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A journey towards healing: Kendrick Lamar's role in redefining rap culture from toxic masculinity

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ABSTRACT

This thesis had the objective of providing a thorough analysis of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* in order to understand the perpetuation of black toxic masculinity in contemporary rap, focusing on the album as an example of stereotype subversion.

Black masculinity has developed after centuries of discrimination, institutionalized racism, and overall neglect of poorer minorities by society. Those segregated in crime-ridden and poor neighborhoods, controlled by gang activity, often adopted certain mannerisms to protect themselves, with many turning to music to find relief.

Lamar's upbringing amidst the "Decade of Death" in Compton, California, is reflected in his albums, drawing from his lived experiences and inspired by the artists he grew up listening to (especially the *gangsta rappers* of the 1980s and 1990s).

To Pimp A Butterfly is a social commentary on the struggles of black people, especially artists, in a white-dominated society, drawing parallels to Kendrick Lamar's personal journey from a naïve and inexperienced kid to a matured celebrity and role model. Lamar opens up to the public, admitting to suffering from depression and suicidal thoughts, and, despite his flaws, accepts his role as a guide for his community, and starts advocating for them.

The album is not only a confirmation of Lamar's artistry and musical knowledge, but also a starting point for a wider discourse on the potential of rap to bring social change and promote healing to build a more inclusive space.

*Per il nonno
Spero tu sia fiero di me*

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INTRODUCTION

Rap music has been a form of expression for many unheard generations, a way to show one's thoughts and call out the struggles of modern-day society, exploring themes such as street violence, police brutality or alcohol, and substance abuse, particularly impacting black men. Rappers often fail to show the vulnerability and hurt that these experiences provide, preferring to glorify what fame brought to them. This thesis aims to analyze the reasons behind the endorsement of such toxic behaviors still present in modern-day rap music, taking as an example the discography of Kendrick Lamar and how he revolutionized the hip-hop scene and stereotypes through his 2015 work *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

Lamar's works may be read as a journey towards healing, overcoming generational trauma, and escaping a world filled with gang violence and abuse. His second studio album *good kid, M.a.a.d city* marks the beginning of this journey. It tells the story of a young Kendrick navigating his adolescence in violent Compton, committing crimes just to fit in with his peers, only to realize he's a "Good kid" living in a "Mad City", and could use his success to help those living in the same destructing environment.

Lamar's third album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) is the primary focus of this thesis and will be thoroughly analyzed in Chapter 3. It represents an important continuation of his personal history but also a protest against the United States' injustices and difficult relationship with the African American community, covering issues like police brutality and racism but also self-acceptance and mental health, making Lamar one of the few rappers of the newest generation to put the stereotypes aside and fully opening himself to the public, with his flaws and weaknesses.

The thesis begins with a historical and social context, exploring the main events and cultural forces that shaped black masculinity in the United States, focusing on the perpetuation of degrading stereotypes and systemic oppression. The South had been the setting for slavery and segregation for more than two centuries until the 13th Amendment abolished it and initiated an arduous period of integration in which the "Freedmen Bureau" was in charge of providing equal rights and opportunities to start a prosperous life as free men in the States. As W.E.B. Du Bois accurately points out in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) the bureau failed, and black people continued to be neglected. At the

same time, a series of stereotypes began circulating and fueling the already existing discrimination. Black men and women were depicted as either uncivilized and ignorant, or as hypersexual and promiscuous, even threatening the “purity” of the white race. The black body was viewed as a mere commodity, and laws like the “Jim Crow Laws” and the “Separated but Equal” ruling, further contributed to the objectification of the community, which was gradually segregated into poverty-stricken neighborhoods.

The difficult environment had a significant impact on African Americans for generations and worsened during the 1980s and 1990s with the so-called “Decade of Death”, in which the deathly crack cocaine began circulating in prevalently black neighborhoods. Hundreds of gangs “invaded” cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and so on, trying to control the traffic and consequently fighting over territories. The difficult environment had a relevant impact on the mental health of black men, who adopted certain mannerisms and attitudes to protect themselves, as portrayed by several rappers of the time. The *gangsta rappers* of the time became real first-hand reporters, telling of their reality in the ghettos and the struggles of their communities.

It was within this setting that Kendrick Lamar Duckworth grew up. Born amidst the “Crack epidemic” in Compton, California, from an early age he was affected by the city’s gang violence, with members of his family involved in these dynamics and witnessing two murders when he was in elementary school, eventually influencing him too as an adolescent until his parents convinced him to get on the right path and utilize his talents in music for something good. In 2012, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* offers a glimpse into his everyday life as a teenager and stands out as a social commentary on the lives of those in impoverished neighborhoods, establishing Lamar as a mainstream artist, and a unique voice in hip-hop.

Amidst the complex socio-political climate in the US, Lamar took a pivotal trip to South Africa, in which he had the opportunity to reflect on his newfound success and reconnect with his roots. In 2015, *To Pimp A Butterfly* reflects on what he has learned, in an introspective and emotional journey toward acceptance and healing. The album blends autobiography with social critiques; jazz and hip-hop; empowerment, grief, and anger, in a masterpiece that profoundly contributed to changing the 2010s rap scene while at the same time, reconnecting with the 1990s rapper’s role of “reporters”.

CHAPTER 1

Before diving into the core of this thesis, it is important to know the context in which black masculinity has developed. The South has historically functioned as a conflicting and hostile site for African American men, with its hundreds of years of slavery, racism, and racial segregation that deeply shaped the mindset of both white and black people. During the Reconstruction era (1863-1877), as the government sought to integrate former slaves into society, white men feared even blending with black men. These damaging ideas spread across the region, creating and representing harmful stereotypes of black men and black masculinity that fuel racial inequalities. In the decades that followed, legalized racial segregation and the ghettoization of prevalently black areas fostered the rise of poverty and crime. Gang violence aggravated after the introduction of crack cocaine in the 1980s. Music became an outlet for black men to report the conditions of the community, giving birth to a genre now known as *gangsta rap*.

1.1 The Failure of Reconstruction and the Illusion of Progress

The period between 1863 and 1877 is known as the “Reconstruction”, during which the government upheld the task of integrating nearly four million former slaves into society. Unsurprisingly, former white slaveowners opposed the integration of newly freedmen. After years of bigotry and racist ideologies, the divide the country had faced until then deepened. Thus, the federal government decided to better the situation by introducing the “Freedmen’s Bureau”.

In March 1865, the “Freedmen’s Bureau” was established to promote education, fair labor, and land distribution. In reality, it was widely critiqued by scholars for favoring white men with its decisions and therefore failing to protect the rights of the freedmen. Among these, W.E.B. Du Bois dedicated an entire chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to analyze the Bureau’s ineffectiveness from an employment, educational, and judicial point of view. Du Bois explained that the failure of the Freedmen’s Bureau ended up costing some fifteen million dollars to the government, eventually not mitigating the harsh environment that ruled the States. As he stated:

Not a single Southern legislature stood ready to admit a Negro, under any conditions, to the polls; not a single Southern legislature believed free Negro labor was possible without a system of restrictions that took all its freedom away; there

was scarcely a white man in the South who did not honestly regard Emancipation as a crime and its practical nullification as a duty. (1903, 28)

Even though slavery had formally been abolished with the 13th amendment, the work of the Bureau and the following presidential acts did not stop whites from economically exploiting black labor whose subjugation was further reinforced by a series of laws called "Black Codes". The black body remained a medium of others' power, even if it was no longer an "extension and instrument of the master's absolute right or dominion" (Wilderson 2020, 40). White supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, enforced these regulations by instigating violence and spreading fear, terrorizing African American communities. From a judicial perspective, getting justice was nearly impossible, as former Confederate soldiers often occupied the position of policemen or judges in regular civil southern courts.

The year 1877 has been regarded as the end of Reconstruction. The last federal troops, stationed in the South, were withdrawn as part of a compromise between the North and South, effectively leaving black men powerless and subject to the ongoing violence. Furthermore, the rise of Jim Crow laws and the 1898 "Plessy v. Ferguson" Supreme Court ruling, institutionalized black segregation across the States. While presented to bring equality, it allowed systemic discrimination towards black people.

1.2 Minstrelsy and the Stereotypical Portrayals of Black People

In the *antebellum* era, stereotypical portrayals of African Americans began circulating in the US. The character of "Sambo" dates to the era of colonization and was created as a justification for slavery. He is described as a docile man who is happy to serve his master and relies on him daily due to his laziness and dumbness. Stories of Sambo were also told to children through stories and games, for generations. In the early 19th century, performer T.D. Rice created the infamous "Jim Crow", inspired by an old black man whom he saw performing in the street (Green n.d. – as cited Engle 1978). The character gained success with minstrelsy shows, in which white musicians would dress in run-down clothes and perform in blackface with grotesquely exaggerated facial features. In the Western world, the character of "Jim Crow" endured over the years as the image of the average black man. In movies, black men were also depicted as uncivilized savages. This new medium served as propaganda to encourage racial cleansing in the US.

Following emancipation, the image of the threatening brute from the "Dark Continent" was revitalized. Acts of racial violence were justified and encouraged through the emphasis on this stereotype of the Savage. The urgent message to whites was, we must put blacks in their place or else (Green n.d. – as cited Boskin 1986).

The conditions of African Americans, subjected to enslavement, exploitation, racial discrimination, segregation, and lynching became entertainment for white classes through these derogatory shows. Black people were described as ignorant, unfit to survive in freedom, and not adapt to "polite northern society". Their appearance, so far from "Victorian beauty standards", created a certain ambivalence between fascination and fear of the black individual (White 2011, 19). Throughout modern history, the black body has consistently been viewed as a commodity for trade. Discriminatory laws like "Jim Crow laws" and the "Separated but Equal" 1898 ruling (also known as the "Plessy v. Ferguson ruling"), along with the physical representation of black individuals, further contributed to the control of the black body even after the official end of chattel slavery, and to its objectification and fetishization.

With the end of the Civil War, a growing panic of racial mixture between whites and blacks established a certain obsession with "protecting" the purity of the white race, and therefore "protecting white women". The "black rapist" is one of the oldest examples of stereotypes born in the South and spread nationwide. Black males were portrayed as violent and sexually pathological, unable to control themselves like beasts. Richardson argues that the trope is rooted in Darwin's scientific theories, which viewed black people as primitive and racially inferior within the hierarchy of human beings (2014, 51). Alongside the image of the black man as a rapist, the black woman is depicted as chronically promiscuous. The traditional "Jezebel" presents features that resemble the European ideal of beauty and therefore attractive to white males which described her as a hyper-sexual seductress to justify abuse and rape. In other images, black women are associated with domestic work and serve the master's family. Characters like "the Mammy", "Aunt Jemimah" and "Sapphire" are depicted as unattractive and non-threatening to whites (Green, n.d.).

The hopes for freedom and equality that the Civil War initially inspired were ultimately proven to be misplaced. Even with the success of black performers like Bert Williams

(forced to perform in black face to gain credibility) and later George Walker, black people were still being stereotyped and their art appropriated by white people.

bell hooks argues that the concept of “freedom” was perceived as a shift in position that would enable black men to fulfill roles as providers and protectors for their families, in line with what white masters taught them (2004). In reality, with the implementation of the Black Codes and the failure of the Bureau, it became difficult for black men to act as the providers of their families. The following paragraph further explores how in the contemporary era, African Americans are often associated with criminality and “*gangsta life*”. Even by getting allowed to have a job and working hard, in the eyes of whites, black men would always be considered thieves or gangsters (hooks 2004, 31) and therefore unworthy of their “freedom”.

1.3 The rise of *gangsta rap*

1.3.1 Historical Context: Segregation and the roots of inner-city gang culture and violence

The previously mentioned *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling laid the legal ground for a racially segregated system. As African Americans tried to integrate into society, the phenomenon of *white flight* started to take place. As black people immigrated to northern cities looking for jobs and financial stability, white people moved into suburban neighborhoods financed by the government – limited to black people by redlining and residential segregation” (Cuchna 2018). In the 1950s, at the peak of racial segregation, black and white people lived their everyday lives in separate spaces (from hospitals to work to school and even buried in different graveyards).

African Americans were gradually relocated into overcrowded ghettos due to a housing shortage, even though the Housing Act of 1949 had the goal of providing a suitable environment for every American family. Black families were confined in low-income areas that surrounded the central business districts, filled with deteriorating and unsafe buildings. After the Act, cities could use federal funds to renovate impoverished areas by building new residential areas, and highways. Thousands of families lost their houses due to the “renovations” and eventually kept on living in crime-filled and poverty-stricken neighborhoods.

The housing projects erected to replace slums soon became dilapidated and crime ridden. They were disproportionately home to poor, single-parent households. Many projects became lawless places, overrun by gang activity. (Ware, 2021,12) The situation was further aggravated between the 1980s and the 1990s as cocaine was introduced in these already impoverished neighborhoods. Speculations started spreading that the CIA had been secretly distributing the deadly drug into black neighborhoods as a “targeted genocide aimed at eradicating black people” (White 2010, 95). Gangs usually controlled the drug traffic, in LA the most notable being the Crips and Bloods who also fought in wars over money, territory, respect, and numerous other reasons, often involving innocent bystanders in the shootings.

1.3.2 *Gangsta rap as social commentary*

This difficult environment had a significant impact on newer generations of African Americans, especially those involved in these situations would adopt certain mannerisms to protect themselves from rivals. As White explains:

The level of deceit, distrust, macho posturing, and violence became endemic to inner city street culture and would eventually show up in songs that mirrored the ruptures, rifts, and ensuing “beefs” between rival gang members, hustlers, rappers, and sometimes entire organizations (2011, 97).

Many turned to music to escape the harsh reality they were living. Like first-person reporters, these young rappers documented the conditions of the lives of African Americans, “telling of a reality seldom seen and rarely discussed in popular culture” (Soren 2018, 5).

Ice T is considered to be the pioneer of the genre, with his famous record *6 ‘N the Mornin’*. The rapper has credited Philadelphia rapper Schoolly D, with his innovative laid-back sound of *P.S.K (Park Side Killers)*, which inspired him to write the song. In his works, Ice T narrates about his daily life in South Central Los Angeles, which grew more violent after the arrival of crack cocaine in black communities.

Amidst this environment, the most influential rap group formed: N.W.A (*Niggaz Wit Attitudes*), who brought the genre to a mainstream audience. Their debut album *Straight Outta Compton* portrayed everyday life in Compton, between violence, police brutality, and addiction, which got highly misunderstood by the white audience. The lyrics are raw and unfiltered, even describing graphic scenes of murders and shootings. The music video for the title track depicts the group members being chased, harassed, and ultimately arrested by the police, serving as a powerful visual representation of the antagonistic

relationship between white police and black people, which is what led N.W.A to release the controversial *Fuck Tha Police*. As MC Eiht explained:

It was just some brothers telling the truth about where they came from. Not everybody was able to see the reality of what gang life was. It's about the police brutality, it's about the poverty, it's about homeboys being killed. N.W.A showed the world this is how we are on the west coast. This is how we grow up; this is what we go through, and now everybody can experience our world. (Shadrach Kabango 2016).

After seeing group member Dr. Dre getting unfairly arrested multiple times, N.W.A decided to release the song which speaks out on the blatant racism of the LAPD towards black people. The song sparked the most controversy, as the group started to be censored and prohibited from playing it in concerts.

With their masculine and unapologetic look, White argues that N.W.A, and *gangsta* rappers in general, embody the slavery era trope of the “Black N*gger” (2011, 81-82); credited to John W. Roberts he differentiates between the “bad black man” and the “bad n*gger”. While the first was considered a hero to his community for resisting white authority, the other was a criminal and an outlaw who acted only for his self-interest even if hurting his community. After the Reconstruction period, the trope resurfaced in fear of black people threatening white race and purity, but it has reached to this day to enforce racial division.

From my perspective, in a society that both abandons and fears these people, rappers can be viewed as revolutionary figures who subvert the stereotypes ascribed to them by challenging the narrative and *status quo* and speaking out on the struggles of their communities.

1.3.3 Subverting Stereotypes: The Use of *Signifyin(G)* In Rap

In “*Signifyin(g)* Ritual: Subverting Stereotypes, Salvaging Icons”, Kim Euell argues that stereotypes generate feelings of shame and anxiety that consequently “undermine self-esteem, ambition, and progress” in people (Euell, n.d.). The black community, already alienated by the system, turned to outlets like music, theater, and poetry to express themselves and tell their truth about the African American experience in the US.

