


**Molding of Identity and Community Responsibility in  
Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly***

Senior Paper

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Kendrick Lamar's third studio album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, works as a continuation of black poetic literary traditions and its uses to document the Black American experience. *To Pimp a Butterfly*, from now on referenced as *TPAB*, has pushed Lamar's status as a leading voice in the new generation of hip hop that rose in the early to mid-2010s. Lamar continues the uses of Black artistic expression to display the Black American predicament to wider audiences through the hip hop genre. Lamar does this by displaying his personal experiences, hardships, and growth as his struggles echo the larger condition of Black American experience through his own personal narrative.

Lamar follows the lead of artists like Amiri Baraka and The Last Poets whose countercultural poetry stirred controversy and societal reevaluation in the 1960s. Works like the Black Arts Movement's founder, Amiri Baraka's "Black Art", reevaluates poetry's uses in society and mirrors Lamar's "Alright", a track that rebels against police brutality and the demonization of Black men in 21st century American society and has now been used in Black Lives Matter protests. Baraka's "A Poem for Black Hearts" where he calls for the resilience of Blacks against outside oppressors of the mind and body can be connected to Lamar's "I", where he calls for his audience to have solidarity in self in order to withstand outside pressures that wish to invade their sense of identity. Hip hop's arrival in the music scene in the mid-1970s was created from the ingenuity of black youth, who wished to express themselves in a new manner that has now exploded into a globally recognized art form. However, the thoughts expressed by emerging hip hop artists, who are and were predominantly Black, relate to past issues that continue to be relevant to the Black community as we see in The Last Poets' 1970 performance poem, "When the Revolution Comes" or Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry".

Lamar's documentation of Black experience comes in the form of hip-hop music, a tool he uses and scholars recognize as a way to communicate the Black condition, frustration, and cultural power since the mid-1970s. Though *To Pimp a Butterfly* is a recent album, released in 2015, it has stimulated new ideas on the use of hip hop to illustrate experience and the ever expanding malleability of the genre. Rachel S. Vandagriff, a literary critic whose "Talking about a Revolution" argues that hip hop was "forged as [a] means to talk about, critique, and analyze the realities of American life as lived by African Americans" (337). Lamar's explication of these Black realities comes through his experiences in Compton such as, poverty, ostracization of its citizens, as well as the survivalist mentalities that occur among the Black community due to this. Lamar follows this pattern in the hip hop genre as *TPAB*'s foundation is built on his understanding of his place in the world and how hip hop is utilized as his means to articulate and face harsh realities that directly affect the creation of his art. *To Pimp a Butterfly* works as not only a hip-hop piece but utilizes the most basic makeup of the genre, poetry, to convey a continual process of self-discovery that is added upon throughout every track. This is done through epiphanic moments that mark the growing understanding of Lamar's own identity and his own lack of agency's connection to the impoverished, chaotic state that his home community of Compton lives in.

While Vandagriff makes claims of the validity of hip hop's documentation of Black life, Gladney states that hip hop has "manifested itself in a stream of poets that have served as clarifiers of the 'ultimate realities' that Black people face" in the "The Black Arts Movement and Hip Hop" as exemplified by Lamar's articulation of Compton life (299). Furthermore, Lamar's understanding of the status of the people he represents in his music as compared to the larger

American narrative that they are often excluded from an idea resonant in the work of countercultural poets of the 1960s.

Gladney contributes to the scholarly discussion by elaborating on hip-hop's wider role in documenting societal issues and experiences. Though Gladney recognizes the "link between social frustration and its influence on literature", he does not determine it as being confined to "negative, anti-social manners many strive to deal effectively with reality through art. They do not seek simply to draw pictures of the urban blight, but seek instead to stimulate thought and discussion concerning the issues raised in music" (*The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop* 292). An idea that Lamar reflects in the last track "Mortal Man", which leaves audiences with no concrete resolution on the issues that he has explicated throughout the album, but allows audiences to contemplate their contribution and ability to alleviate the issues that have shaped Lamar's idea of community responsibility in *TPAB*. Gladney's statement parallels the aim of Lamar in *TPAB* as it is not just a static piece for auditory consumption, but Lamar wants to work in the lives of his audiences and spark conversation that leads to resolve, continuing the intent of 1960s Black countercultural poets in the 21st century.

