted of his murder. Many credit this killing and acquittal as the straw that broke the camel’s back that led to the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁴⁷ Lamar also brings up the idea of “modern day slavery” comparing such racially motivated murders to slavery, a means of control, mistreatment, violence, and unjustness coming from the idea of *racism*.

The song proceeds into what Lamar presents as what appears to be violent resistance to end such violent injustices:

“The reason why I’m by your house
You threw your briefcase all on the couch
I plan on creeping through your damn door and blowing out
Every piece of your brain
'Til your son jumps into your arms
Cut off the engine then sped off in a Wraith”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ “Kendrick Lamar 2016 Grammy Performance”, Streamable, <https://streamable.com/2mos>

¹⁴⁷ Darren Simon, “Trayvon Martin’s Death Sparked a Movement That Lives On Five Years Later”, CNN News, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/26/us/trayvon-martin-death-anniversary/index.html>, accessed August 1, 2019

¹⁴⁸ “Kendrick Lamar 2016 Grammy Performance”, Streamable, <https://streamable.com/2mos>

Lamar's performance of resistance now also turns violent, accentuated by flashing, frantic lighting to bring the performance to its climax. Harmonically, the song consists of three chords, Emaj7#11 (where the melody note in the voice alternates between the maj7 and the #11), Emin7, and Cmaj7, while adding in numerous ii-V jazz passing chords, and tritone substitutions, giving the harmonic a much more complex rich sound, yet still quite mellow. Once Lamar brings up the idea of fighting violence with violence, the song dynamically takes off. His flow becomes much more staccato, abrasive, and angry, and though the chord progression itself has not changed, it builds into a frenzy, layering drums, wailing sax and electric guitar over top of the keys, while Lamar stares down the camera, almost as if possessed and delivers fiery bars, and introducing "Hiiiipower", the name of his first single, which vividly describes killing police officers. The climatic buildup, along with the simple chords lending themselves to myriad fills and other added extraneous complexity building up to an over the top performance ending. What we can glean from this is that Lamar is presenting a musical style often praised as high art within Black culture (i.e. jazz) but recontextualizing it in the context of hip-hop music to hammer home two emotions at the end of the performance: anger, and resistance. The most powerful image of the performance comes up at the end, as the stage blacks out, and a silhouette of Africa is shown in the background with "Compton" written across it, while Lamar's lone figure stands in front. Contrasting this image with the social dancing, powerful visuals of casting off the chains, and intricate choreographed dance moves, the result is a message of Lamar trying to represent a transnational sense of blackness. Here, the images of empowering dance and music of resistance are all represented in a single image to hammer home the meaning of the performance, to add a sense of empowerment to black identity, and to show black resistance to institutional oppression.

These notions of blackness displayed through the body, and the use of dance, in combination with the musical rhetoric of jazz leads to important representations of resistance, throwing off self hatred, and empowerment. By having Lamar's *TPAB* express these notions, it creates necessary representations of blackness in the 21st century, and helps to push artistic discussions of race and economic marginalization into a form reflecting a modern dynamic.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have held the position that *TPAB* is a seminal album due to its representations of social narratives through music and performance by constructing musical personae using jazz language. These representations are essential in discussions of race, poverty, and marginalization in the 21st century.

In chapter 2, I examined the argument for the dangers of racial identity. I rejected this argument, and state that racial identities can exist in ways that are not dangerous, and in ways that are beneficial to society. Lastly, I argued the importance of the role that music plays in the expression of racial identity, and how music can help shed light on marginalized social narratives. We can also tangibly see the need for discussions of race and poverty in the current political climate, with growing economic inequality and having, according to Paul Taylor, having “social goods distributed along racial lines”.¹⁴⁹

In my third chapter I argued for how *TPAB* accomplishes this by examining songs such as “Complexion (A Zulu Love)”, and “The Blacker The Berry”, among several others, and how the use of jazz language elevates these narratives. An important point that I would like to make here is what made *TPAB* unique in the debate surrounding racial identity, black pride, poverty, and music with respect to the musical language reflecting on modern jazz. Where artists such as A Tribe Called Quest and Common drew on a sense of jazz by sampling upright bass, jazz piano lines, etc., Lamar’s use of jazz speaks to ideas of modern jazz, such using electric tones, fusing