In music and other mediums such as theater and poetry, it can be observed what Professor Henry Louis Gates calls *Signifyin(g)*. In his General Linguistics course, professor Ferdinand de Saussure separated the linguistic sign (a word) into two parts: signified –

the concept one wants to convey – and signifier – a sound or image associated with the concept. Gates argues that the black community has disrupted this conventional model by recontextualizing standard English terms and replacing them with new culturally relevant concepts through rhetorical figures, citing, and intertextual relations (Gates 2014, 51) (Schur 29). The term “*Signifyin(g)*” is visually similar to the standard (white) English term “signifying”, except for the capital letter and the “g” in between brackets. This highlights how the two systems, apparently similar only differ in meaning, symbolizing a sort of reappropriation of the language from its dominant meaning, by the African American community.

The most blatant example of *Signifyin(g)* is the transformation of the n-word, widely used in rap lyrics. In a 1995 interview with Tabitha Soren, the late rapper Tupac Shakur, proceeds to explain the difference to the skeptical reporter. While talking about his experience in jail, Tupac highlights the uncontrolled power of white policemen, to the point of using racial slurs without consequence. The interviewer seemingly justifies this behavior, by pointing out that the word is used in Shakur’s songs, to which the rapper replies by explaining how he differentiates between the historical term, used to refer to those “with ropes on their necks”, and the one he uses in his songs, indicating to those with “gold ropes, hangin’ out at clubs”. This short remark is significant to emphasize how, with a subtle shift in spelling and meaning, such a historically degrading word was transformed from a symbol of white dominance – firstly represented by the masters during the slavery period and now by the power of the police – into a symbol of strength within the community.

Scholars have given different and unique definitions of the concept of *Signifyin(g)*, among these Roger D. Abrahams who suggests that in black discourse it includes “the trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point” but also “making fun of a person or situation” and “speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures” (Gates 59). This last definition is one of the many examples of how *Signifyin(g)* applies to rap music and its performances. With the rise of gang activities in the 1980s and 1990s, certain hand signs started to be used to express one’s affiliation with certain street crews. The famous step movements such as the “Crip Walk” are used to spell out letters and communicate in code

and have been performed by rappers in music videos and concerts as a representation of their roots. Also, *Signifyin(g)* includes certain facial expressions, such as the gaze known as “mean mugging”, which “signifies upon and position critiques relations of race, power, and social” (White 56) in an attempt to reject the stereotype of the submissive southern male in a hypermasculine image. Again, everything associated with kindness or “femininity” is rejected and replaced with more aggressive body language (White 57).

1.4 Black masculinity and mental health

Historically, men are seen as masculine if capable of fending for themselves and their families, with consequent habits, traditions, and beliefs associated with “being a man”. Manhood takes an exaggerated route in *Hyper-masculinity*, portrayed through exaggerated displays of physical strength, social power, and eventually violence. In rap music and aesthetics, there is a certain obsession with representing one’s strength and credibility, resulting in a toxic environment with standards not always achievable.

As previously observed, black men have been associated with various stereotypes and tropes, characterized as dumb to aggressive and hypersexual. bell hooks argues that the root of toxic black masculinity dates back to the slavery period, during which black people have passively internalized these representations that shape even newer generations (1992). Furthermore, with the rise of *gangsta* rap, as said before, the demeanor among people of the same community changed, opting for more untrusty and masculine behavior. Still, hooks believes that *gangsta* culture is a product of the capitalist system that marginalizes and exploits black people while offering an illusion of empowerment through a toxic pursuit of wealth, leading to isolation and self-destruction. Because men want to fulfill the traditional role as breadwinners, as taught by white masters before them, any type of job, legal or not, has been accepted as long as one proves to have money (2004, 35). Those who opt to be successful within the exploitative movie or music industry often see their lives as empty and meaningless” (hooks, 2004) so much so that they may turn to addiction as a way to cope. Moreover, a recurrent obsession with death and nihilism can be observed in the works of artists who come from difficult backgrounds, especially linked with violence. Moya Bailey suggests that nihilism is caused by an overabundance of negative emotions that males cannot express due to patriarchal expectations towards them, eventually resulting in “excessive nihilism, depression, misogyny, and violence” (Hart 2015, 3 – as cited Bailey 2013).

CHAPTER 2

In order to fully understand Lamar's work, it is necessary to get to know the artist and understand the environment in which he grew up and created his projects.

Kendrick Lamar grew up in Compton, California, a city sadly internationally recognized as dominated by gangs and violence. In the years, the city has become home to famous hip-hop artists, from N.W.A to 2Pac, Snoop Dogg, and many more, the first to speak out about the reality of life as African Americans in the US.

When talking about his childhood, the artist recalls seeing Dr. Dre and Tupac Shakur shooting the music video for "California Love" at the Compton Fashion Center (also known as Compton Swap Meet) surrounded by people from the whole city. The sense of community and love created by the artists amazed Kendrick and inspired him many years later to follow in Dre and Pac's footsteps (Moore 2020, 32).

2.1 Context and background information

In 1867 Griffith Dickenson Compton led 30 families from Stockton, California to the area now known as Compton. It was an agricultural city, mainly white, with one black resident by the 1930s due to racist policies that restricted the area to African Americans. After World War II, the Supreme Court overturned these laws, and more black families moved to the city; while white people fled, in a phenomenon known as *white flight*.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Government supported the evacuation by financing new white middle-class suburban areas through federal funds, granted with the 1949 National Housing Act and limited to black people by redlining and residential segregation" (Cuchna 2018). The neighborhoods inhabited by black residents, and other minorities, were deemed as risky and therefore unsuitable for mortgage support, another episode of institutionalized discrimination that excluded African Americans from owning properties (Jackson 2021).

Around the 1970s, criminality increased due to the growing unemployment and saw the creation of first street gangs: the Crips (created in 1969) and its rival, the Bloods (1972). Middle and upper-class black families moved to nearby towns and the city officially became the epicenter of gang activity (Moore 2020, 28). Between the 1980s and 1990s, the situation worsened with the introduction of crack cocaine.

Kendrick was born as the first *gangsta* rap songs began to be released and the War on Drugs – which coincides with the Ronald Reagan administration – targeted and incarcerated minorities.

2.2 Early life and first releases

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth was born in Compton on June 17, 1987, amidst the turbulent context of the Decade of Death. His parents Kenneth “Kenny” Duckworth and Paula Oliver moved, while still teenagers in 1984, from Chicago to escape Kenny’s affiliation with the Gangster Disciples (Hopper 2012). With just \$500, they settled in Compton, where Paula worked as a hairdresser and Kenny at a local KFC while still *hustling* on the side. On Spin Lamar affirmed:” My pops did whatever he could to get money. He was in the streets. You know the story.” (Hopper 2012). They lived in Section 8 housing – a federal program, in which a portion of rent is paid by a housing agency – reliant on welfare and food stamps. He was described as a quiet and precocious kid who would often sit in a corner and observe what was happening around him (Moore 2020, 30); in a 2015 interview, his mother recalls walking him home from school as “He would ask me questions about Section 8 and the Housing Authority, so I’d explain it to him“ (Eells 2015). In 1992, riots spread after the beating of unarmed driver Rodney King by four police officers. In cities like Compton, chaos broke loose, Kendrick remembers seeing his dead stealing from a car shop. Confused, he could not understand what was going on, until he watched the news: ”I said to my mom, ‘So the police beat up a black man, and now everybody’s mad? OK. I get it now.’” (Eells 2015). It was his first encounter with racism and racial disparity.

Though he remembers having a good childhood, life in violent Compton wasn’t always easy. At five years old he witnessed his first homicide, a drug dealer getting shot in a drive-by, and another at eight while he was walking home from elementary school, as he saw a man get shot in a drive-thru while ordering food. At NPR he said: “[...] Admittedly, it done something to me right then and there. It let me know that this is not only something that I’m looking at, but it’s something that maybe I have to get used to” (NPR 2015). He admitted that love from family and friends is what he needed to get through the violence. In elementary school, he met Matt Jeezy, a fellow student who lived in the same neighborhood. They used to play together with other kids – some of whom would even,

later, kill each other due to their gang affiliations – the two friends would distance themselves, resulting in getting bullied, as told by Jeezy:

Me and Kendrick used to get picked on because we weren't big bad gangstas. We hung out with them, we associated ourselves with them, but they knew we weren't gangbanging or anything like that. The girls would pick on us, the fellas would pick on us, but that was part of the territory of living in Compton and growing up around gang culture. (Moore 2020, 34)

As bell hooks said, in black communities, those who proved they had money became respected and powerful, no matter how it was earned; that is why the “deadly drug economy” was somehow accepted in black lives, an “easy” way to make big money (2004, 34). Consequently, it was hard to navigate an environment like Compton without getting involved in these situations. To mitigate the tension among his students, Regis Inge, a teacher at the Vanguard Learning Center, introduced his classes to poetry, connecting it with hip-hop. For these young kids, poetry would serve as a powerful medium to deal with their struggles, both in and out of their households (Moore 2020, 34).

For an introverted and shy kid like Kendrick, who also had a notable stutter, Inge played a crucial role in his growth. The professor noticed something in the young boy and challenged him to improve his skills and his talent. Kendrick became obsessed with his poetry classes, if he forgot to do an assignment at home, he'd get to school early and do it there (Moore 2020, 36). At home, he wrote nonstop, his dad told Rolling Stone: “We used to wonder what he was doing with all that paper, I thought he was doing homework! I didn't know he was writing lyrics” (Eells 2015). Kendrick rapped about what he observed in his everyday life, as said by his friend Matt “He was rapping about what he knew at the time—and that was drugs, gangbanging, and the streets. As we got older and started maturing, I saw him take the craft more seriously” (Moore 2020, 35) thus including profane and straightforward lyrics. Paula Oliver told Rolling Stone:” “I had never heard him say profanity before, then I found his little rap lyrics, and it was all ‘Eff you.’ ‘D-i-c-k.’ I'm like, ‘Oh, my God! Kendrick's a cusser!’” (Eells 2015).

In high school, his passion continued. One day, Jeezy recalls his friend rapping for four or five blocks while walking home together, in that moment he knew he would have been successful, as long as he worked hard and stayed on the right path. However, at age 16, he became involved with a problematic group of friends, partying and drinking, emulating

what he had previously seen as a kid with his parents and their parties. Although he never gave specific details, he recalls visiting a friend at a hospital after getting shot, or his mom rescuing him after getting hit also (Eells 2015). Eventually, his dad did not accept the possible life he was walking towards (of crimes and gang affiliation) and took Kendrick aside, as the artist told Spin “My father said, ‘I don’t want you to be like me’”, though initially skeptical, he then understood his father’s point of view and “Out of respect, I really just gathered myself together.” (Hopper 2012)

In tenth grade, Kendrick met Dave Free (David Isaac Friley), who experimented with music at his improvised studio in his house, they met through a friend who praised the young rapper. Together they released Lamar’s first mixtape *Y.H.N.I.C. (Hub City Threat: Minor of the Year)*, under the name *K-Dot*. After he graduated, Dave got a job as a computer technician, while still helping his friend with his music. One day, he was called to fix Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith’s computer, founder of Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE). Once he realized the problem could not be fixed, he pretended to keep working while listening to his friend’s music at a loud volume, so that Anthony could also hear it. Impressed, Tiffith arranged a live setting where Kendrick freestyled for two hours, the producer pretended to ignore him (Spin, 2012) until: “He notices I’m not moving and starts going crazy. So, I look up and I’m like, ‘God damn. He’s a monster.’ So, the next day I had a contract for him.” (Moore 2020, 45). In 2005 Lamar signed TDE, a deal that raised some concerns as Tiffith was known to be part of the Bloods, while the rapper came from an area controlled by the enemy Pirus (subgroup to the Bloods), though for the artist it was the least of his problems. In his life he never picked a side, surrounded by violence from an early age, he always believed that one day Compton would unite in a single community, without rivalry or violence, a sort of quest that he is following to this day and that, as will be discussed later as it is widely present in his music.

At the same time, Tiffith signed a contract with three other MCs — Schoolboy Q, Ab-Soul, and Jay Rock — and two aspiring producers: Mark Spears, also known as *Sounwave*, and Terrace Martin, a multi-instrumentalist fond of jazz and soul. Tiffith’s studio became a sanctuary for these kids, who were eager to escape the harsh reality of Compton and get their voices heard. Between 2005 and 2009 Lamar released two mixtapes: *Training Day* and *C4*, a tribute to Lil Wayne’s 2008 *Tha Carter III*, who the critics found redundant. *K-Dot* represented a character who is only focused on being

better than others, thinking: “[...] I want to be the best wordsmith, anybody that gets on this track I have to annihilate” (Penrose 2017), dismissing his true self and feelings. In the same year, Lamar toured with rapper The Game on his *LAX Tour*, opening his shows with label mate Jay Rock, this experience inspired him to change his name to *Kendrick Lamar*. The artist shared with *Variety*: “When I stopped going by K-Dot, I think that was the moment where I really found my voice” (2017).

2.3 The call from Dr. Dre and newfound success

On 31st December 2009, Lamar released the EP *Kendrick Lamar* followed by his debut album *Overly Dedicated* (though some claim it to be a collection of songs or mixtape), the first to enter the Billboard charts, it peaked at number 72 on the Billboard 100. In 2010 he toured again in Tech N9ne's *Independent Grind Tour* as a “hype man” to Jay Rock. During this time, he started receiving multiple calls from Dr. Dre's team, as the artist was interested in working with him. Skeptical of these calls, he almost turned them all down, though Dre's team did not give up and eventually convinced the young artist to come to the studio where he worked on the upcoming album *Detox* (The Howard Stern Show 2017).

Overly Dedicated presented a relevant growth in the artist's career, with its complex structures and lyricism, appearing as a middle ground between old *gangsta* rap of the 90s, in a sort of tribute to those who succeeded before him (2Pac, Dr. Dre, and Ice Cube to name a few), but with a modern twist, even showing a hint of emotion, but nothing compared to what he will release later in his career (Reeves 2017). The general consensus was good, but the album was shadowed by *My Dark Twisted Fantasy* by Kanye West, who dominated the 2010s music scene with its unapologetic attitude and love-hate relationship with his fans and colleagues.

After only 10 months, Lamar published *Section.80* which sold around 5000 copies in the first week after its release.

2.4 Section.80 (2011)

Released on the 2nd of July 2010, *Section.80* is Kendrick Lamar's first official album, to which collaborated the “newfound” artist of TDE: Terrace Martin, who brought a jazz-infused sound to the project. It was written between the end of the *Independent Grind Tour* and the return home. The themes are more poignant as he tackles themes such as

systemic oppression, drug abuse, and self-medication, resulting in an overall sense of anxiety and depression representative of the whole 80s generation who lived amidst poverty and destruction brought by the deadly drug (Quality Culture 2022). The album title combines the name of the government-funded “Section 8” housing (representing poverty) and the decade of the 1980s, known as the “Crack Decade” or “Decade of Death”.

The songs are connected through a skit where an unnamed leader is preaching in front of a group of people, reunited around an intimate campfire. Through these sermons, Lamar speaks directly to his community, addressing the generation’s vices and the consequences of temptation. Throughout the album it appears the desire, on the rapper’s behalf, to elevate hip-hop and his community “through self-analysis, self-empowerment, cultural criticism, leadership, lyrical prowess” (Cuchna 2018).

In his Pitchfork review, Tom Breihan defines Kendrick Lamar as a weird but “promising young guy”, a good start for his next projects, as “rap music could always use more weird kids” (2011).

2.5 good kid, m.A.A.d city (2012)

In 2012, Lamar hit the road again for four months, as a headliner for Drake’s *Club Paradise Tour*, along with rising star A\$AP Rocky (Moore 2020, 75). Rocky had been in the industry since 2011, after signing a 3-million-dollar deal with Sony/RCA (Munday 2022). With his experimental and somewhat psychedelic sound, by 2012 he already had a big and growing fanbase, almost obscuring Lamar during the headlining shows.

In February of 2012, the song “Cartoon & Cereal” got leaked onto the internet, it was supposed to appear on the upcoming album though the artist eventually scraped it. The song, even if not part of the album, gives some information about the themes of *good kid, m.A.A.d city*: a young boy watching cartoons while his father is pointing a gun at his mother, giving birth. As the story unfolds, we learn that it is the young boy who’s actually being delivered, and this is the first scene he sees as coming into the world, which will mark his whole life. It is a story not only representative of Kendrick’s childhood surrounded by violence but also of his peers, a central theme to the album.

In March of the same year, Lamar signed a joint deal with Dr. Dre’s Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records to release his debut album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*

(Nadeska 2012). In an interview with HIPHOPDX he admitted to acknowledging Dre’s talent for discovering successful artists such as Eminem, and Interscope for investing in excellent albums – *2Pacalypse Now* by Tupac, *Get Rich or Die Trying* by 50 Cent and *The Marshall Mathers LP* by Eminem – therefore decided it was the best choice for the unique vision he had for the album (Horowitz 2012).