Jeff Chang in *Can't Stop Won't Stop* that aspects of rap were birthed out of "the ashes and ruins of the sixties" (307). Here, Chang is referencing the loss of prolific black figures and political setbacks in civil rights. While Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett in "Hip-Hop and the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form", attribute the Black anger of the 1960s resulted in hip hop being "the first African- American musical form to be created in the post-civil rights era" as the Black community was left to make sense of the ruins Jeff Chang was referencing above (182). The continuance of Black poets using literary art to detail Black American life is very much prevalent in Lamar's work as his personal narrative is linked to the bigger cultural history

of Black folks in America. Components like exclusion and depression begin Lamar's journey to find identity. However, he soon finds that this journey is not so clear and becomes more complex throughout every track, the deeper Lamar digs through issues like the cause of his depression, survivor's guilt, and hopelessly strives to achieve the redemption he believes will rid him of it. As well as his discoveries of diaspora's contribution to his identity issues and the racial neglect and disparity that confine his community of Compton to means of survival that keep them in their oppressed physical and psychological state.

### ***I. Survivor's Guilt and Redemption***

Lamar fights with survivor's guilt and struggles to find (*a way to make*) amends (*for*) his past shortcomings throughout *TPAB*. The death of a close friend, that he even calls his brother, is a huge influence in *TPAB* and helps set the groundwork for his cleansing process in the album. Compton, California has become notorious for being the stomping ground of West Coast "Gangsta rap" and is also considered a dangerous area, including gang activity. According to Lamar's statements in his work outside, opportunity for the citizens of Compton are limited and this idleness has resulted in a dangerous, poverty stricken environment. Lamar finds himself becoming a victim of the surrounding violence after a fight that ended with him being beaten and escalated to Lamar's close friend, Dave, being shot in an effort to protect Lamar.

These events are defining for Lamar's character within *TPAB* because it helps to create an inescapable problem for Lamar that cannot be avoided by the money he has acquired or the fame he has reached. Though he has been able to become a world renowned artist, things like protecting his loved ones are still outside his reach. These details help to define Lamar's search for the fulfillment he is striving for in *TPAB*. Something that he thought could be found in the material items he now possesses and helps bring to light the idea of what happiness is, where it it

be found, and how one achieves it. But first he must confront his survivor's guilt with rather than hide from it under materialistic items and status. He does this in the sixth track of *TPAB*, "U".

"U" marks the lowest point of Lamar's depression in the album. The song's setting is in a secluded hotel room as the speaker locks himself off from the rest of the world and drowns his sorrows in alcohol while an internal voice of self-sabotage takes over. Lamar utilizes different voices in order to capture the internal struggle and chaos happening within the speaker. One voice has a tone of blame and harsh judgement at Lamar's past choices and the use of his vocal power within lines such as:

What can I blame you for? [...] I can name several  
Situations, I'll start with your little sister bakin'  
A baby inside, just a teenager, where your patience  
Where was your antennas?  
Where was the influence you speak of?  
You preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her  
I fuckin' tell you, you fuckin' failure- you ain't no leader  
I never liked you, forever despise you- I don't need you!  
The world don't need you, don't let them deceive you (Lamar, *U*, line 11-20)

The first voices sets the tone of guilt for the song while also allowing listener's insight into the cause of the speaker's degraded psyche. These lines give detail on the responsibility that Lamar feels for those around him and the "blame" Lamar feels for the circumstances of his loved ones. In this quote, the pregnancy of his young sister is the center of his shame. Lamar feels that he could have stopped this from happening if his attention would have been in the right places, not absorbed in the perks of fame. In the final three lines of the above quote the full weight of guilt

and shame has dissolved Lamar's idea of his own purpose as the voice invalidates his vocal power and deems it to be misused by Lamar.