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, 86.

jazz harmony with R&B and soul, but departing with ideas associated with the swing traditions and concepts such as jazz as “America’s classical music”.¹⁵⁰

Though the ending of “The Blacker The Berry” presents a point of view which I reject, that being equating the hate crimes such as the murder of Trayvon Martin with gang violence, the basis of the song is an expression of black pride. With this in mind, the underlying meaning to this ending is a cry for black solidarity, as opposed to trying to equate two separate situations with separate mechanisms. This use of jazz, pioneered by Miles Davis in the 1960s with albums such as *Bitches Brew* and now popularized by artists like Thundercat and Robert Glasper, is integral in creating the multiplicity of different sounds to construct different personae reflecting on non-limiting forms of black identity.

The use of jazz language according to Justin A. Williams also reflects on a sense of high art.¹⁵¹ This results in a musical language that elevates marginalized narratives to the forefront of popular culture, and reaffirms the necessary pride, dignity, and humanity of marginalized narratives by constructing artistic depictions of these narratives with a black musical tradition that has become synonymous with high class and respectability. Secondly, the discussion of the issues being discussed reflected the political debate around race in a modern sense as well by bringing up figures such as Barack Obama and Trayvon Martin. Lamar combines these musical and social discussions by bringing up various different personae that add further depth to the discussion of race, and to express further elements of black identity. These include the field negro versus the house negro, the role of the black elite, and an aggressive persona of nihilism formed through antiblack racism.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Williams, “The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music”.

In chapter 4 I turned my focus to the role of televised performances, music videos, dance, and the black body in representing social narratives. This discussion involves how Lamar uses performative elements of dance and the body to reflect a particular political message, as in the SNL performance, or the use of dance in “i”, and the political framework of Lamar’s *Grammy* performance. I include these artistic representations as part of the brilliance of *TPAB* was not just musical, the use of the black body as a tool to deliver a particular message, and the use of dance to, similarly to the use of jazz rhetoric, reaffirms the dignity of those marginalized, and creates a space of power.

Hip-hop has always been expressing the “voices from the margins”, and this is something that is also true for many forms of African-American music.¹⁵² But hip-hop stood apart due to, as DeFrantz says, “pleasure and power”.¹⁵³ This music spoke of empowerment and pride even in the midst of being dehumanized and marginalized. It expresses stories that helped empower those in poverty, and those living under the stigma of marginalization. But to carry this dialogue, and the traditions of having art express social narratives, the 21st century dynamic of the experience of poverty and modern black identity required an album that would speak to these narratives. Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly* presents this necessary step in music and furthermore, draws on traditions of black music such as jazz, and the use of the black body to create a space of power.

In the lineage of hip-hop and rap, and in the greater lineage of African-American music there are numerous artists and albums that are integral to artistic discussions and representations of political and cultural phenomena as part of social narratives, and *TPAB* is necessary in

¹⁵² Rose, 2.

¹⁵³ DeFrantz, 229

propelling these artistic discussions, representations and social narratives into their modern iterations. But of course, there is always more work to be done. Where *TPAB* helped propel this work into its modern iteration, works such as Chance the Rapper's *Coloring Book* used similar musical rhetoric to discuss a responsibility which artists have to their communities, and SZA's *Ctrl* discussing black female identity – i.e. carrying on the necessary dialogue of social narratives. What we should then hope for the future of hip-hop and rap is to continue to be a medium for the expression of black identity and the experience of poverty, as we can see how *TPAB* has had an affect on social movements, and has opened up the doors for musical dialogue on 21st century social narratives. This artistic work is necessary in the empowerment of marginalized voices throughout race relations, economic inequality, and the political climate of the 21st century. It is albums such as *To Pimp a Butterfly* and artists like Kendrick Lamar whose artistic work is imperative to this empowerment and the reaffirmation of the humanity and dignity of the marginalized in the midst of systems of dominance. It is this music that makes an important stance on race and poverty in the 21st century to let the world know, that through all this, no matter what - we gon' be alright.

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