That summer, the rapper also performed at the annual Pitchfork Music Festival in Chicago. Ryan Schreiber, founder and CEO of Pitchfork recalls an unexpected success: “I remember watching people flood from other stages mid-set over to this tiny blue stage. And seeing these massive throngs of people stretching out, way past the food stands and everything else. For us to see Kendrick having that kind of pull that early on was pretty impressive” (Moore 2020, 78). Even pop superstar Lady Gaga sneaked unnoticed backstage to watch the performance (Sargent 2017), the two had bonded sometime before over their taste in music. Gaga should also have appeared on the album though the song was erased.

On July 31, the first official single for *good kid*, “Swimming Pools (Drunk)” was released, becoming an instant success. Even if celebratory and party-like, the song meditates on excessive drinking and peer pressure, also including memories of Lamar’s family history with alcoholism. Later that year in October, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* is released. It is a concept album, envisioned as a short film that portrays one pivotal day in young Kendrick’s life in the streets of Compton as the character navigates through peer pressure, gang violence, and desire for personal growth” (Stephens 2023). The songs, similarly to *Section.80*, are interrupted and connected through voicemails, skits, etc. which engage the listener.



Figure 1 Album cover
Credits Kendrick Lamar via Spotify

The album cover features a family polaroid where baby Kendrick is sitting around a small table with his family. An alcohol bottle is placed next to his baby bottle, and his uncle is doing a gang sign while holding Kendrick with one hand. All the eyes are covered, except for the kid, symbolizing his innocence (Cuchna 2018). The picture represents the harsh environment in which the artist will bring the listener: his childhood, divided between light-heartedness and violence.

The title “m.A.A.d” has two meanings. The first “My Angels on Angel Dust” is explained in the song “m.A.A.d city”, in which Kendrick argues that we are born pure, angels but our actions are sometimes impure when influenced by the environment, nevertheless, we remain pure. The second meaning, “My Angry Adolescence Divided” encapsulates the “coming-of-age” concept of the album, it is a call back to the transformation that the artist is experiencing, from K-Dot to *Kendrick Lamar* but also from boy to man (Cuchna 2018).

The album opens with “Sherane a.k.a. Master Splinter’s Daughter,” a group of people is reciting the “Sinner’s Prayer”, a Christian’s prayer of repentance that will be heard again, recited by poet Maya Angelou, at the end of “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst”. Lamar then starts narrating how he met his love interest Sherane at a party, and, after chatting for the whole summer, he is on his way to meet her. The reference to “Master Splinter” alludes to the comic books and series *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in which the character is depicted as a rat. This may indicate Sherane’s connections with gang members, implying she is a “hood rat” a US slang term for a promiscuous woman. Upon arrival at her house, he sees two dark figures approaching. The song abruptly interrupts as one of the many voice messages starts playing: Kendrick’s mom Paula, scolds him for taking her car and warns him about Sherane.

The story then stops as “Bitch don’t kill my vibe” starts playing. The song foreshadows Lamar’s future in the music industry, surrounded by people who merely want to exploit him and his mission to elevate the current state of hip-hop (Cuchna 2018) almost predicting what 2015’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* will cover. The track ends with a skit of Kendrick’s friends coming to pick him up, they start freestyling in the car, leading into “Backseat Freestyle”, which marks the true beginning of the story.

The group decides to rob a house as depicted in “The Art of Peer Pressure”; the song includes detailed descriptions and self-reflections, in which the rapper acknowledges that these actions are out of character for him but feels compelled to participate because of

peer pressure, he is a *good kid*, but the *mad city* of Compton has a bad influence on him. After nearly getting caught, the group of friends get back to the car; Kendrick is offered a marijuana cigarette unknowingly mixed with cocaine. Under the influence of the drug, his friends bring him to Sherane's house ("Poetic Justice"), where the initial plot resumes and Kendrick is jumped by the two black figures, who start interrogating him.

As the titles might suggest, the following two songs, "good kid" and "m.A.A.d city" represent the album's core. In "*good kid*," Lamar lists the environmental influences that threaten a good kid like him: gang culture, police brutality and alcohol and drug abuse. The theme continues in "*m.A.A.d city*" a frantic and hysterical song reminiscent of Compton's reality. The voices are almost distorted and eerily, like the protagonist is hallucinating. The dream is suddenly interrupted and the line "*Wake yo' punk ass up*", performed by MCEiht, confirms that the song was a dream. Eiht, who had huge success in the *gangsta rap* days, acts as a sort of father figure, as he had already lived these experiences in the 80s, therefore his appearance symbolizes how they persist to this day but also an homage to the artists he grew up listening to. As the Mc explains to Moore:

We sat down, he played me the song and let me hear the hook. I came up with my verse and everything went like clockwork. He could've gotten anybody from Compton to be on the song, but because of the type of music I had put out, which always referenced Compton and the streets, that was the type of flavor he wanted on it. He was trying to bring an authentic cat who used to do rap back in the days, who came from that era. It was basically a studio conversation and him telling me that he wanted me to do what I was known for. (Moore 2020, 86)

Sadly, Compton is not a reality one can wake up from. In the next song, "Swimming Pools", after plotting revenge on those who assaulted Kendrick, his friend Dave is shot to death and in the 12-minute-long track, "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst", Kendrick has to face the consequences of the tragedies that the city brings. The song depicts two stories: of Dave's brother and a prostitute. In verse one, Dave's brother wants to avenge Dave and asks the rapper to memorialize the tragedy in his songs, in case he will not live enough to hear it; the verse is suddenly interrupted by gunshots, "implying that Dave's brother has met a similar fate before he could escape the cycle of violence" (Quan 2021). The other character is the sister of Keisha, from "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)" from Section.80 also reminiscent of 2Pac's "Brenda's Got a Baby", which told the tragic story of a prostitute who got abused and murdered. Like Dave's brother, the verse is cut short by the sound of gunshots, but her story will be mentioned again in *To Pimp a Butterfly*

(2015). Finally, the song's outro depicts Dave's brother and a group of friends gathering to avenge the lost friend. Exhausted by being surrounded by death, they resort to violence, since it is the only solution they know. Eventually, a woman, played by poet Maya Angelou, approaches the group after noticing a gun in the hand of Dave's brother. She starts reciting the "Sinner's prayer" heard in the first song, symbolizing a cathartic moment for Kendrick which culminates in the following song.

Finally, "Real" celebrates self-love, a spiritual victory for the character. The song ends with another skit from Kendrick's parents, this time the music does not stop, creating an impactful and moving moment for Kendrick's journey. His father consoles him over losing his friend and asks him not to learn the hard way like him, a callback to the moment told in the 2012 Spin interview. Paula encourages him to take his music seriously to give back to his community and *become a positive person*:

If I don't hear from you by tomorrow, I hope you come back and learn from your mistakes. Come back a man, tell your story to these black and brown kids in Compton. Let 'em know you was just like them, but you still rose from that dark place of violence, becoming a positive person. But when you do make it, give back with your words of encouragement, and that's the best way to give back. To your city... And I love you Kendrick [...].

Lastly, the sound of a tape being re-rounded, or fast-forwarded, signifies the album's end, even though there's another track after, the celebratory anthem "Compton", featuring Dr. Dre.

The album debuted at number 2 on the Billboard 200 chart going certified platinum in less than a year (Cuchna 2018), even surpassing Eminem's record as the longest-running hip-hop album in September 2019. As of April 2024, the album had spent over 600 weeks on the chart. It won Album of the Year at the 2013 BET Hip Hop Awards and earned five Grammy nominations. *good kid*, has been regarded as one of the best albums of the 2010s, with its material being also included in the English classes of Professor Adam Diehl at the Georgia Regents University.

2.6 To Pimp A Butterfly (2015)

2.6.1 Context to the Album

During the 2010s racial tensions continued to rise as numerous unarmed African Americans were killed by police officers across the States, often without facing any consequences. Many turned to the streets to express their frustration with a justice system

that appeared indifferent to the lives of one of the largest and most marginalized communities in the country. Once again, racial disparity continued to afflict black people, who still needed to fight to get their rightful, and most basic, rights recognized.

On February 26th, 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot dead by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, during a trip visiting his father and his father's fiancée. The boy briefly went to a supermarket when, while walking back, he was followed by a car. In the meantime, Zimmerman reported Trayvon to the police, describing him as a suspicious person. Though told otherwise, the 29-year-old gets out of the car and proceeds to shoot unarmed Martin, claiming it was self-defense (CNN 2024). At the time, Lamar was still on tour with Drake and A\$AP Rocky, though the happening shook him so much that he started drafting what would later become "The Blacker the Berry", a song about racial injustice and the experience of being black in the US.

In 2014, the deaths of Eric Gardner, Michael Brown Jr. and Tamir Rice, to name a few, shook the States as none of the police officers responsible – Daniel Pantaleo (Lockhart 2019), Darren Wilson (Basu, Yan and Ford 2014), and Timothy Loehmann (Siemaszko, Silva and Fieldstadt 2015) – were not indicted. Riots burst demanding justice and fair treatment by police. Many shared their support, among these Q-Tip, from the rap group A Tribe Called Quest, and rapper Macklemore joined protesters in the streets.

Many celebrities demonstrated their support, Q-Tip, from the rap group A Tribe Called Quest, and rapper Macklemore joined protesters in the streets. Lamar released "i" a song about self-love, which will appear on the upcoming album. Though perceived as tone-deaf in the eyes of the public, in the context of the album, it is a celebratory anthem that represents Kendrick's emersion from depression and self-harm. The rapper took it upon himself to discuss these themes on the new album, feeling a certain pressure from his fans and the general public who expected more given his past album.

Following the release of *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, he toured with Kanye West, opening the shows of the *Yeezus Tour* at the end of 2013. While on tour, he learned that Chad Keaton, brother of one of his longtime friends, had died due to complications from gunshot wounds. Lamar had promised Chad's brother to watch over him while incarcerated, but when the news came, he felt like he had failed his promise, he told GQ: "It all happened when I was overseas," he says. "I had to talk to him over Skype on the hospital bed before

he passed”. Since he was on tour, he had no time to process what happened and had to return to perform immediately:

He only made it "back to the set" to grieve for a single day, the day we were scheduled to talk. "It can be complicated and confusing," Kendrick says of his life right now, funerals for murdered friends one day, private jets to fashion parties the next. (Marsh 2013)

The accumulated emotions due to the loss of his friend and the guilt it brought to him, mixed with the pressure to be a role model to his fans while still performing as if nothing happened, made the artist break down in a depressive episode in a hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. Furthermore, in January of 2014, Kendrick attended the 56th Annual Grammy Awards. There were big expectations for *good kid, m.A.A.d city* to win Best Album or Best Rap Album, instead the win was “robbed” by Seattle rapper Macklemore and producer Ryan Lewis who collaborated in *The Heist* which included hits such as “Thrift Shop” and “Can’t Hold Us”. Compared to Kendrick’s work, Macklemore’s songs felt like mocking a genre known to be representative of black culture and minorities in general (Moore 2020, 11). Nonetheless, Macklemore won the Grammy for Best New Artist, Best Rap Performance, Best Rap Song, and Best Rap Album.

Following the Grammys, in winter of the same year, Kendrick traveled to South Africa to play a series of three shows in Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg. The trip came at a perfect time, as Kendrick needed a break. He visited Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated from whom he took inspiration for his next album, he got in touch with the culture and the locals, experiencing a sense of community like never before: “I never felt love like that. I never felt that much love in one place. Just love, like the energy of that” (Mahadevan 2022), something that he wanted to spread to his friends and family back home.

2.6.1 The Album

On March 2015, Kendrick released *To Pimp a Butterfly* which resumes his story from where the listener left off in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. The protagonist finds himself navigating the unfamiliar world of fame, unequipped and surrounded by vices, he will have to face deep survivor’s guilt and depression for leaving his loved ones in Compton. (Cuchna 2018). The album can be divided into 5 major acts, each symbolizing a moment in his transition from caterpillar to butterfly, towards a new self, free from the “jail” that is Compton and his mind. Though the artist doesn’t solely focus on his personal journey,

he continues his “mission” towards healing his community. Among the many themes, the project tackles the treatment of African Americans in today’s society and the exploitative nature of capitalism towards black artists, layering different stories and characters. *To Pimp a Butterfly* features a unique 70s and 80s-inspired funk and jazz sound achieved thanks to a talented collective of musicians, among these: producers Terrace Martin, Sounwave (Mark Spears), and TaeBeast (Donte Perkins); pianist Robert Glasper, bass virtuoso Thundercat (Stephen Bruner), saxophonist Kamasi Washington, and vocalists Anna Wise and Bilal. The sound is an homage to the great black artists who made history, and that Kendrick grew up listening to during his parents' parties: James Brown, The Isley Brothers, Sly Stone, Donal Byrd, Parliament, and Miles Davis. (Cuchna 2018)

The album’s seventh song “Alright”, aiming at shedding light on police brutality, became an anthem for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. In July 2015, during the protests following the death of Sandra Bland (who allegedly killed herself three days after getting arrested), the verse “*We gon be alright*” was heard throughout Cleveland, as a sign of unity between people. As the rapper stated in a 2017 interview with Rick Rubin, “Alright” was thought of as an uplifting song: “[...] Not playing the victim, but still having that ‘Yeah, we are strong.’” (GQ 2017) On June 28, 2015, he was invited to attend and perform at the 15th annual BET Awards where he sang “Alright” standing on top of a police car with an American flag in the background: a symbolic gesture at a time when racial injustice is still dividing the whole country. A FOX News segment sparked controversy when commentator Geraldo Rivera criticized Lamar’s performance claiming: “This is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in the recent years.” (Barajas 2017) the artist responded to the critic in a TMZ interview, where he affirmed: “How can you take a song that’s about hope, and turn it into hatred? [...] Hip-hop is not the problem. Our reality is the problem of the situation. This is our music. This is us expressing ourselves”. As said before, since the release of *good kid*, Kendrick always had the plan to fight for creating a positive world for those who grew up in difficult settings like Compton, and with the success of *To Pimp a Butterfly* finally showed him that it was possible.

Rather [than] going out here and doing the murders myself, I want to express myself in a positive light the same way other artists are doing. Not going out in the streets, go in the booth and talking about the situation and hoping these kids can find some type of influence on it in a positive manner. Coming from these

streets and coming from these neighborhoods, we're taking our talents and putting 'em inside the studio. (Stutz 2015)

Finally, at the 58th Grammy Awards, Kendrick won five awards, among these Best Rap Album for TPAB and Best Rap Song (“Alright”), a much-deserved victory, after what he went through in 2014. In March of 2016, TDE released *untitled, unmastered*, scrapped untitled songs that should have appeared on the album but eventually did not. “At times playful, the EP offered a rare peek into Kendrick’s creative brain and just where he was going for *To Pimp a Butterfly*” (Moore 2020, 166).

2.7 DAMN. (2017)

On November 9th, 2016, Donald J. Trump officially became the 45th United States President, a bittersweet win, given the candidate's blatant racism even questioning President Obama’s citizenship, affirming he was born in Kenya and demanding to see a birth certificate (Krieg 2016). Though he claimed to have “done more for African Americans in three years than the broken Washington establishment has done in more than 30 years” racial disparity continued (Cineas 2020).

During this time, Lamar stayed out of the public eye, nonetheless, he never stopped working and creating. In a 2019 interview with Redbull Music Academy, Sounwave, who contributed *To Pimp a Butterfly*, admitted that, while creating the 2015 album, Kendrick was already thinking about the next projects:

That’s Kendrick. He was on his fourth album, skip the third album. His brain is... I can’t explain it, but we literally just finished mastering *How To Pimp to Butterfly* and he was like, ‘Alright, that’s cool. So for this next album.’ I’m like, ‘Bro no, it’s not even out yet. Let it get out first and then we’ll start talking about it’ [...] (Miller, 2019)

For his upcoming album, he wanted to connect with the entire country, not just his peers, expressing his frustrations, fears, and pain.

On the 14th of April 2017, Lamar released “*DAMN.*”, his fourth studio album. It is a more cynical project, underlying the artist’s disillusionment as the voice of a generation, and the frustration towards his impact on the public (a theme also discussed on the track “Mortal Man” in TPAB) but also his difficult relationship with himself, dealing with his mental health and finding hope in God.

“BLOOD.” introduces the album's plot: Kendrick is walking when he sees a blind woman looking for something she apparently lost. He decides to help her, asking if she indeed

lost something, to which she replies “*Yes, you lost something/ You have lost your life*” and proceeds to kill him with a gunshot, as a somber voice says:

Is it wickedness?
Is it weakness?
You decide
Are we gonna live or die? (Lamar 2017)

Wickedness and weakness are the two major themes of the album, which can also be played in reverse, revealing two different versions of Lamar’s character (the wicked and the weak) both of whom will end tragically. The listener is free to start from the side he pleases, implying that the artist himself doesn’t admit whether he feels more wicked or weak. If the tracks are listened to in order we are presented with the story of “Kendrick the weak”, whose actions get slowly humbled as God tests his faith. The transition is also represented through the sound, which gradually becomes softer. Playing the album in reverse, however, we hear the story of “Kendrick the Wicked” who gives into temptations of greed, lust, and self-arrogance (Chinapen 2021).