At the turn of the song another voice enters that is garbled, disjointed and displays the alcoholic, depressed state of the speaker well, stating that the speaker is:

[...] no brother, you ain't no disciple

You ain't no friend

A friend never leave for Compton for profit

Or leave his best friend, little brother

You promised you'd watch him before they shot him (Lamar, *U*, line 42-46)

Internal versus external conflict is used by Lamar as the speaker mourns over his shortcomings and views his newfound fame as being in opposition to his duty as a "friend" and "brother" to those in Compton (*U* 45). The internal chaos of the speaker is preying on the guilt of Lamar as he struggles to maintain the validity of him leaving Compton. This moment in the album pushes the speaker to face issues that he has been suppressing; the internal voice is aware of this and jabs at the speaker more stating that "I know depression is restin' on your heart" and "you shook as soon as you knew [that] confinement was needed" (*U* line 56/62). These lines are another hint at the speaker's inability and apprehension about facing the true source of his problem. The depressed state of the speaker paired with overwhelming shame leaves the speaker to contemplate thoughts of suicide in his seclusion. The reader gathers insight into how much these failures have impacted Lamar's psyche through the second voice's taunting him stating that if he "told [Lamar's] secrets/the world'll know money can't stop a suicidal weakness" (*U* line 71-72).

The survivor's guilt that has pushed Lamar to this point is not only represented in "U" but also in "Institutionalized", where Lamar tries to expose those from Compton to the successes he

has achieved and bring them into a different environment than what they are accustomed to. Lamar's intentions are to take his friends out of the violence and criminal activity that their hometown exposes them to and appease his own guilt about leaving behind his comrades. Lamar finds that it is easier to change the environment of his comrades than to change the man himself. "Institutionalized" is a reflection on how one can be assimilated into a certain type of mentality, due to their upbringing in a particular environment, and not be able to leave behind their old practices and behaviors when afforded the opportunities of a new situation. For example, the statement "I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it/Institutionalized, I keep runnin' back for a visit" (*Institutionalized* line 3-4) represents this idea. The "ghetto" here is not only represented by the type of environment Lamar's friends are in but also the mindset of those who have become accustomed to the ghetto (*Institutionalized* line 3). This environment and mindset becomes learned behavior and a place of comfortableness for those Lamar is describing. The words "runnin' back for a visit" suggest that the ghetto has become hard to break from due to how accustomed its inhabitants have become to this harmful environment and behavior (*Institutionalized* line 4).

Lamar retells the dialogue between himself and a friend, who has been caught attempting to steal from Lamar's hip hop colleagues, and tries to defend his behavior in the second verse, "Now Kendrick, [I] know they're your co-workers/ But it's [going to] take a lot for this pistol [to] go cold turkey" (*Institutionalized* line 42-43). The metaphor of the pistol being unable to go cold turkey represents the old dangerous habits of Lamar's friends and how they are unable to be abandoned so easy. The wealth that Lamar's friends are now surrounded by has not only been unreachable for them but the inability to obtain it has been a hindrance for their ability to make a better life for themselves making its presence around them hard to ignore. Wealth is



described as being seen to give a person certain advantages within this text especially by the friend accused of plotting theft. He even takes a Robin Hood stance on his behavior by saying to Lamar, “Remember steal from the rich and givin’ it back to the poor”, reminding Lamar of his own humble beginnings that are not so different than the friends he is chastising (*Institutionalized* line 46) .

In “Institutionalized” a ‘hood mentality’ is described that works against those that embrace it keeping them trapped in a mindset that is self-sabotaging. This style of living is also described in another track, “Hood Politics”, which helps to describe the framework of this mentality. Both of these tracks show a deeper level and process to Lamar’s understanding of the conditions that have shaped the people of Compton and the consequences of poverty.

“Institutionalized” is important in the totality of *TPAB* as it delves into the widening complexity on the issue of helping the people in Compton from their environmental circumstances while also allowing Lamar to realize that the resolve of these issues is a longer, more complex process.

“Institutionalized” is also important in comparison with “U” as it shows Lamar’s effort to redeem himself from the failures that left him in such a degraded state as in “U”.

## ***II. Diaspora and Identity Issues***

Issues of identity and a desire to find purpose is conveyed to readers throughout *TPAB*. Lamar’s depressive state leads him to contemplate his role in helping Blacks escape systems of materialism, violence, and poverty after the guilt of losing two of his friends. Materialism is its own pervasive entity within hip hop music and the Black community. Hip hop music often includes flaunting status through wealth and material items which is not representative of the vast majority of its listeners. This is an issue that Lamar recognizes and wrestles with as he is a now a multi-million dollar artist, who came from a poverty stricken neighborhood and now has

to make sense of this abrupt change and clash of two separate realities. The clash between his newfound financial status and his attachment to those who cannot achieve this wealth, leads Lamar to explicate complications with identity and reevaluate his own purpose as a voice to his community.

In “How Much a Dollar Cost” Lamar’s already injured psyche is overcome by greed and vows to never return back to the poverty from which he came from, a common motif in hip hop music, makes his greed turn into cruelty. “How Much a Dollar Cost” utilizes religious allusions to Moses, Pharaoh, and the Israelites to display the two paths that Lamar can choose from. The one that relates to Moses where he is a leader and a guide to those of Compton or of the Pharaoh where he abandons all attachments and is only concerned with self-preservation.

Lamar begins a dialogue with God, disguised as a homeless man, begging Lamar for change in his first trip to Africa. Lamar’s greed and hatred is represented as the Pharaoh in lines such as: “My selfishness is what got me here”” represents the Pharaoh’s concern with his own legacy and retaining control of the state of Egypt in comparison to Lamar wanting to retain his financial and hip hop status at any means necessary (*How Much a Dollar Cost* line 57) . Also lines like, “So i’mma tell you like I told the last bum/Crumbs and pennies, I need all of mines” continue to show the speaker’s lack of empathy for the homeless man (*How Much a Dollar Cost* line 58-59). Or the line “When I was strugglin’, I did compromise, now I comprehend”, which shows a progression to the present greedy state that the speaker didn’t always have. However, now the speaker’s need to protect his own well-being outweighs his desire to help his fellow man similar to the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh by God in Exodus (*How Much a Dollar Cost* line 62). Although the direct statements by the speaker are more representative of the Pharaoh, the statements made by God in “How Much a Dollar Cost” represent Lamar’s

potential to be a voice and leader for his people in comparison to Moses. The most supporting evidence of this is God's asks the speaker "Have you ever opened up Exodus 14?" then proclaims that "A humble man is all that we ever need" (*How Much a Dollar Cost* line 46-47) .

The dialogue arises when Lamar refuses to give God any money or food which is extremely telling of the speaker's condition, he is quick to flaunt his wealth with luxury vehicles but slow to share it. The speaker states to God, who is still in disguise, that he acts as if the speaker "was supposed to save him/Like I'm the reason he's homeless" (*How Much a Dollar Cost* line 36-37). This line points to the community responsibility that Lamar should feel for those around him. Lamar knows that he should feel some form of compassion for the homeless man, but instead shrugs off the idea due to his hardened heart and how self-protective he has become. Lamar's guilt is present in these lines as he knows what he should do but a sense of self-preservation block him from doing so. At the beginning of this narrative Lamar feels no responsibility for those around him and has no recognition of his power to be a leader to Black Americans who look up to him.

The reluctance to assume the responsibility for community is also found in the track, "Momma", which is also placed in a South African setting. Lamar starts the song with the same vanity and pride that is found in "How Much a Dollar Cost". "Momma" is broken up into three separate parts: the beginning recounts Lamar's coming to fame that has left in an inflated state of vanity and naivety, the middle recounts an instance of meeting a child in South Africa who looks into the soul of Lamar (including the depression and uncertainty that is consuming Lamar's psyche), and the end which harkens back to the same damaged psyche in "U" that has entrapped Lamar through the album. In the second section Lamar's uses repetition in repeating "I know everything", as he proclaims his infinite understanding of the world around him (*Momma* line