For this album, he mainly collaborated with producer Sounwave (Mark Spears) who told GQ they even slept in the recording studio to achieve the perfect sound: “[...] we locked down the studio for months. Never left. Literally sleeping bags in the studio.” (Hyman 2017)

For *DAMN*. Kendrick received five more Grammys, and in 2018, a Pulitzer Prize for its “virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life” (Pulitzer.org) making history as the first time the award was given to an artist outside the classical or jazz community.

During the *DAMN. Tour* director Ryan Coogler reached out to Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith, and later Lamar, to create a few songs for the upcoming Disney and Marvel movie “Black Panther” (Ameen, Madden 2018). Given the themes discussed in the film, Lamar and producer Sounwave eventually decided to produce a whole album from scratch (Santosuosso 2018). The two were given complete creative control, allowing them to explore a sound they usually would not. Acoustically, the soundtrack combines South African sounds, with various instruments such as the talking drums, verses in Zulu, and rap. It was the first time a rap album was featured in a Disney production.

2.8 Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers (2022)

After *DAMN.*, he withdrew again from the public scene coming back for a few sporadic interviews but still releasing a few songs. In July 2019, his first daughter Uzi was born. Lamar always tried to keep his relationship and his family private, though he opens up in his fifth studio album.

In 2021 the blog *oklama.com* was launched, in which he shared a series of announcements. In August Lamar published a message: he had been living a quiet life, focused on “writing, listening and collecting old Beach cruisers” even going months without using the phone. A period in which he reflected on his personal journey and prepared to leave TDE to embark on a new venture. On the 5th of March 2022, through a Baby Keem video (cousin of Kendrick Lamar) it is announced the creation of pgLang, “a multilingual, artist-friendly service company” cofounded by Dave Free (Mamo, 2020). On the 18th of April, a note appears on the website: “From the desk of oklama”, Lamar’s fifth studio album will be released on the 13th of May 2022. The name *oklama*, carries multiple meanings, one being “o” indicating a zero, which could symbolize a starting point, and “lama” an abbreviation of “Lamar”, since Kendrick announced the end of his collaboration with TDE. “Oklama” could also refer to a native Choctaw word which translates to “my people” also used in some passages of the Bible in which a prophet refers to the people of God (De Laurentis 2023).

On the 8th of May, “The Heart Part 5” is released. It is a common practice for Lamar to release new versions of “The Heart” right before the publication of each of his albums as it prepares the listener with the themes explored in the upcoming projects. In this case, grief and hurt are the focus of the album, which the rapper claims have been romanticized by modern society:” In the land where hurt people hurt more people/Fuck callin’ it culture” (Gee et al. 2022). In the music video, Lamar’s face morphs into those of famous black men: O.J. Simpson, Will Smith, Jussie Smollett, Kobe Bryant, Kanye West, and Nipsey Hussle as to underline the duality of Kendrick, the good and the bad (the weak and the wicked).

On the 13th of May 2022, *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers* is published. The album is structured like an open therapy session in which Kendrick is not afraid to admit to his sins and where the listener is invited to participate. Throughout the album’s first part, Whitney

Alford, Lamar's wife, advises his husband to go to therapy and "reach out to Eckhart" – referring to spiritual leader Eckart Tolle – who guides the artist in his journey.

In "United in Grief", the first track, he admits having been egotistic, materialistic, and obsessed with sexual pleasure which caused him to cheat on his partner:

I've been going through somethin'
One thousand eight hundred and fifty five days
I've been going through something
Be afraid (Lamar 2022)

"1855 days" is the time passed since the release of "*DAMN.*", during this time, he got married and saw the birth of his children, the reason for his willingness to change. The whole family can be seen on the cover, in which the artist is holding his son, with a gun in his trousers as he sings "Life as a protective father, I'd kill for her" (Lamar, 2022, track 3). He is often seen wearing a diamond thorn crown, similar to Jesus Christ's leading up to his crucifixion; according to British Vogue, it is a symbol of "artistic prowess, humility and perseverance" and "for the rapper, it serves as a nod of respect to the artists who came before him." (McDermott 2022) Lamar is juxtaposing himself with the religious figure alluding to his longstanding objective to be a guide (a Messiah) for his community.



Figure 2 Album cover
Shot by Renell Medrano, via oklama.com

"Count Me Out" is the first track of the album's second part, it represents a breakthrough as he starts a new chapter of his life, willing to battle his savior complex already acknowledged in *To Pimp a Butterfly* during his mental breakdown in "u". In the first part of the song, Kendrick looks back at the promises he made to his fans in the past, what his mother asked in "Real" ("good kid, m.A.A.d city"), and what he promised his younger

self in “Momma” (“To Pimp a Butterfly”): to be an advocate for change and speak out for his people. However, he has come to a point where he can’t do it alone, he can’t save a whole community by himself, in “Savior” he admits: “The cat is out of the bag, I’m not your Savior” (Lamar, 2022). The album ends on a positive note, as in “Mirror” he says: “I chose me, I’m sorry” (Lamar 2022).

CHAPTER 3

This chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of 2015 *To Pimp A Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar. An album that profoundly changed the hip-hop scene of the 2010s influencing its sound and shedding light on themes from racial disparity, colorism, self-acceptance, and most importantly mental health. The album consists of 16 tracks and can be divided into four acts, structured around a narrative of transformation from his Compton (caterpillar) mentality to his newfound role as a guide to his community (butterfly). Throughout the analysis, I will distinguish between Kendrick Lamar the character and narrator of the album, whom I will refer to as simply “Kendrick”, and the author and singer Kendrick Lamar or simply Lamar; in order to separate the matured artist from the naïve and flawed character on a journey to find himself again.

3.1 Context and plot

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 2014 Lamar embarked on a pivotal trip in South Africa where he visited Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg, and toured historical sites like Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated. Meanwhile, in the US, a series of protests burst after the killing of multiple black men by white police officers who were not indicted. The uprisings generated debates about racial disparity, police brutality, and the unfairness of the justice system in the country. Many celebrities intervened by participating in the demonstrations, speaking out on social media, and even releasing thought-provoking songs.

While *good kid, m.A.A.d city* was a prevalently autobiographical project, at times including everyday episodes from life in Compton, *To Pimp A Butterfly* parallels autobiographical excerpts and elements of the story of African Americans, shedding light on their struggles and exploitation in today’s capitalistic society. The album is filled with intricate layers, stories – at times calling back to previous releases – and characters. In line with Gates’ *signifyin(g)* theory of African American artistic and literary tradition as centered around symbolism, metaphors, and intertextual relations (Gates 2014).

The album also features a funk and jazz sound, inspired by the 1970s and early 1980s music – that Lamar used to listen to at his parent’s parties in the living room as a kid – to pay homage to black musicians who got mistreated and exploited throughout their careers.

The story resumes where the 2012 album left off: newly signed to Dr. Dre's label, Kendrick, the protagonist, gets transported into the unfamiliar world of fame with the promise to return to Compton as a changed man, and a role model to his community. But having lived all his life in the somewhat enclosed city, the rapper is unprepared to navigate an industry filled with wealth, temptation, and bureaucracy and gets consequently swallowed in Uncle Sam's (and later, Lucifer's) consumeristic trap, where he is exploited (or "pimped") like other black artists before him. Lamar will have to embark on a personal journey to deal with his personal demons and survivor's guilt, to take control of his life. As the album progresses, a poem unfolds, culminating in the final track "Mortal Man", in which the protagonist reads it to the late Tupac Shakur.

The album was originally called "To Pimp a Caterpillar" which abbreviates to "T(o)PAC", as a nod to Shakur, but was eventually changed to "Butterfly", creating a striking contrast between the darkness of the verb "to pimp" and the lightness and beauty of the butterfly, symbolizing Lamar's transformation. The butterfly represents the rise from a place of depression to a newfound self, where the artist uses his fame to help his community, effectively taking advantage of the situation for a higher purpose (MTV 2014).

3.2 Album analysis

3.2.1 Act 1

Act 1 is composed of "Wesley's Theory", "For Free" and "King Kunta", introductory to Kendrick's character after fame and before his transformation into a "butterfly", representing himself as naïve and "uneducated" to navigate in an environment like the music industry.

3.2.1.1 Wesley's Theory

While *good kid, m.A.A.d city* often included the sound of cassettes and tapes being forwarded or re-rounded, *To Pimp A Butterfly* opens with the crackling noise of a record needle, symbolizing the period that influenced the album's sound, the 1970s. The record plays a dreamy sound, as Boris Gardiner casually sings "Every nigga is a star". In the '70s, Gardiner intended to change the perception of the word, encouraging black people to use and transform it into a positive word, similar to what Lamar will do later in the album (Genius.com). As the listener prepares to be catapulted into Lamar's world, the

music is suddenly interrupted by an exclamatory “Hit me!” reminiscent of James Brown, and a groovy sound right after.

An ominous voice starts reciting a prediction: “When the four corners of this cocoon collide/ You'll slip through the cracks hopin' that you'll survive/Gather your wit, take a deep look inside/Are you really who they idolize?/To Pimp A Butterfly” (2015). After becoming a celebrity, Kendrick abandons the chaotic Compton for a new life of fame and temptation. In an attempt to survive, he will question himself, his morals, and the nature of success: Is he the one the fans idolize? Or is he just a character? This is *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

The chorus describes Lamar’s relationship with music as toxic, which started as genuine love but evolved into an exploitative bond that lured Kendrick in to exploit his talents for fame even making him leave his friends and family (“Bridges burned, all across the board/Destroyed, but what for?” (2015)), something that will lead him into a depressive episode.

In the first verse, the listener is introduced to Kendrick’s juvenile mindset after signing his first deal. The young rapper dreams of recklessly spending all his fortune, recreating what other rappers previously did in the music videos he saw as a kid. He even dreams of putting “the Compton swap meet by the White House”, a reference to the album cover, with a striking juxtaposition between the position of the judge and the empowering one of the black men in the background.

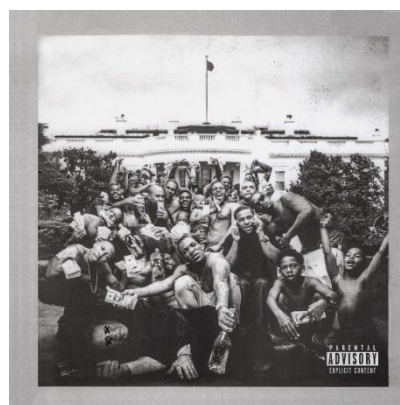


Figure 3 Album cover
Shot by Chris Buck, via Spotify

The verse concludes with the line: “Uneducated, but I got a million-dollar check like that” (2015) which summarizes Lamar’s character at the time, young and naïve who rapidly became rich not knowing how to handle everything that came with it. The refrain: “We

should never gave niggas money/Go back home” (2015), inspired by a Rick James skit from the Chappelle Show, is a metaphor for the treatment of African Americans in the United States. Although the *American Dream* promised infinite opportunities, black people historically had been regarded as a burden and therefore had to fight an uphill battle to achieve the most basic rights. The line mirrors what would have been the perception of white society towards the black community: that things would be easier if they “went back home”. Furthermore, the line foreshadows Lamar’s pivotal trip to South Africa in 2014 alluding to the comedian Dave Chappelle’s one, also to South Africa, which he took at the height of his fame in search for clarity.

The verse is followed by a voicemail in which Dr. Dre advises the young rapper to be careful about the downside of success: “Remember the first time you came out to the house?/You said you wanted a spot like mine/But remember, anybody can get it/The hard part is keepin' it” (2015), meaning that anyone can become famous, but it is difficult not to get exploited.

The warning is interrupted by the second verse, where Uncle Sam (played by Kendrick Lamar) tempts young Kendrick with material goods, promising anything he wants – “What you want you? A house or a car? /Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?” (2015) – but subtly implies that everything comes with a cost, as previously said by Dr. Dre. “Forty acres and a mule” is the first hint of the deceitful promise, it refers to the “Special Field Order No. 15” issued by Union General William T Sherman which granted newly freed black families 40 acres of land and a mule as the basis for economic independence. However, after the assassination of President Lincoln, the issue was revoked and the land returned to its former owners (Gates, n.d.). The line became a metaphor, and symbol, for the empty promises that the US gave to black people. Similarly, Uncle Sam lures the young rapper into reckless spending while reminding him that, despite his wealth, he lacks the power to change the system, and is therefore weak and prone to be taken advantage of: “ And when you hit the White House, do you/But remember, you ain't pass economics in school/And everything you buy, taxes will deny/I'll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five (Yeah)” (2015). Wesley Snipe is a famous African American actor who served time for tax evasion in 2008; also “35 years old” is the legal age to run for president of the US, Lamar is implying that Uncle Sam (and the States) will stop his ascension to fame through taxes, publishing rights, and contracts like other black musicians before him –

Ron Isley (from the Isley Brothers), James Brown, and Lauryn Hill, to name a few (Wete 2014) – for an uneducated person like young Kendrick at the time, it is easy to get “Wesley Sniped” (Moore 2020, 122). Another warning closes the song: “Look both ways before you cross my mind” and “Tax man comin’”, advising the artist to be careful when navigating the world outside Compton.

3.2.1.2 For Free? - Interlude

The second track, “For Free”, produced by Terrace Martin and pianist Robert Glasper, is a frantic and dynamic jazz song, with spoken words and slam-style poetry (Cuchna 2018). It is primarily a critique of the US capitalistic system and its consequent exploitative nature towards black people.

The song starts with a woman yelling at Kendrick, diminishing his character and self-worth, critiquing him to the point that he is reduced to a mere source of materialist benefits. The woman is probably an allegory for “America”, asking for gifts but never getting satisfied, consequently representing how Lamar is exploited by the industry and society, which view him only as a source of entertainment and profit. Kendrick blends satire and humor by responding with: “This dick ain’t free”, repeated multiple times, to the exhaustion even. With the line: “Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich” (2015), Lamar underlines how African American work has been historically overlooked and underappreciated, trying to keep black people under control to this day.

Lamar has given in to the requests of “America”, now under the resemblance of a woman who at the end of the song threatens to call Uncle Sam to hurt Kendrick if he tries to oppose. Despite what was advised by his close ones in the previous song, the character has fallen into Uncle Sam’s trap; though blinded by his material wealth, Lamar overlooks his situation, and in the next song returns to Compton as “King Kunta” bragging about his new life as king.

3.2.1.3 King Kunta

While the previous songs were lyrically intricate, “King Kunta” stands out for his laid-back sound and “sung style”, reminiscent of 1990s West Coast rap. According to producer Sounwave, the initial song was much more complex, and Lamar eventually simplified it to the beat heard today (Bowman 2015), according to Bungert, to give listeners a better chance to focus on the song’s message (Bungert 4). The beat sampled “Get Nekkid” by

Compton rapper Mousberg, also known for being part of the Bloods gang, a sort of homage to his hometown while still acknowledging his violent aspect.

The title references Kunta Kinte, the protagonist of Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and ancestor to the novel's author. In the chorus, Lamar sings: "King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him" (2015) referencing a passage of the story in which Kinte's foot is cut off to prevent his escape from the plantation. Lamar presents a powerful oxymoron: he compares himself as both a king and a slave, presenting as self-assured but at the same time facing the pressure to conform to the industry's demands (represented by Uncle Sam).

The identification of "king" is a call back to Lamar's feature in Big Sean's "Control" in 2013, in which the rapper declared: "I'm the King of New York/King of the Coast; one hand, I juggle 'em both" (Big Sean 2013). However, the same industry that gave him wealth and power got him under control like a slave. The song does not just talk about his experience but also the struggles of the whole African American community, which are still being exploited by the capitalistic system on which the US is based. To this day, black identity is still based on the "double consciousness" that Du Bois spoke about in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), torn between being "African" and still not being quite accepted as "American". Black artists like Kendrick Lamar are being celebrated but at the same time limited by the (racialized) expectations imposed by the industry, this theme will be confronted again in the 13th track, "The Blacker The Berry" in which Lamar fully expresses his anger towards the system and the institutionalized racism, reflecting on black identity and the struggles that his community still face today.