30). Lamar elaborates on the expansiveness of his understanding as he states “I know wisdom”, “I know history/I know the universe works mentally”, “I know fatality might haunt you” (*Momma* line 33/37). The significance of these statements and also the irony of Lamar’s own naivety comes to light when he visits South Africa, where a little boy that recognizes and admires Lamar peers into Lamar’s fractured psyche. It is extremely significant to “Momma” that enlightenment comes in the form of a child. The child is aware of Lamar’s fame and accolades, but is more concerned with Lamar’s beginning, something that he has lost and is unconsciously searching for. The child supports this with his statement of “Kendrick, you do know my language/You just forgot” (*Momma* line 66-67). “Language” not only represents the native tongue that the boy may have spoken, but also the distance between the boy and Lamar due to Lamar’s American upbringing and separation from his ancestral home of Africa. The child continues with a harsh critique of Lamar’s inability to face the true cause of his problems, “I mean, your life is full of turmoil/Spoiled by fantasies of who you are, I feel bad for you/I can attempt to enlighten you without frightenin’ you/If you resist, I’ll back off quick” (*Momma* line 75-77). A poor child pitying a millionaire artist makes the harshness of his words even more jarring. Though Lamar states that his knowledge of the world is expansive, it is a child that grounds Lamar and makes him recognize how little of the world he really does know. The child is a polarizing symbol for the potential of Lamar which God states in “How Much a Dollar Cost” is “bittersweet” due to the speaker’s misuse of it. The encounter with the child harkens back to issues with identity, that have strayed Lamar from his purpose but is reignited in “How Much a Dollar Cost” and “Momma”, whose themes of diaspora point to the reasoning behind Lamar’s loss of identity.

### ***III. Racial Neglect/Disparity***

Much of the connection and feeling of responsibility for those Lamar speaks for does not only come because of regional proximity but also a shared societal condition, as the people of Compton are a piece of the larger puzzle of Black American experience. In trying to find identity and purpose Lamar takes a look at his historical roots, including the cause of black condition and how these roots have affected his confusion of identity as a black man in America. Also, how to restructure identity and the purpose of the black man in the greater scheme of American society. This has been discussed in Lamar's pilgrimage to South Africa in "Momma" where he is enlightened on the miniscule scope of his understanding of his true purpose, but Lamar delves further into how he has been led astray from this purpose in corresponding tracks like "For Free" and "For Sale".

"For Free", the second track of *TPAB*, uses repetition and alliteration to enforce solidarity in taking back agency from America. Lamar makes a statements against America's pervasive use of Black people to build the nation and its reluctance to recognize Black people as building it. In this track America is symbolized as a materialistic woman that continually calls on Blacks to help uplift her materialist status, opposed to the speaker who symbolizes Black male agitation with America's perversion, exclusion of this group, and the misuse of their talents. This is illustrated in the speaker's first lines as he addresses America's anger with the speaker's dwindling dependence and complacency with the condition America has set for them:

This d\*ck ain't free

You lookin' at me like it ain't a receipt

Like I never made ends meet

Eatin' your leftovers and raw meat" (Lamar, *For Free*, line 1-4)

Here the speaker is standing up for his agency and part in the construction of America. The crudeness of “d\*ck ain’t free”, represents the abuse of Black men for America’s gain and how they figuratively impregnated America to grow it to the global power it is today (*For Free* line 1). “Receipt” stands for Black people’s presence being proof of their own involvement in the building of America, even when they were only afforded the scraps and “leftovers” of America’s achievements not only as slaves but citizens of its society today (*For Free* line 2/4). The speaker continues stating that “I need forty acres and a mule/Not a forty ounce and pit bull”, referencing a proposed form of reparations for slaves after Abolition that was never received (*For Free* line 15-16). Lamar’s comparison of the two lines is meant to display what could have been and what is. The “forty ounce and pit bull” represents materialism and a distraction for Black people by America, who in this track believes they should be appeased with the scraps they are so generously given (*For Free* line 16). This line also hints at the misguidedness of the Black population as they live in a state of ignorance are are satisfied with nothing an idea that Lamar is moving away from in “For Free”. As the track continues the speaker’s confidence in his agency grows as he uses alliteration to reiterate his stance:

Pity the fool that made the pretty in you prosper

.....

Kept me up watchin’ pornos in poverty; apology? No

Watch you politic with people less fortunate, like myself (Lamar, *For Free*, line 20-26)

“Pretty” here is used as both to reference America being symbolized as a woman, but also “pretty” refers to the materialist status at the core of belief in “For Free” (Lamar line 20). Lamar continues the use of crudeness as he cites America’s success that was watched by Black people

from afar, as pornography due to its exaggerated subject matter. Also how it is inaccessible to Black people but the Black community being thoroughly obsessed obtaining it. Lamar also recognizes the control that America has had on Black peoples and how an imbalance of power in politics that have left those “less fortunate” to be at the whim of America’s generosity (*For Free* line 26). This shows recognition of the speaker’s understanding of his relationship with America as well as the line saying that America and Black people’s “friendship [is] based on business” not reciprocal as the speaker may have believed in the past (*For Free* line 32). Lamar ends “For Free” with a powerful statement on his agency and the taking back of power: “Oh America, [...], I picked cotton and made you rich/Now my dick ain’t free” (line 48/49). Again the speaker is addressing the lack of reciprocity in the relationship between America and the Black community, while also addressing the beginnings of the exploitation of Black labor for America’s benefit.

In “For Free” Lamar addresses America as an entity that has worked as an oppressive tool against black agency and how it has confined Black identity to only be valuable if it is conjoined with materialistic values. These same materialistic values come up again in “For Sale”, but the antagonist has now changed to Lucy, a female incarnation of Lucifer, that is present to buy Lamar’s allegiance in exchange for monetary fulfillment. Lamar’s characterization of Lucy follows the common motif of the devil attempting to enter the speaker’s life by stating that he is here to fulfill the speaker’s deepest desires for his own gain. The search for fulfillment has been continued throughout the album but his searches for happiness has left him in the depressive state found in “U” and an epiphinac moment in “Momma”. Yet, he has still not captured what it is to be fulfilled and Lucy preys on this vulnerability and attempts to deter Lamar in his search for identity purpose. In “For Sale” Lucy does the majority of the speaking,

dominating the conversation, as she makes her claim to Lamar on how she can help him resolve the issues that plague fractured psyche.

Lucy gon' fill your pockets

Lucy gon' move your mama out of Compton

Inside the gi-gantic mansion like I promised

Lucy want your trust and loyalty

Avoiding me?

It's not so easy, I'm at these functions accordingly (Lamar, *For Sale*, line 42-47)

The issue of money is brought up by Lucy as she states her claim to Lamar's allegiance. Lucy's use of money to fill the speaker's pockets and take his "mama out of Compton" is an indication of Lucy's insight into the inner desires of Lamar, though this may be superficial and only at the surface layer of Lamar's inner psyche it is also valid due to Lamar's impoverished background. As well as, his statements in "How Much a Dollar Cost" where he promises never return back to poverty. Lucy's determination to have Lamar's allegiance is represented in lines like "Lucy don't slack a minute/Lucy work harder" or "Lucy gon' call you even when Lucy know you love your Father" (*For Sale* line 47-49). Outside of gaining Lamar's soul there is a recognition by Lucy of Lamar's power, she even states that this is not the first time she has pursued a rapper as that there are other "rappers that [she] came after". Here, Lamar gives the readers insight on the significance of rappers in "For Sale" (line 41). Rappers are not only surrounding by sinful temptations like sex, drugs, money constantly, but also that they are popular figures in society that have the ability to be a productive voice or a malicious influence to listeners. This goes back to Lamar's slowly growing idea of his ability to be a voice to those in his community if he uses his vocal power correctly. It also shows the opportunistic stance of Lucy, as she is another



symbol for the deterrent of community responsibility, the destruction of identity, and agency that would come with surrendering allegiance to her.

In the first track of *TPAB*, “Wesley’s Theory”, similar statements of Lucy’s are reiterated as well as the materialistic sentiments of America in “For Free”, but this time in the voice of Uncle Sam:

What you want you? A house or a car?

Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?

Anythin', see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog

Motherfucker, you can live at the mall (Lamar, line 61-64)

Uncle Sam’s statements signify that he has nothing to offer Lamar outside of physical items much as Lucy and America do. However, there is confliction with the speaker in “For Free” as he is familiar with the illegitimacy of what these figures can give him, but still haunted by temptation. This stems from a disconnection with historical and ancestral background that has been taken from them and replaced by materialist ideas of a standard of living and what determines identity and status in America.