The theory is confirmed at the end of the song, as the rapper recites the first verse of the poem: "I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence" (2015). Until this point, Kendrick's actions were largely self-serving, reflecting his immaturity, where he flaunts his wealth only to impress his friends in Compton – the same peer pressure already witnessed in *good kid, m.A.A.d city* which got him to rob a house and get drunk. Looking back on his actions, Lamar realizes, in a moment of self-awareness, the need to change, foreshadowing his journey.

3.2.2 Act 2

The second act is made up of: “Institutionalized”, “These walls”, and “u”, each song symbolizing obstacles – institutions, selfishness, and intrusive thoughts – that prevent Kendrick from emerging out of his cocoon and starting his journey.

3.2.2.1 Institutionalized

Firstly, “Institutionalized” is centered around the theme of institutional racism and how the “*gangsta mentality*” still affects Kendrick even after leaving Compton. Institutional racism can be defined as discriminatory practices aimed toward a minority by political and social institutions. In an article by Us News, Jeff Nesbit reports evidence of the double standard in the treatment of African Americans compared to white people, which starts from an early age and accompanies black people for their whole life (from school to the workplace) (Nesbit 2015).

Kendrick reveals to be trapped in a cocoon created by both internal and external factors, among these, is institutional racism which creates lasting impacts in predominantly black neighborhoods, leading to ghettoization, poverty, and violence.

The songs start with Lamar speaking with a high-pitched voice, in the album voice manipulation signals the presence of another character, in this case, a younger Kendrick: “What money got to do with it/ When I don't know the full definition of a rap image?/I'm trapped inside the ghetto and I ain't proud to admit it/ Institutionalized, I keep runnin' back for a visit, hol' up [...] Institutionalized, I could still kill me a nigga, so what?” (2015).

Like a stream of consciousness, even after experiencing success and leaving Compton he remains psychologically tied to his past. Lamar admits to still being influenced by the *gangsta mentality*, and to have given in thoughts about killing someone in his own community, something that will come back to haunt him again in the album. Still, in the chorus, when given the chance to hold the most prestigious position in the United States, a role as president, Lamar is again preoccupied with material things.

If I was the president
I'd pay my mama's rent
Free my homies and them
Bulletproof my Chevy doors
Lay in the White House and get high, Lord
Whoever thought?
Master, take the chains off me! (2015)

Once again, this passage proves what was previously stated by bell hooks, that in marginalized communities, self-worth is measured by wealth and violence rather than self-growth, therefore institutional racism is a mindset that is perpetuated in these neighborhoods through generations (hooks 2004) (Cuchna 2018). To Lamar, the new life has not brought him the fulfillment he expected, but instead, it left him feeling alienated from his friends who are still tied to a “hood” mentality, which is vividly described in an episode he recounts. Kendrick brought some of his friends to the BET Awards, as declared in “Wesley’s Theory”, but rather than celebrating his achievements, the group sees an opportunity to rob the artists in the room – looking at them “like they’re harvests”. Snoop Dogg’s entry with “And once upon a time, in a city so divine [...]” is a nod to Slick Rick’s 1989 “Children’s Story”, a cautionary tale about two kids who start robbing people, one of them eventually becoming addicted until getting ultimately killed by a policeman. The contrast between the song’s theme and the genre in which it is told emphasizes the harsh reality that some kids in neighborhoods like Compton experience every day, expressing the dissonance between Lamar’s life before and after success.

The second verse is told through one of Kendrick’s friend’s points of view, which tries to justify the behavior as a “defense mechanism”, something learned from a young age and born to institutionalized oppression. Seeing successful black men and women flaunting their wealth reminds his friends of his limited opportunities, where success is highly unlikely. Lamar is an exception which only deepens the friend’s frustration which angers him to the point of stealing. Kendrick finds himself in a difficult position, while his intentions were pure – sharing his new experience with his friends – he has not realized how deep-rooted the institutionalized mind is among those who have not left Compton, which is confirmed by the line “You can take your boy out the hood/ But you can’t take the hood out the homie”. This experience has left Kendrick confused about his place in the world, still ill-equipped to navigate his new life of success but distanced from the person he once was in Compton.

3.2.2.2 These Walls

The following song, “These Walls”, opens with another verse from the poem: “I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence/ Sometimes, I did the same”. Lamar now admits to misusing his power, his fame, to get revenge, he tells how he had a sexual relationship with a woman who happens to have children with a man in jail. The

man is responsible for killing “Dave”, Kendrick’s friend who got shot at the end of “Sing About Me, I’m Dying Of Thirst” in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Lamar’s lyrics keep the listener engaged throughout the song, confused about who the girl is and the reasons for his actions, until it is revealed in the last verse.

The symbol of the “walls” represents Kendrick’s cocoon, the beginner stage of his journey, and symbolizes the rapper’s weaknesses already stated above: women (lust), his mind, and institutional racism - represented through the prison cell, which is also where the men he got revenged on is confined – that stop him from emerging out of his past persona.

3.2.2.3 u

The poem is repeated, this time serving as an introduction for “u”, where the final verses set the scene of the next song:

I remember you was conflicted
Misusing your influence
Sometimes I did the same
Abusing my power, full of resentment
Resentment that turned into a deep depression
Found myself screaming in a hotel room (2015)

Kendrick is in a hotel room, screaming at himself, reflecting on his actions in “These Walls”. After taking advantage of a vulnerable and lonely woman - the mother to his friend’s killer’s children – he feels ashamed and realizes that the revenge did not make him feel vindicated as he thought it would. The anger unleashes his bottled emotions, leading the rapper to confess his private insecurities, including a profound survivor’s guilt for entering a successful new life while leaving his loved ones back in Compton. His voice is unsteady, and the words slurred, mimicking a drunken state that combined with the harsh self-criticism, makes the listener almost feel uneasy and vulnerable.

The song is inspired by a real-life event, that happened in a hotel in Atlanta in 2013 while touring with Kanye West, during which Lamar lost three friends, Braze, Chad Keaton, and Big Pup, as he shared in an MTV interview:

I pulled that song not only from previous experiences but I think my whole life. I think everything is drawn out of that, even situations from *good kid, m.A.A.d city* [...]. And when I was on that tour bus and things were happening in the city, or in my family, that I can’t do nothing about [...], that can draw a thin line between

you having your sanity or you losing it and this is how artists deteriorate. (MTV 2015)

Lamar already spoke on these themes in a feature in a YG song “Really Be (Smokin N Drinkin)” where he also used the same voice inflection:

I'm on this tour bus and I'm fucked up
I got a bad call, they killed Braze
They killed Chad, my big homie Pupp
Puppy eyes on my face, bruh
And I really be drinkin', why the fuck I really been smokin'? (YG 2014)

The track begins with two screams, as Kendrick stands in front of a mirror he begins repeating: “Loving you is complicated” while in the background, a frantic piano sound reflects the artist’s chaotic state of mind; overwhelmed by his emotions, the only thing that could bring him relief is alcohol. The line also references a poem written by Tupac Shakur and included in the posthumous book *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* (2000), where he shares his internal conflicts about love (Cuchna 2018).

In verse one, Kendrick begins criticizing himself in a raw, emotional, and poignant rant about claiming to be a king but not being able to reach his close ones, questioning his leadership. The verse ends abruptly, sounds of glasses and liquor bottles can be heard throughout the song, a person then knocks on the door, it is the housekeeper who has to clean the room, also confirming the setting of the song. The brief interruption could also be another example of Kendrick’s confused state, which makes it difficult to focus only on one thing. The track resumes, taking a dark turn as he blames himself for the death of Chad who couldn’t visit at the hospital because of the tour, and instead, video-called him until he passed away – “A friend never leave Compton for profit, or leave his best friend, little brother/You promised you’d watch him before they shot him” (2015). At the end of the verse, the sound of crying and sniffing can also be heard.

In the third verse, he takes his subconscious point of view, threatening himself to reveal his secrets: he confesses not speaking to a couple of people in Compton (having a “beef” with them), confirming that the institutionalized dynamics in the city keep on influencing him, and admits to having suicidal thoughts. The passage confirms how Kendrick is confined in the metaphorical walls of his mind and haunted by his past actions he finds himself at his most vulnerable. The song marks the end of the second act, in which his weaknesses are exposed as he manages to balance his Compton upbringing with his new

life. In the following act, the protagonist begins anew, trying to emerge out of his cocoon and eventually announcing the defeat of Uncle Sam.

3.2.3 Act 3

Kendrick wakes up after his dark confession, with a new and optimistic outlook on life, willing to overcome his suffering. In an attempt to defeat Uncle Sam, he meets Lucy (short for Lucifer) who also tries to lure Kendrick into reckless spending, promising to give him everything he wants in order to control him. Eventually, Kendrick goes back to Compton, looking back at his achievements so far but then realizing there is so much more he has to do. Finally, he takes a pivotal trip to South Africa, which deepens his existential crisis, leaving him to choose between “good” and “evil”, forcing him to take ahold of his destiny. Act 3 includes: “Alright”, “For Sale”, “Momma”, “Hood Politics”, and “How Much A Dollar Cost”.

3.2.3.1 Alright

“Alright” became an anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement as protesters would sing the chorus in protests across the States, in hopes for a better future.

The song opens with: “Alls my life, I has to fight” (2015) a reference to Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel symbolic of the continuous fight of the black community for equal rights. In the album, it represents a triumphal moment for Kendrick who tries to get back up after the events of the previous song.

In the first verse, Lamar tells how he has woken up with newfound clarity, deciding to face Uncle Sam, which the listener has grown to recognize for his exploitative intentions (“I recognize you're looking at me for the pay cut” (2015)) until is finally killed (“But homicide be looking at you from the face down” (2015)). The verse draws parallels between Kendrick’s fight and the violence endured by black people by the police: “And we hate po-po/Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigga/I'm at the preacher's door/My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow/But we gon' be alright” (2015); the image of kneeling symbolizes both the act of praying and the position of submission when stopped and searched by police (Genius.com).

Kendrick confides in God to help him overcome his fears and protect him, but in the second verse, his faith is threatened by the presence of Lucy (Lucifer the devil) who attempts to corrupt the rapper like Uncle Sam in “Wesley’s Theory”. Lucy’s intentions

are particularly visible in “For Sale”, an interlude linked to “For Free”, the second song of the album, which lists the temptations of the new villain of the story. The song also introduces another two lines of the poem: “The evils of Lucy was all around me/So I went runnin' for answers” (2015).

3.2.3.2 For Sale? - Interlude

The track starts with heavy breathing that is interrupted by a dreamy sound, meaning Kendrick might be dreaming. The hypnotic vocals support the idea of Kendrick’s subconscious speaking to him in the form of a dream:

What's wrong, nigga?
I thought you was keeping it gangsta
I thought this what you wanted
They say if you scared, go to church
But remember, he knows the Bible too (2015)

The first lines are a call back to “Wesley’s Theory” and “King Kunta” in which Kendrick’s bravado stood out, flaunting his success and wealth. It is also a mockery of Lamar’s vulnerability shown in “u”, which contrasts with the stereotypical behavior of rappers. The phrase “If you are scared go to church” is mostly used in the hip-hop community of the West Coast and can be heard in a series of songs like: “Rather Be Ya Nigga” (1996) by 2Pac and Richie Rich, Snoop Dogg’s “Freestyle Conversation” (1996), and Ice Cube “Go to church” (2006). It is a reminder that in street life, one can only be saved by faith and God. But to Kendrick, not even church is a safe space, because “he [Lucifer] knows the Bible too”, given he once was an angel.

Similarly to Uncle Sam, Lucy appears as a fun and bubbly person but cleverly drops hints of her true intentions: “Smoking, lokin', poking that doja 'til I'm idle with you” (2015), she wants to keep Kendrick under control and manipulate him into thinking they are involved in a romantic relationship:

I remember you took me to the mall last week, baby
You looked me in my eyes about four, five times
'Til I was hypnotized, then you clarified
That I (Want you)
You said Sherane ain't got nothing on Lucy
I said, "You crazy?"
Roses are red, violets are blue
But me and you both pushing up daisies if I (Want you) (2015)

The first line is a reference to the second verse of “Alright” in which Lucy introduced herself: “[...] see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog/ Motherfucker, you can live at the mall” (2015), the mall is representative of reckless spending and capitalism, the intrinsic qualities of the two antagonists of the album. Lucy has Kendrick in a spell; hypnotized, in front of her he acts like a teenager, reciting poems like “Roses are Red”, demonstrating how the relationship is not based on reciprocated love. It should also be noted how Lamar adds nods to his 2012 album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, this time referencing his love interest Sherane, for whom Kendrick had stolen his mother’s car to meet in the middle of the night, on the other side of the city, controlled by a rival gang that the girl’s family is also affiliated with. The final phrase “pushing up daisies” is slang for death, indicating the flowers that usually grow on top of graves and that the relationship could end with the death of the protagonist (Genius.com).

In verse two, Lucy admits to having known Kendrick for all his life, and leverages on his loved ones to get him: “Lucy gon' fill your pockets/Lucy gon' move your mama out of Compton/Inside the gi-gantic mansion like I promised” (2015) in exchange for a contract signed, a literal pact with the devil.

Lucy represents an internal reaction to Lamar’s vulnerability, which similarly to “For Free” makes him return home once again in search of answers. The song ends with another poem line: “The evils of Lucy was all around me/So I went runnin' for answers/Until I came home” (2015).

3.2.3.3 Momma

In “Momma” Kendrick returns back home, this time more experienced and humbler. The title references the place where it all began, his hometown, which metaphorically welcomes him back as the chorus recites: “We been waitin' for you/Waitin' for you” (2015), though the line takes another meaning in the second verse. As Kendrick recounts everything he has learned this far, but realizes he still has to mature and embarks on a new trip in South Africa: “Until I realized I didn't know shit, the day I came home” (2015). This time the chorus refers to “Mother Africa” who had been waiting for Kendrick.

Once in Africa, in the third verse, the rapper meets a boy who reminds him of his younger self: “Nappy afro, gap in his smile, hand-me-down sneakers” (2015). Kendrick recalls

their conversation, which likely happened in his head given they speak different languages: “He looked at me and said, “Kendrick, you do know my language/ You just forgot because of what public schools had painted” (2015), the language he refers is not verbal but cultural, it is the African heritage shared through Lamar’s ancestors. However, the Western public system has influenced Kendrick’s way of perceiving Africa, and therefore lacks familiarity with the culture, nonetheless, the boy makes him feel a deep connection to his roots.

The kid acknowledges Lamar’s fame but redirects the conversation to make him rethink his actions, mostly driven by his ego, and selfishness which have changed him: “Spoiled by fantasies of who you are, I feel bad for you” (2015). The boy even offers to pass down some knowledge, but Kendrick needs to be ready to accept it: “But if you pick destiny over rest-in-peace/Then be an advocate, tell your homies, especially/To come back home” (2015). Lamar finds himself at a crossroads: “Pick destiny” or “rest in peace”, utilize his fame and status to be an advocate for his community, or give in to the temptation and stay on the path that will inevitably lead to damnation.

The second part of the song includes a frantic interlude in which Kendrick is thrown, once again, into an existential crisis, this time showing signs of change:

I been lookin' for you my whole life, an appetite
For the feeling I can barely describe, where you reside?
Is it in a woman, is it in money or mankind?
I been lookin' for you my whole life, an appetite
For the feeling I can barely describe, where you reside?
Is it in a woman, is it in money, or mankind?
Tell me something, think I'm losing my mind, ah! (2015)

The search for happiness has, so far, been based on women and money, but after Africa, his perspective has changed, now adding “mankind”. The interlude summarizes the pivotal question of the album: how does one use his power? For good or for evil?

3.2.3.4 Hood Politics

Lamar’s journey has just begun, he is still not ready to answer the fundamental question the album poses and is torn. The crisis continues in “Hood Politics” after Kendrick listens to a friend’s voicemail (played by Dr. Dre). Since he is always busy with his new work, the friend can’t help but leave messages and lightheartedly jokes about fame changing the way Kendrick is now living, even addressing him with his former stage name “K-Dot”,

and – “Don't tell me they got you on some weirdo rap shit, nigga/ No socks and skinny jeans and shit, [laugh]” (2015). Even if lighthearted, Kendrick takes the message personally, not wanting to appear different to his friends in Compton, he tries to prove himself.

In the first verse, Lamar raps with a high-pitched vocal inflection which, as seen before, indicates that he is embodying his younger self. The content of the verse is “hood politics”, referencing the violent dynamics between gangs in cities like Compton, therefore Lamar starts rapping targeting an imaginary rival, only to prove to his peers that he can still channel the attitude K-Dot used to have during his teenage years (“14 years later going hard like we used to” (2015)).