#### ***IV. A “Mortal Man”***

The album concludes with the track, “Mortal Man”, where the epiphanic moments and the internal self-discoveries Lamar has experienced finally come to a conclusion, giving the reader a full understanding of Lamar’s comprehension of his journey and how they have contributed to his newly recognized role as a hip hop leader. Every track has led up to this final piece as Lamar combines the knowledge he has accumulated into this final statement on identity in the greater world. As well as the needed solidarity in self for one to survive in a world where there is so many outside circumstances that can diminish the internal character of a person.

Lamar explicates these ideas with the repetition of the line, “When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?”, a common phrase representing when life or a situation takes a bad turn (*Mortal Man* line 6). Lamar uses this line when he questions if the ones that surround him will still be loyal to Lamar if he did not have material items or status to give. This line repeats throughout the album and seems to be an open question to the audience. There is never a response to this question and it continues throughout the track as Lamar elaborates on loyalty and the importance of self-sustainment. He persist with the first verse stating:

Do you believe in me? Are you deceiving me?

.....

Is your smile on permanent? Is your vow on lifetime?

Would you know where the sermon is if I died in this next line?

If I’m tried in a court of law, if the industry cut me off

If the government want me dead, plant cocaine in my car

Would you judge me a drug-head or see me as K. Lamar (Lamar, *Mortal Man*, line 21-27)

Lamar’s questioning continues with this first verse as he takes a look at the fortitude of those around him and their love for Lamar as a man, outside of his status as a hip hop artist. This verse is a list of hypotheticals, like much of the song is, as Lamar digs into the possibilities of living in a circumstantial world, where nothing is promised and lasts forever. However, it also shows a new level of value system by Lamar. Line two displays this change as things like true friendship and commitment are revealed as the main objective for Lamar compared to the love for money that consumed him in “How Much a Dollar Cost”. Not only is Lamar concerned with commitment, but also for the sustainment of his character by his loved ones after trials like death,

imprisonment, and defamation. Lamar implies that he wants his words to live on in his counterparts like powerful “sermon[s]” and to not be let go of even through his shortcomings (*Mortal Man* line 24). Lamar even examples one of the biggest degradations of character for Black men, drugs, as he references government corruption’s contribution in tainting the character of Black men with false drug use, a very real fear for Black men across America. A crime that defames the character of Black men as well as silencing their voice, something that Lamar is heavily against as vocal power is where his true power as a leader in the hip hop industry lies.

Lamar’s references to the love he desires through tests of character and identity is put in relation to the love Nelson Mandela had during his imprisonment in the South African apartheid, “Want you to love me like, want you to hug me like Nelson” (*Mortal Man* line 29). Lamar compares Mandela’s imprisonment and the continued admiration and support he was given by fellow South Africans, as an example of the type of love and loyalty he desires. By connecting the love Lamar desires to that of a prolific political figure like Nelson Mandela, Lamar is recognizing his role as a voice to the Black modern experience as it may have been originally unwanted, but given due to the masses that absorb his art worldwide. Though Lamar is aligning himself with wanting the type of love such an adored figure like Nelson Mandela received by those around him, he is not saying that he isn’t a man who is subject to failure. Lamar now recognizes his own limits as he states in the hook of this track, “as I lead this army make room for mistakes and depression” (*Mortal Man* line 39). The acceptance by Lamar that he only has so much power and that failure and vulnerability is an unavoidable part of life displays the progression Lamar has made out of the arrogance and naivety that was seen by readers in “Hood Politics” and “King Kunta”. The inclusion of “mistakes and depression” in this line also is

evidence of Lamar's recognition of his past and the progression he has made to utilize his past experiences as a guiding example to those that admire him (*Mortal Man* line 39).