In verse two, Lamar takes the listener on a typical day in Compton, in which a friend warns him that a rival gang is coming to fight, taking the opportunity to reflect on the ever-present tension and frustration in the area: “Oh, yeah? Everything is everything, it's scandalous/ Slow motion for the ambulance, the project filled with cameras/The LAPD gamblin', scramblin'” (2015), instead of helping change the dynamics and the vicious cycle of violence in these underprivileged neighborhoods, society and government focuses on the high-rate crimes and takes every chance they get to film it, perpetuating the stereotype of people in ghettos only being criminals. The cities are filled with new and rising gangs (“They tell me it's a new gang in town” (2015)), a product of the government's neglect which Lamar has seen first-hand during his childhood, amidst the War on Drugs by the Raegan presidency.

Lamar parallels the hypocrisy of the government towards these communities, to the same dynamics among politicians inside Congress (“From Compton to Congress” (2015)), though their actions affect the whole country: “Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-icans/ Red state versus a blue state—which one you governin'?!/ They give us guns and drugs, call us thugs [...]” (2015).

The song then reverts devils into “Hip-hop politics”, where rappers battle each other with “diss” tracks and rivalries, only to prove who is real or not, yet fail to support those who could become mainstream alone (“If you did, then Killer Mike'd be platinum” (2015)), a nod to Killer Mike, who was widely overlooked despite his abilities and politically conscious lyrics. Lamar critiques the lack of support, suggesting that if the hip-hop community truly valued those who are “real” then artists like Killer Mike would have

platinum projects. Lamar himself brought change to the rap scene in 2013, where in verse in Big Sean's "Control" he called out a series of artists, sparking excitement without escalating into violent rivalries like the once Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac fell victim to in the 1990s.

The song is a commentary on authenticity, with the chorus reciting: "I been A-1 since day one, you niggas boo-boo", where "A1" means that something is genuine and "boo-boo" is slang for being a nobody, which is applied to both the "hood" and "the government", but also to Lamar's personal journey in trying to convince himself to be the same he once was in Compton. The conflictual state is also expressed in the new lines of the poem, summarizing what the listener has witnessed so far:

[...] Until I came home
But that didn't stop survivors guilt
Going back and forth
Trying to convince myself the stripes I earned
Or maybe how A-1 my foundation was
But while my loved ones was fighting a continuous war
Back in the city
I was entering a new one (2015)

Though "Momma" seemed like a step forward, "Hood Politics" displays how, no matter how much Kendrick denies it, he is still institutionalized and affected by the dynamics of Compton, *fighting a continuous war* between his new self and his old one.

3.2.3.5 How Much a Dollar Cost

"How Much a Dollar Cost" is the pivotal point of the album in which Lamar confronts his relationship with money. Set in South Africa, it is inspired by the rapper's trip to the country, in which he observed the people's struggles and poverty. The song tells a powerful and moving story of Kendrick's encounter with a poor beggar who asks for a dollar (10 Rand). Skeptical, the artist refuses, until the man makes him confront himself, questioning his values and journey so far.

How much a dollar really cost?
The question is detrimental, paralyzin' my thoughts
Parasites in my stomach keep me with a gut feeling, y'all
Gotta see how I'm chillin' once I park this luxury car
Hopping out feeling big as Mutombo
"20 on pump 6," dirty Marcellus called me Dumbo
Twenty years ago, can't forget
Now I can lend him a ear or two

How to stack these residuals tenfold (2015)

Kendrick begins by reflecting on the cost of money and the complex relationship it has with it. To him the question is *detrimental*, money brings him pride for having come so far than the people he grew up with, but also anxiety to maintain his status. The constant need to display his wealth traces back to a childhood where he was bullied, triggering a defense mechanism that pushes him to prove himself and rise above others. Lamar acknowledges being narrow-minded and individualistic, feeling ashamed and revealing how this pursuit of success has been driven by his personal insecurity, a personal struggle of his.

Suddenly, Kendrick is brought to reality as a homeless man asks him for 10 Rand, the equivalent of a dollar. The rapper is reluctant to give it as he assumes the man would use it to buy drugs, so he refuses: “I told him I ain't have it and closed my door/Tell me, how much a dollar cost?” (2015). The last line takes a different tone after the chorus, by James Fauntleroy: “It’s more to feed your mind/Water, sun, and love, the one you love/All you need, the air you breathe” (2015), what is a dollar compared to all the thing one already has? It seems Kendrick has lost track of what is important in life, too busy surrounding himself with material temptations.

Kendrick feels compelled to stay, as the man *stares at him in disbelief* almost making him feel insecure which is expressed with anger and frustration: “Cause now I'm starin' back at him, feelin' some type of disrespect/ If I could throw a bat at him, it'd be aimin' at his neck” (2015). The man then asks: “Have you ever opened up Exodus 14? A humble man is all that we ever need” (2015), referring to the story of Moses, who in the Bible guided the Israelites out of Egypt even if skeptical of his abilities, alluding that if Kendrick was more humble, he could become a leader or a guide to his community like Moses did for his (Adewale 2022). Nonetheless, he keeps on defending himself and justifying his selfishness claiming to be seeing right through the man and comparing him to a bad actor (“Kazaam is sad thrills, your gimmick is mediocre/ The jig is up, I seen you from a mile away losin' focus” (2015)). The man replies: “Your potential is bittersweet” (2015), indicating that if only Kendrick changed he could fulfill his role as guide, instead he refuses to let go of his selfishness (“Every nickel is mines to keep” (2015)). Then follows a moment of revelation:

He looked at me and said, "Know the truth, it'll set you free

You're lookin' at the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power
The choir that spoke the word, the Holy Spirit
The nerve of Nazareth, and I'll tell you just how much a dollar cost
The price of having a spot in Heaven, embrace your loss—I am God" (2015)

The man reveals himself to be God in the first line, referring to John 8:32 in which Jesus declared to be the son of God to a group of Jews. Kendrick's selfishness – guided by pride, fear and mistrust – has cost him a place in Heaven, his salvation, thus bringing him to confront his actions and values.

The outro, played by Ronald Isley of The Isley Brothers (one of the groups that he grew up listening to as a kid), summarizes the message of the song:

I washed my hands, I said my grace
What more do you want from me?
Tears of a clown, guess I'm not all what it's all meant to be
Shades of grey will never change if I condone
Turn this page, help me change to right my wrongs (2015)

Kendrick recognizes his lack of humility and his flaws, hidden behind the mask of his public image ("Tears of a clown"). This self-reflection exposes how societal norms encourage individuals to prioritize personal success and wealth instead of helping those in need. Finally, he expresses a desire for change, willing to take responsibility for his past choices.

3.2.4 Act 4

In the previous act, the protagonist was left with a metaphoric choice, torn between "good and evil", or between "God and Lucy (Lucifer)". The end of "How Much A Dollar Cost" marks Kendrick's decision to follow his path toward salvation and, advocate for his community through his wealth and fame. The song is similar to "Real" in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, marking the end of the album in which Kendrick's mother advised him to speak of his experience to the kids of Compton to show them his growth as a positive person. In October of 2013, Lamar also got baptized a second time, signifying his commitment to a new life. In an interview with the New York Times, the rapper admitted: "For many fans, 'I'm the closest thing to a preacher that they have [...] My word will never be as strong as God's word. All I am is just a vessel, doing his work'" (Coscarelli, 2015).

In the new act, Kendrick accepts his leadership role and starts speaking directly to his community, preaching a message of positivity, love, and self-acceptance. “Complexion (A Zulu Love)” speaks on the concept of colorism; “The Blacker The Berry”, inspired by the homonymous novel by Wallace Thurman, deals with black identity and the internal conflict experienced by oppressed groups in society; in “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said)”, Kendrick receives heartfelt advice from his mother, recalling the message in “Real”, encouraging the son to embrace his true self. The song is directly connected to “i” the last song of the act, in which Kendrick spreads a positive message of self-love. The song initially sparked controversy, not fully understood by the public given the difficult period the States were going through at the time of its release, and eventually, became one of the most symbolic tracks of the whole album.

3.2.4.1 Complexion (A Zulu Love)

Firstly, “Complexion” is another song that comes directly from Lamar’s experience in South Africa. Its message is simple and straightforward, like its chorus: “Complexion, Complexion it don’t mean a thing” (2015), in an attempt to overcome racism and colorism with a celebration of beauty. The title “A Zulu Love” refers to the Zulu philosophy “Ubuntu” which translates to “human kindness”, promoting love and kindness no matter the person’s background, skin color, or origins (Genius).

Colorism traces back to the 16th and 19th centuries, in which African Americans were enslaved and forced to work in white-owned plantations. During this time, notions of white skin color as representative of civility, superiority, and canonical beauty spread, regarding dark skin as its opposite. In the US, light-skinned slaves were usually born out of rape between masters and dark-skinned slaves. While light-skinned children were not recognized by their fathers, they were usually granted some privileges, like domestic duties instead of hard labor in the fields, and sometimes allowed to receive an education. Thus, a social hierarchy based on skin color was created, putting whites on top. Such systems of racist ideologies are perpetuated today, even among minorities, affecting all aspects of everyday life and particularly impacting women (Cuchna, 2018; Hunter, 2007). The song itself references history in the first two verses, as Lamar plays the part of a dark-skinned slave who courts a light-skinned slave: “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” (2015). In the second verse, the girl is described as brown-skinned with blue eyes which makes

Kendrick realize she was born out of abuse. Lamar also references his wife, Whitney Alford, crediting her for opening his eyes to the beauty of women of color: “Then Whit' told me, “A woman is woman, love the creation”” (2015).

In the third verse, MC Rapsody delivers a powerful message on Black identity and colorism. The North Carolina rapper is known for her clever wordplay and for covering issues like self-love and acceptance. She firstly references Stu (Stuart) Scott and 2Pac, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, two successful figures with different skin tones as a critique of how beauty standards should not influence one’s achievements. The rapper also cites “Keep Ya Head up” (1993) one of the most famous 2Pac songs, which praises women and women’s beauty, becoming a feminist anthem. In the verse, she also admits to having critiqued herself for her appearance but has now learned to love herself and encourages others to do the same, the line “I love myself” is also the chorus of the “i”. In a 2015 interview, Rapsody told HOT 97 that, when Lamar reached out to collab on the song, she had not heard the finished version nor any other track of the album. It is a coincidence that she referenced 2Pac, given the importance to Lamar and the album, as it will be discussed later, and also anticipated the chorus of the 15th song in the album without listening to it.

The outro is a grim picture of what Lamar observes once back in Compton. A hellish environment in which “Barefoot babies” are trapped, set up to become “teenage gun toters”. The rough imagery can be interpreted as a metaphor for Lucy’s triumph over people, leading them to destructive and violent behaviors, encapsulating the vicious cycle of violence perpetuated in these cities –also fueled by the government’s indifference.

3.2.4.2 The Blacker The Berry

In “The Blacker The Berry” Lamar continues with his advocacy on the struggles of the African American community. It was released a few months apart from “i”, still at the height of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Sonically, the track appears as the polar opposite of the warmer and more vibrant “i” and “Complexion”, standing out for its darker and intense tone, channeling Lamar’s anger and frustration towards the ongoing racial injustices.

The song starts with an introduction by Kendrick Lamar, in which he mumbles a series of conflicting ideas about his black identity, feeling both pride and resentment:

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, somethin' black, I ain't mean black (And pray to the God)
I hate everything black (We don't believe)
Black, I want all things black
I don't need black, I want everything black
I don't need black, our eyes ain't black
I own black, I own everything black (2015)

The verse plays on DuBois' idea of "double consciousness" already introduced on the album's second track, "King Kunta", in which Lamar described himself as both a king and a slave. Du Bois claims that African Americans experience a conflicting sense of self due to societal norms created by white supremacy (1903). The lines in between brackets represent the voice of Black America itself, forced to conform to society's cultural assumptions that ultimately reduce black people to mere stereotypes maintained since the antebellum era. The verse speaks not just about Kendrick's personal ambivalence, but also about the oppression that the whole community feels. The final line could also be representative of the music industry, which exploits black artists by appropriating their art, another theme already expressed in the album.

Six in the morn'
Fire in the street
Burn, baby, burn (You, you, you, you, you)
That's all I wanna see (You, you, you, you, you)
And sometimes I get off watchin' you die in vain
It's such a shame, they may call me crazy
They may say I suffer from schizophrenia or somethin'
But homie, you made me (You, you, you, you, you)
Black don't crack, my nigga (2015)

The bridge is connected to the outro of "Complexion" and continues to describe the hellish setting that Lamar found once he returned from South Africa. The first line references "6 n' The Mornin'" by Ice T, in which the rapper describes his daily life in South Central Los Angeles, amidst the violent "Decade of Death", as he tries to escape getting caught by police. "burn baby burn" is a catchphrase by DJ Magnificent Montague, symbolic of the 1965 Watts riots. These first three lines are enough to understand that Lamar is describing a violent protest. He feels enjoyment in watching these people die, which may be an indicator that he is going crazy, though this behavior is the product of the same dynamic that society and the States created ("You made me") which contributes to his already deep internal confusion, more evident in the following verse.

Each verse begins with “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015” the reason of which will be revealed at the end of the song, keeping the listener intrigued in the meantime. The death of Trayvon Martin has particularly shocked Lamar who simultaneously calls out the hypocrisy of the government. Lamar accuses American institutions of perpetuating violence and exploitation against black people while, at the same time, praising black artists and activists, and declaring national holidays (“You hate me, don't you?/You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture” (2015)). This institutionalized discrimination makes it difficult for black people to reconcile their identity, not feeling fully American in a European-centered society that does not fully accept their heritage and fails to address their mistreatment and struggles. As explained in “Institutionalized” the neglect of the community and, their insecurity of not being accepted, is often expressed through anger, as a defense mechanism admitting: “You made me a killer”.

The chorus: “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice/The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot” (2015), is another allusion to “Keep Ya Head Up” by 2Pac who originally intended it as celebratory while Lamar reinterprets it in a darker tone. The “berry” and the “juice” are metaphors for black killings, stating how African Americans are disproportionately targeted by white police, thus encapsulating the anger both Kendrick and the community felt between 2014 and 2015 after the numerous unjustified deaths of African Americans by white policemen.

The second verse is a commentary on the US penitentiary system which largely targets African Americans – a number that has increased 400% since the Reagan Era – and compares it to modern-day slavery since inmates are hired to work but underpaid. Lamar changes the narrative by becoming a successful artist, beating the odds, and flaunting his wealth as revenge against the same system that tries to oppress him, a nod to Uncle Sam and Lucy.

In the final verse, the discourse continues, this time Lamar argues that the hatred is generational and that he too was affected. Kendrick confesses why he deems himself a hypocrite: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street/When gang-banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?/Hypocrite!” (2015). Kendrick’s advocacy in the fourth act, speaking out on institutional racism, police brutality but also black pride and identity, makes the protagonist rethink his past actions, and again, come to terms with himself.

The song draws parallels to Wallace Thurman's 1929 novel by the same name, which follows protagonist Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned woman, as she navigates her college life affected by discrimination and colorism by society, her peers, and even herself, questioning her self-worth and self-sabotaging her relationships. Both explore the complexities of black identity and racism, even if decades apart, showing how relevant the struggle still is in modern-day society. Lamar broadens the discourse by arguing how colorism and discrimination among discriminated communities is a byproduct of systemic oppression and often leads to black-on-black violence. At the same time, Thurman offers a perspective on the psychological effects of colorism, stressing how the continuous rejections result in Emma Lou being isolated and unable to recover and accept herself until the end of the book. The final confession in the song reveals how difficult it is to overcome one's struggles and internal conflict. In the song, Kendrick is continuously reminded by the oppressive system, of his past actions, pushing him to face his contradictions. "The narrator of the song wants to show off black pride as fiercely as he can, and yet the memory of his past actions are getting in the way." (Kornhaber 2015) While the first verses are directed to the listener, the third is personal to Kendrick's journey, as he explained in a 2015 MTV interview:

These are my experiences, This is my life that I'm talking about. I'm not speaking to the community, I'm not speaking of the community, I am the community [...] When I say these lines, is for myself, is therapeutic for myself". (MTV 2015)

He is not trying to lecture anybody but admits to still being the flawed individual whose hypocrisy is more layered and not necessarily easy to understand, given what he has shown of having been through, both in the 2012 album and the previous songs. In the end, Kendrick is still trying to come out of his "cocoon", his comfort zone. In the following song, he recalls what his mother said when he became famous, in "Real" she advised him to come back and be an example for the kids in Compton: "Let 'em know you was just like them, but you still rose from that dark place of violence, becoming a positive person" (2012). Three years later, Kendrick has not forgotten the advice, and amidst his internal turmoil, goes back to his mother.

3.2.4.3 You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)

"You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)" was produced by *Lovedragon*, a duo consisting of lyricist and trumpet player Josef Leimberg and producer and multi-instrumentalist Terrace Martin. The title references 2Pac's 1997 "Lie To Kick It" and samples Ice Cube's "You

Ain't Gotta Lie (Ta Kick It)" (2000), another nod to the West Coast rappers who made the history of *gangsta rap*.