Lamar has reached the conclusion to recognizing his power through the epiphanic moments in the album however, they have also helped him reach the solidarity in identity and the type of character that he must uphold if he is to accept his role in community responsibility. He supports this in the following lines: "Do you show forgiveness?/[...]/What kind of den did they put you in when the lions start hissing?/ What kind of bridge did they burn?" (*Mortal Man* line 52-55). Here, Lamar is questioning the depths of his character and how upstanding he can truly be in the face of adversity and betrayal, issues that have already plagued him throughout the album. His biblical allusion to Daniel and the lion's den represents the tests that will be attributed to those who stand firm in a certain belief system. As well as the "den" being situational, varying among person to person, and the "kind of den" being absolutely personal which is represented by the "lions" (*Mortal Man* line 54). These "lions" can include a person's shortcomings, fears, and those who wish to see others ruin. Lamar maintains this idea with the next line where he uses the burning of bridges as a metaphor for relationships that are destroyed due to trials, betrayals, and human desire. Nevertheless, Lamar identifies these trials as tests of the moral character of an individual, suggesting a growth in understanding of his past adversity and its contributions to his difficult role as leader. Also, that leadership and responsibility is not readily given but gained through pain and experience which again can be seen in the line, "as I lead this army make room for mistakes and depression" (*Mortal Man* line 39). He carries on this thought in the next few lines as he expresses that he has: "I got abandonment issues/I hold grudges like bad judges, don't let me resent you/That's not Nelson-like" (*Mortal Man* line 71-72). The issue of abandonment is still very much present in "Mortal Man" as the track deals with

the idea of unconditional love that is needed even within moments of vulnerability. However, there is also a level of accountability that Lamar is sharing with his audience in the line “don’t let me resent you” this suggests an idea of community through his inclusion of the audience by saying “you” (*Mortal Man* line 71). Furthermore, Lamar may be expressing that though he has been given the talent of explicating Black experience through hip hop music, it is without true action in human life if the people listening to it are not allowed to be present in it through critique. Also, if this critique is abandoned then the true purpose of Lamar’s music will be lost as it created for more than auditory consumption but also wants to create action in the lives of his audiences. This is an idea that he incorporates to keep his “Mortal Man” argument pertinent by including relevant references in Black life such as corrupt government powers, “bad judges” with “grudges”, or Black figures like Huey Newton, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela (Lamar line 72). These references relate to the now set ‘standard’ for Lamar, in terms of character, as he defines traits of the leader he aims to be as “Nelson-like” or un-Nelson-like throughout the track (*Mortal Man* 73).

In “Mortal Man” Lamar does not say that he now has a mastery of the issues he has faced in the former tracks of the album but proclaims to know now how to cope with them through love, love within community and love within self. Without a firm frame of being, identity, Lamar ended in the predicaments of depression, suicidal thoughts, and seclusion. It also left him questioning who he was and how did his psyche and moral compass end up so fragmented in the first place leading him on the journey that is seen in *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

## **V. Conclusion**

The true aim of Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* is to depict the continuation of Black struggle through the lens of a 21st century hip hop artist. Though Lamar, himself, has reached

great levels of fame and exposure to the world, still feels he cannot fully escape the conditions that plague Black Americans. And though he has tried to ignore them, he cannot continue to do so in good conscience. This is the start of Lamar's epiphanic journey which widened his understanding of the conditions that keep his hometown of Compton in a form of unrecognized oppression by forces that work internally, in the community, and externally, by outside dominant American culture and government. Throughout *TPAB*, Lamar attributes the confusion and chaos within the Compton community he loves to a lack of identity and purpose that makes progressing in life with a firm moral compass extremely difficult.

Lamar's epiphanic moments work not only for his own personal journey but to make him aware of his responsibility to be a voice for the Black community and to share their stories so the Black American experience heard by wider audiences. For Lamar this is what it means 'to pimp a butterfly,' to use his talents and vocal power for a cause. The progression from a caterpillar to a butterfly involved Lamar secluding himself in a cocoon of angst and resentment, only being able to break out of it and become a butterfly when he becomes able to see the world clearly. Lamar's new focus is attributed to the enlightenment he gains through epiphanic moments and guiding figures. In *To Pimp a Butterfly* he is able to break out of the confinement of his cocoon through these epiphanies because they show him the true purpose of his talents which is his responsibility to his community. Those realizations allowed for his transformation into the butterfly. The butterfly represents Lamar as he can now fully use his talents for the good of not only his home community of Compton but to continue the representation of Black life through art that defies American dominant culture.

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