In the brief introduction, Kendrick sets the tone for what the listener will venture into which is a lesson from his mother ("Hey, hey, babe, check it out, I'ma tell you what my mama had said" (2015)). As Kendrick reenters the city, his mother can "spot him a mile away", probably due to his more expensive clothing which clashes with his poverty-stricken hometown. Throughout the album, Lamar confesses feeling guilty for leaving Compton and having a new and wealthier lifestyle, while the lives of his loved ones remain unchanged; also fearing that this newfound success would make the community not include him anymore, despite the amount of support the artist has shown to the city and the community for his whole career. This insecurity makes him put up a façade that his mother recognizes right away: "Who you foolin'? Oh, you assuming you can just come and hang/ With the homies but your level of realness ain't the same/ Circus acts only attract those that entertain" (2015). The message is further supported by the refrain, in which Kendrick attempts to speak as he assumes would impress the people he grew up with, asking where the "plug is" (slang for a drug dealer) or the "juug" (slang for an illegal money scheme), which only upset his peers who accuse him of sounding like an undercover policeman. In the chorus, Kendrick is simply advised to be himself and stop faking aspects of his personality.

In the second verse, Kendrick's mother gives another powerful message, reminding him of what is going on outside Compton, and that inside his own culture, he is not perceived as trustful because of the way he is acting. Kendrick then goes on to list different types of complexes that he is affected by: "jealousy", "emotional", "self-pity" and "under oath" and finally "loudest person one room complex" which refers to an inferiority complex, as is said that the loudest person in the room hides deep insecurities; all of which have so far been represented in the album (Cuchna 2018).

In the third verse, Kendrick reminds the listener that he too is familiar with the struggles of his community, having lived it firsthand during his childhood and teenage years. He encourages the audience to remain authentic and break a cycle of insecurities passed on for generations. The song then fades into the sounds of a crowded street, morphing into the following song "i".

3.2.4.4 i (Single version)

“i” is an uplifting song in which Lamar preaches to his community about self-love and self-acceptance as means to overcome violence and hate. when analyzed in the perspective of his personal journey, it is a pivotal moment in which he accepts his role as guide for his peers, finally moving on from the darkness represented by the contrasting track “u”.

The song was released on September 23, 2014, in a version not included in the album which instead was replaced by a sort of “live version” in which Kendrick is performing at a concert in Compton. I decided to discuss both versions, along with the music videos, as the two differ from each other but, when viewed together, offer a fuller perspective on the song itself and the overall album.

It was produced by Rahki (Columbus Smith III) who also worked on “Institutionalized”. When crafting the song, Rahki came up with a sound reminiscent of The Isley Brothers’ music, leading Lamar to decide to remake the classic “Who’s That Lady” (1973). Lamar also personally asked Ronald Isley's permission to use the song and invited him to appear in it (NME 2014). Instead of using a sample, they flew in a band and re-recorded the instrumental (Whalen 2014).

Starting with the studio version, the song begins with a voice saying: “This is a world premiere”, as the song was the first single released after the album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Lamar then starts rapping:

I done been through a whole lot
Trial, tribulation, but I know God
Satan wanna put me in a bow tie
Pray that the holy water don't go dry, yeah, yeah
As I look around me
So many motherfuckers wanna down me
But an enemigo never drown me
In front of a dirty double-mirror, they found me (2015)

The introduction summarizes what the listener has experienced for the past 14 songs, Kendrick has went through *trials and tribulations*, not just on the album, but for his whole life until he found his faith in God which protected him from being exploited by the temptations of the devil. In the album, both Uncle Sam and Lucy (Lucifer) attempted to “pimp” Kendrick who can now affirm to be ready to face them (“an enemigo never down me”). Cuchna argues that in the line “an enemigo never down me”, the pronunciation of “an enemigo” which in Spanish stands for “enemy”, sounds similar to “an amigo”,

Spanish for “friend”, which could refer to the duality of the devil, which firstly tries to befriend Kendrick to then reveal his true intentions.

The uplifting sound bursts as, in the chorus, Kendrick praises love to be the key to dealing with the darkness of the world, which is described as a “ghetto with big guns and picket sings”.

This new positive look on self-love and confidence is met with skepticism, even though people may view him as “crazy”, he still flaunts his new self-confidence and reassures that he too feels insecure at times (“Everybody lack confidence” (2015)). He then reaches out to the young people in cities like Compton, aware of how their potential is much overlooked due to the neglect of the system (“How many times the city making me promises?” (2015)). Nonetheless, Kendrick emphasizes that “self-love” is the only reliable source of strength when the situation is beyond one’s control.

Kendrick then lists a series of negative external forces that threaten one’s peace, and that he witnessed first-hand in his childhood (“a war outside”, “a bomb in the street”, “a gun in the hood”, “a mob of police”, “a rock on the corner”, “a line for the fiend”, “a bottle full of lean”, “a model on the scene”) which include vices that many in his community resort to as coping mechanism for the frustration they feel – a callback to “Institutionalized” in which Kendrick’s friend steals due to his underprivileged position that does not offer any opportunities outside Compton, with his successful friend being an exception. Once again, Kendrick finds an alternative method in self-acceptance.

In the song’s the bridge, Kendrick is walking barefoot through a valley, a scene reminiscent of Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me” (Bible Gateway). Here, the valley is a metaphor for the somber Earth, in which Lamar struggled for all his life. He then uses the phrase “fi-fie-fo-fum”, taken from the fable of “Jack and the Beanstalk”, in which the giant signals his arrival, symbolizing his triumph. At the end of the story, Jack defeats the giant by cutting down the tree that leads to his castle, the line could therefore be symbolic of Kendrick’s victory over Uncle Sam and Lucy, representations of oppression and temptation (Cuchna 2018). On the other hand, the phrase could also represent Kendrick’s Walk through the valley as a powerful giant. (Genius.com) The bridge introduces the contents by the third verse, in which Kendrick admits to having been at war, with himself and those who tried to use him: “ I've been dealing with depression ever since an

adolescent” (2015), which he is determinate to overcome “till I get it right”, he then describes himself as a superhuman fighting his enemies: “And it's evident I'm moving at a meteor speed/Finna run into a building, lay my body in the street”, he then concludes the verse referencing his promise to his mother in “Real” (2012): “Give my story to the children and a lesson they can read” (2015).

If the song had been included in the album, the outro would have signaled the end of the story before the epilogue of “Mortal Man”:

I lost my head
I must've misread what the good book said
Oh, woes keep me, it's a jungle inside
Give myself again 'til the well runs dry (I) (2015)

In these final words, Kendrick reflects on his journey. This newfound life of success makes him fall victim to Uncle Sam (a metaphor for capitalism) and later Lucy (the devil) who tempt him with money and vices consequently making him lose his path. Kendrick spirals into his depression, fueled by the guilt of leaving his loved ones in Compton, and not being able to protect them from the “hood politics” that already made him lose three of his closest friends. Finally, a trip to South Africa, where he reconnects with his roots and faith, makes him realize his purpose in life.

3.2.4.5 i (Album version)

At the end of “You Ain’t Gotta Lie” the song fades away, replaced by the murmuring of a crowd and the sound of a microphone being picked up. “i” begins as a “hype man” asks if the microphone is on, and then introduces Kendrick as the “number one rapper in the world”. Kendrick has finished touring and came back to enlighten his community with what he has learned along the way. The man tries to gather the people around, especially the kids – call back to the single verse in which he said: “Give my story to the children and a lesson they can read”.

Lamar made some changes to the album songs, other than hearing him sing in a “live version”, the bridge and refrain are not included, and the chorus presents different words. I would like to focus on the third verse instead, as is relevant to the narrative and to what will be discussed in the paragraph for “Mortal Man”.

As Kendrick continues his concert, a fight breaks out, we can hear him ordering to stop the music, but the line is cut off as he is trying to sing “lay my body off the street” and

then trying to break it with a motivational speech. It is no coincidence that he decided to stop the music at that point, as the content of the following line is about gang rivalry and violence within the community. Kendrick is upset, he stops a gathering that could have been important not only for the kids but for the community itself (“We could save that shit for the streets/We could save that shit, this for the kids, bro” (2015)). He then draws the attention of the crowd by asking how many people they lost due to gang violence only in 2014, stressing how futile it is to engage in black-on-black violence while the community is already threatened by society, it is energy that could be put towards bettering themselves. His voice slowly penetrates the murmuring of the crowd until he goes silent and proceeds to rap acapella:

I promised Dave I'd never use the phrase "fuck nigga"
He said, "Think about what you saying: 'Fuck niggas'
No better than Samuel on the Django
No better than a white man with slave boats"
Sound like I needed some soul searching
My pops gave me some game in real person
Retraced my steps on what they never taught me
Did my homework fast before government caught me
So I'ma dedicate this one verse to Oprah
On how the infamous, sensitive N-word control us
So many artists gave her an explanation to hole us
Well, this is my explanation straight from Ethiopia
N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty; king royalty - wait, listen
N-E-G-U-S description: black emperor, king, ruler, now let me finish
The history books overlooked the word and hide it
America tried to make it to a house divided
The homies don't recognize we been using it wrong
So I'ma break it down and put my game in a song
N-E-G-U-S, say it with me, or say it no more
Black stars can come and get me
Take it from Oprah Winfrey, tell her she right on time
Kendrick Lamar, by far, realest Negus alive (2015)

The focus of the verse is the “controversial” use of the N-word and black-on-black violence. He firstly recalls his friend Dave advising him to reconsider using the term as it could perpetuate harm and division in the community – represented through the character played by Samuel L Jackson in 2012 “Django Unchained” and famous presenter Oprah Winfrey, who widely expressed her views on banning the word as it only reminds African Americans of a painful chapter in history. “Dave” may refer to his longtime friend Dave Free, manager to Lamar and president of TDE, or it could allude to the character “Dave”

from *good kid, m.A.A.d city* who dies after being shot by a rival gang. Lamar brings up once again his 2012 album when recalling what his father said in “Real”: “Any nigga can kill a man, that don't make you a real nigga. Real is responsibility. Real is taking care of your motherfucking family. Real is God, nigga” (2012). Through this thought-provoking conversation, Kendrick begins searching on the history of the word while in South Africa, arguing that it originates from the Ethiopian word “Negus” which means “royalty”. In an attempt to restore its original power, Kendrick explains to the crowd how, during slavery, its meaning was changed and degraded, losing its empowering force which continued once the school system’s ignorance, allowed its negative connotation to persist, instead of teaching its history. Kendrick attempts to revive the word, reclaiming its original meaning and cultural impact: “N-E-G-U-S, say it with me, or say it no more”, and finally crowns himself “king”: “Kendrick Lamar, by far, realest Negus alive” (2015).

During his trip to South Africa, Lamar had the chance to meditate on himself and his actions, making him reflect on his vices and his selfishness, culminating in “How Much a Dollar Cost” in which he found the faith he once lost with fame— as admitted on the single version of “i”: “I must've misread what the good book said” (2015) – Kendrick had already got close with religion in “Sing About Me, I’m Dying Of Thirst” in which a woman, played by Maya Angelou, approached him and his friends while plotting revenge on those who killed Dave, and made them rethink their actions through prayer. The trip also served as a powerful tool to search for his ancestry, language, and culture, which made him want to teach his peers once he came back to Compton, to those who never left the city and likely won’t. On “i” he gets confronted, once again, with the institutionalized racism that penetrates the community, resulting in black-on-black violence and represented through the fight that interrupts the concert; though Kendrick quickly takes the opportunity to spread a message of love and positivity, finally embracing his role as a guide – the crowd slowly goes silent, intrigued by Lamar’s speech – a symbolic first step on his “objective” to keep the promise to his parents.

The music video was published in November 2014, four months before the album’s release (15th of March 2015), and features a single version of the song. The video in part anticipates what the content of the album version will be. Lamar is initially seen in a club when suddenly a fight between two black men breaks out. One is wearing a blue shirt while the other is a red one, symbolizing violence among the African American

community through gang rivalry, with blue and red being the symbolic colors of the California gangs of the Crips and Bloods. The artist then starts singing and the dancers of the club follow him in the streets of Compton. Like a magnet, Lamar pulls people to join him in his dance and stops, with his engaging presence: two policemen about to arrest a black man and a person about to commit suicide. Furthermore, the single-track cover art features two black men doing heart sings with their hands while wearing the color of the gangs

Though “i” is not the last song in the album, it represents a full-circle moment in the narrative – with “Mortal Man” being an epilogue that summarizes and reflects on the themes discussed throughout – in which Lamar finally crowns himself “King”, this time without being tied to Uncle Sam or Lucy. In “For Free”, the woman accused Kendrick of being no king, also proven in “King Kunta”, where Kendrick was represented as both a king and a slave due to his subordination to the industry. “i” is also connected to the introductory “Wesley’s Theory” where the very first line claimed, “Every nigga is a star”, showing Lamar’s attention to detail and dedication to this project. Ultimately “i” encapsulates the essence of the album’s narrative, Kendrick’s personal transformation through criticism and pressure, grief, rage, and finally redemption.

3.2.5 Mortal Man

“Mortal Man” is the epilogue to the album and the longest track, divided between a song and a conversation with the deceased rapper and activist Tupac Shakur.

The track begins with a dreamy sound and vocals, Lamar briefly raps until the verse is interrupted by the chorus. He mentions Nelson Mandela’s work, hoping to be a guide and leader like him one day, but still recognizing that he is flawed and asking his fans to recognize that he makes mistakes too: “As I lead this army, make room for mistakes and depression” (2015). He then asks the question: “When shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?” (2015), the phrase is commonly used when something goes rapidly wrong. Kendrick asks, when it happens, giving examples of possible conspiracies like being framed in a court case by industry or the government if his fans will still be loyal and support him. It seems like Kendrick is aware of the fragility of celebrity and the devotion towards celebrities and leaders, which takes a lot to build and a simple scandal to destroy.

How many leaders you said you needed then left 'em for dead?
Is it Moses? Is it Huey Newton or Detroit Red?

Is it Martin Luther? JFK? Shooter—you assassin
Is it Jackie? Is it Jesse? Oh, I know it's Michael Jackson—oh” (2015)

He closes the verse by listing a series of public figures – and the religious character of Moses – all of which were betrayed by their supporters. Moses was betrayed by the same people he saved, supported by his brother; Huey P. Newton was the confounder and activist of the Black Panther Party and was killed by a member of the Black Guerilla Family, once part of the Black Panthers (Valdemar, 2012). “Detroit Red” was a nickname for Malcolm X, spokesman for the Nation of Islam, a religious organization responsible for the death of the activist after he left in 1964 (Biography.com). Martin Luther King (MLK) was also an activist, known for his Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and was assassinated by James Earl Ray, an escaped felon who later admitted to being part of a larger conspiracy (Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute). John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) was the 35th US President and was shot in Texas while in his car, the reason remains unknown but fueled numerous theories. “Jackie” refers to Jackie Robinson, the first black man to play Major League baseball and was met with verbal and physical abuse. Michael Jackson, the “Pop King”, was accused of child molestation, and even though he was acquitted, his reputation was compromised (Tsioulcas 2019). All of the people listed were known for being influential and having a relevant impact on their community, attempting to challenge the system to bring change and equality.

With the chorus, Kendrick hopes to build a relationship of mutual respect with the public, similar to Mandela’s, where people fought for him even while he was incarcerated, demanding his release. He always kept his promise to end apartheid and when he was free, he worked right away with the then president De Klerk to negotiate on the situation in South Africa. Similarly, Lamar wants to keep his promise to elevate his community from the violence in Compton and has already shown it with the release of his 2012 album. Instead of seeking revenge and retaliating violence with gang activities, he redirected his anger in music, making his thoughts lessons for those living in similar situations. The songs represent a valuable starting point for reflection not only on the relationship with leaders and celebrities but also with the people we surround ourselves with, our loved ones, and our peers.

In the second part of the song, he extends the conversation to 2Pac, the late rapper was also an activist and role model to Kendrick Lamar, who witnessed the shooting for the music video of “California Love” at the Compton Swap Meet when he was a kid.

The second part begins with Lamar reciting again the poem, lastly heard on “Hood Politics” – [...] But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city/I was entering a new one – introducing “How Much a Dollar Cost” the song set in Johannesburg, South Africa, where God speaks directly to Kendrick, giving him the start again his spiritual journey in order to become a positive person for his community. At the beginning of the second part, Kendrick finishes reciting the poem, adding new lines representative of the fourth act:

A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination
Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned
The word was respect
Just because you wore a different gang color than mine's
Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a black man
Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets
If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us
But I don't know, I'm no mortal man
Maybe I'm just another nigga (2015)

Kendrick speaks of his trip to South Africa and how he wanted to spread what he had learned to his peers back in Compton. He firstly denounces colorism in “Complexion (A Zulu Love)”, a type of discrimination which happens even among the African American community; in “The Blacker The Berry” he speaks on black-on-black violence and gang rivalry; in “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma said)” and “i” he talks about the importance of realness and self-acceptance. Finally, on the first part of “Mortal Man” he reflects on his newfound role of guide and the public’s relationship with leaders, concluding that, in the end, he is just a mortal man downsizing his image from what he claimed at the end of “i” (to be a king), admitting to have strengths and weaknesses like any person, and asking his fans, instead of judging, to stay at his side.

As the poem concludes, Kendrick continues speaking: “Shit and that's all I wrote [...] I just felt like it's something you probably could relate to” (2015), the listener now realizes that this whole time, Lamar had been reading to someone, which is revealed when answering a question about a metaphor. This person is none other than the late Tupac

Shakur, speaking directly to Kendrick Lamar in a metaphysical conversation, perfectly constructed and natural.

Tupac Shakur has been one of the most important figures of the 1990s hip-hop scene. Born in 1971 to two members of the Black Panther Party, he has always been active in politics, with his music tackling themes like police brutality, poverty, and gang culture but also the mistreatment of women and the struggles of child pregnancies and motherhood. Sadly, his personal life often shadowed his discography, mostly his arrests. Shakur died aged 25, many described him as the best rapper in the whole history, therefore leaving behind an incomplete legacy.

Kendrick asks 2Pac a series of advice for his personal journey and questions about the current state of the United States. Shakur reflects on his story, how he came from an underprivileged situation but worked hard to build himself up until he became a successful millionaire, and though he had to overcome difficulties, his faith in God is what helped him the most and claims that “all good—, all good things come to those that stay true” (2015). This is relevant to the narrative of the album, as Kendrick reconnects with God in South Africa and decides to tell his peers what he has learned, again in line with the promise in “Real”.

He then asks some questions about the current situation of the black community and what to expect for future generations. Pac believes a rebellion similar to the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion will break out and turn into bloodshed. Despite Shakur’s death in 1996, his words could still be applied to the current race relations in the United States, given the numerous protests that have happened in the United States in the past decade, after the deaths of many African Americans at the hands of white people. Lamar then responds, sharing his faith in the power of music as the last resort to bring change and end the interracial conflicts in Compton: “Only hope that we kinda have left is music and vibrations, a lot of people don’t understand how important it is you know. Sometimes I can like, get behind a mic and I don't know what type of energy I'ma push out or where it comes from (2015)” to which 2Pac replies: “It’s spirits [...] We just letting our dead homies tell stories for us” (2015). Cuchna argues that this is another cathartic moment, as the listener realizes that Lamar is continuing Tupac’s legacy through the album, as Shakur represents “the dead homie” and this is his story, interjecting with Kendrick’s, as their upbringing, the respective journeys to overcome their struggles, their activism – and even

their close birthdays in June – make their connection even more relevant, and some may argue it is even “spiritual”.

Kendrick then goes on to recite another poem that a “good friend” of his wrote. It begins with references to the 2012 album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*: “The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it/Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it/In order to protect itself from this mad city” (2015). The caterpillar represents all the people who like Lamar have been influenced by the destructive environment in which they live, often resorting in violent gang activities to protect themselves resulting in his close friends being killed, Dave in the album, and Chad Keaton, Braze and Big Pup in real life.

While consuming its environment
The caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive
One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him
But praises the butterfly
The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness
And the beauty within the caterpillar (2015)

After the loss, the kid decides to tackle the world only through his faith and music and realizes that, despite his difficult upbringing, he can use his talents to escape from Compton and start a better life. The following part represents the narrative of *To Pimp A Butterfly*, how Kendrick was exploited by the capitalistic industry who made him abuse of his success and eventually regret it, falling into a deep depression but eventually emerging after a pivotal trip to South Africa, where he reconnected with his roots and faith, finding his life purpose.

But having a harsh outlook on life
The caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak
And figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits
Already surrounded by this mad city
The caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon
Which institutionalizes him
He can no longer see past his own thoughts, he's trapped
When trapped inside these walls certain ideas take root, such as
Going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city
The result?
Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant
Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations
That the caterpillar never considered
Ending the internal struggle
Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different
They are one and the same (2015)

Kendrick emerges from the cocoon, ending his personal struggles and deciding to become a positive guide to help others in the same situation as he was to escape. Even though he transformed, he still feels in part “caterpillar” as to admit he is not perfect. On NME he admitted:

“[Being a leader] wasn’t even an ambition, to be real with you,” he says. “It’s something I didn’t wanna take responsibility for. Nobody do, especially when you’re still searching for answers for yourself. I don’t have the answers! I tell people that all the time. I’m still learning, but I think that’s what makes people connect with me. I don’t point the finger.” (Denney 2015)

3.3 Final thoughts

Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 *To Pimp A Butterfly*, is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece that profoundly changed the hip-hop scene. Not only is it an accurate social commentary on the struggles of the African American community, discussing a spectrum of themes from institutional discrimination to colorism and black-on-black violence, but it also offers a new perspective on Lamar’s character as a “modern messiah” while still acknowledging his flaws and insecurities in emotional pieces like “u”, “The Blacker The Berry” and “i”. Throughout the album, Lamar openly admits to being deeply conflicted by accepting his newfound role, revealing his deepest insecurities. Yet in my opinion, this sensitivity and self-reflection demonstrate he is ready to lead and be an example for those in Compton and, in a sense continue the legacy Tupac Shakur initiated. *To Pimp a Butterfly* contains numerous allusions and callbacks to the late rapper, and with the imaginary interview in “Mortal Man”, Lamar seeks advice on how to fill in his shoes and eventually receives a “symbolic” blessing from his idol.

This album is not only autobiographical, but it serves as a powerful representation of an entire community that has endured centuries of pain, resilience, and neglect. Even when wealthy and famous, Kendrick is still denied the freedom white men receive, due to a capitalistic society that continues to limit black people to this day through institutional racism. Nonetheless, while shedding light on their struggles, this piece of work is a celebration of the beauty and strength of African Americans and their culture in a way white society has long overlooked.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis had the objective of providing a thorough analysis of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* in order to show the versatility of a genre often misunderstood and regarded as only promoting violence and gang culture. Lamar showed how he subverted these stereotypes by using his music as a platform to speak on a wide spectrum of themes ranging from systemic racism to generational trauma and black identity.

As explored in the first chapter, for centuries black men in America have been subjected to degrading and harmful stereotypes, reduced to caricatures and tropes that portrayed them as either dangerous rapists or hypersexual and ignorant. These stereotypes justified discriminatory treatment, denying black men basic rights that white people had the privilege of receiving. As hooks claimed, even by working hard, black men were viewed as unworthy of the "freedom" the *American Dream* promised (hooks 2004, 31).

The "Decade of Death" had a profound impact on the mental health of both black men and women. Many black men, in particular, would often adopt certain mannerisms to protect themselves from gang affiliations, portraying themselves as tough and hypermasculine, and with any display of emotion being regarded as a sign of weakness. These behaviors have become defying characteristics of the *gangsta rap* genre and are still present today.

Kendrick Lamar grew up during the genre's peak. Influenced by the rap scene of the 1990s, his early works are widely inspired by the West Coast rappers of the time, mirroring the braggadocio and unapologetic *gangsta* rapper's behavior, sometimes at odds with the character described by his friends and family. His 2012 album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* marks a powerful moment in Lamar's career, pushing him into the mainstream, and realizing the impact he could bring to his community, born out of a promise to his parents.

In 2015, *To Pimp A Butterfly* represents his transformational journey from naïve and unexperienced rapper, born and raised in Compton, to a leader for his peers back at home – from caterpillar to cocoon, to butterfly – in which Kendrick questions himself, confronting the weight of his role born out of societal pressure and guilt, for having such an important role yet failing to reach those close to him.

The story reaches an impactful turning point after Kendrick's trip to South Africa, in which he reconnects with his ancestry and faith, helping to come out of his destructive cocoon of insecurities, depression, and vanity, also rooted in institutional racism. Lamar alternates autobiographical moments with messages to his community and society, addressing injustices and struggles African Americans have endured for centuries.

On tracks like "Institutionalized", "Hood Politics" and "The Blacker The Berry", Lamar dives into social dynamics at the root of black-on-black violence and provides evidence of how overlooked the black community, speaking on the flawed judicial system and penitentiary system. On the other hand, "Alright", "Complexion (A Zulu Love)" and "i" spread a positive message of self-acceptance and self-love, despite society's strict beauty standards. Furthermore, the success and importance that "Alright" had amidst the Black Lives Matter movement, showed the importance for celebrities and rappers to speak on political issues.

Through the emotional tracks of "u" and "i", Lamar challenges traditional notions of masculinity and violence, making the listener sympathize and understand the artist's motives on a deeper level. By showing his vulnerable side, his wrongs, and admitting to being flawed despite his character as a mainstream rapper and leader, *To Pimp A Butterfly* marks a step forward in a long process of destigmatizing mental health in a genre that does not allow for emotivity. In Lamar's 2022 album, *Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers*, he admits to having sought help from a therapist in a new emotional work of art that, in my opinion, could not have been possible without the 2015 album leading the way.

To Pimp A Butterfly exemplifies Kendrick Lamar's artistry in creating a piece representative of the African American community in all his forms. Musically, the introduction of a jazz sound – one of the oldest genres attributed to black people – is another celebration of black culture. Additionally, the allusions, callbacks, and collaboration with the most important black artists of all time highlight Lamar's wide musical knowledge and respect for those who came for him. I believe this album is a masterpiece that reflects Kendrick Lamar's dedication to his art, honoring those who "paved the way" before him, and establishing himself as a full-on artist and inspiration to the new generations. Lamar's work could signal the start of a discourse on the evolution of rap and its collective potential to bring social change, challenge societal norms, and promote healing to build a more inclusive space for all through the power of art.

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ITALIAN SUMMARY

La musica rap è stata una forma di espressione per molte generazioni che non hanno avuto la possibilità di essere ascoltate, esplorando temi come la violenza di strada e da parte delle forze dell'ordine, l'abuso di alcol e stupefacenti, che colpiscono in particolar modo gli uomini neri. I rapper spesso evitano di mostrare la vulnerabilità e il dolore che portano queste esperienze, preferendo parlare di ciò che la fama ha portato loro. Questa tesi ha l'obiettivo di analizzare le ragioni dietro questi comportamenti tossici ancora presenti nel mondo del rap, prendendo come esempio la discografia di Kendrick Lamar.

I lavori di Lamar possono essere visti come un viaggio verso la guarigione interiore, superando traumi generazionali e offrendo una via di fuga da un mondo di violenze e abusi. Il suo terzo album *To Pimp A Butterfly* è il focus di questa tesi, rappresenta un'importante continuazione della sua storia personale ma anche una protesta contro le ingiustizie subite dalla comunità Afroamericana. Rendendo Lamar uno dei pochi rapper delle nuove generazioni a mettere da parte gli stereotipi per aprirsi completamente al pubblico, con tutte le sue forze e debolezze.

CAPITOLO 1

Il primo capitolo delinea il contesto storico e culturale all'interno del quale si è sviluppata la mascolinità nera. Storicamente il Sud degli Stati Uniti è sempre stato un ambiente ostile per gli uomini Afroamericani, segnato dalla schiavitù, razzismo e segregazione razziale che influenzarono la società del tempo. Durante l'era della Ricostruzione (1863-1877) il governo aveva il compito di far integrare quasi quattro milioni di vecchi schiavi all'interno della società, ovviamente contro le volontà degli ex padroni che, anche dopo la creazione della "Freedmen's Bureau", continuarono a sfruttare gli uomini ora legalmente liberi; grazie ad una serie di leggi chiamate "Codici neri", applicate con violenza da organizzazioni suprematiste bianche come il Ku Klux Klan.

Allo stesso tempo, gli Afroamericani vennero associati a stereotipi degradanti e razzisti, oggetto di spettacoli creati da attori bianchi, in cui venivano rappresentati come ignoranti e stupidi, o violenti stupratori. Le donne nere erano viste come seduttrici di cui approfittarsi o serve il cui unico compito era obbedire ai padroni bianchi. L'aspetto così lontano dagli standard di bellezza bianchi, creava una certa ambivalenza tra fascino e

paura, tanto che il corpo nero continuava ad essere visto come oggetto anche dopo l'abolizione della schiavitù.

Durante il periodo di integrazione, le famiglie bianche si spostarono in quartieri finanziati dal governo e gli Afroamericani vennero gradualmente confinati in zone sovraffollate e povere, attraverso leggi che promettevano di rinnovare le aree più povere, ma che di fatto sfollarono centinaia di famiglie. Tra gli anni '80 e '90 la situazione si fece più grave con l'introduzione del crack nei quartieri più poveri e a prevalenza nera e controllate da violente gang. Questo ambiente distruttivo ebbe un impatto significativo sulla salute mentale delle nuove generazioni; coloro coinvolti in queste dinamiche erano soliti adottare certi comportamenti schivi e macisti per proteggersi. Molti si concentrarono sulla musica per scappare da queste realtà difficili. I giovani rapper documentavano le condizioni delle vite degli Afroamericani in quegli anni, raccontando di realtà raramente discusse. Ice T è il pioniere del cosiddetto *gangsta rap*, spianando la strada per altri talentuosi rapper come il gruppo N.W.A che portarono il genere ad un pubblico più vasto. I luoghi comuni razzisti, affibbiati anche ai nuovi artisti, vengono sovvertiti attraverso tecniche come il *Signifyin(g)*, concetto ideato dal Professor Henry Louis Gates, che rielabora il linguaggio e i suoi significati. L'esempio più eclatante è la trasformazione del significato della *N-word*, ora utilizzata dalla comunità nera come simbolo di potere.

Il genere del *gangsta rap* ha messo in evidenza la mascolinità tossica presente all'interno delle comunità nere, la pressione a conformarsi a ideali maschilini connessi a violenze, forza e ricchezza, collegato anche ad una necessità storica di venire accettati all'interno della società bianca.

CAPITOLO 2

Il capitolo ripercorre brevemente la vita di Kendrick Lamar. Nasce a Compton, California, il 17 giugno 1987, durante la "Guerra alle droghe" dell'amministrazione Reagan.

Come altre città, Compton subì un rapido declino tra gli anni '70 e '90 dell'900 a seguito dell'introduzione di droghe pesanti nei quartieri neri, e la nascita di varie gang rivali. La stessa famiglia di Lamar ne è colpita, con il padre fuggito da Chicago con la moglie per scappare dalle affiliazioni con i *Gangster Disciples* ma continuando a delinquere una volta a Compton. Da piccolo, Kendrick viene descritto come un bambino tranquillo e precoce e uno studente modello. Alle scuole medie, il professor Inge gioca un ruolo

cruciale nel far avvicinare Kendrick alla poesia, il ragazzo scrive di quello che conosce, di un'infanzia segnata dalla violenza a Compton (a 5 e 8 anni assiste a due omicidi per strada), di droghe e alcol, e delle gang che controllano la città. I prospetti per una carriera nella musica si fanno più seri quando grazie all'amico Dave Free, nel 2005 entra nella casa discografica *Top Dawg Entertainment* (TDE) grazie a cui pubblica i primi mixtape con l'omonimo di "K-Dot".

Nel 2011 il suo primo album *Section.80* è il primo di una serie di progetti elaborati con cui denuncia i problemi della generazione nata durante gli anni '80 e '90, tra povertà, depressione, abusi di sostanze e alcol. Nel 2012, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* è l'album che lo catapulta nel mainstream. La canzone "Real", contiene un messaggio della madre, in cui si fa promettere che Kendrick sarà guida e modello da seguire per i ragazzi cresciuti nei quartieri popolari. Una promessa importante, che con la nuova vita da celebrità, farà soffrire l'artista di depressione e colpevolezza, di aver lasciato i cari a Compton per seguire i suoi sogni. L'album successivo, *To Pimp A Butterfly* è considerato come proseguimento all'album del 2012, e scritto durante un periodo di importanti proteste della comunità nera contro le violenze delle istituzioni e polizia. Si tratta di un lavoro pensato in celebrazione della comunità nera, della cultura e soprattutto della resilienza, alternato a passaggi autobiografici in cui Lamar racconta del difficile percorso di transizione da giovane ragazzo di Compton, ad artista mondiale. Tra il 2017 e il 2022 pubblica *DAMN.* e *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers*, in cui continua l'esplorazione dei temi di *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Il primo è un album prettamente di denuncia del trattamento delle persone nere durante la presidenza di Donald Trump, il secondo esplora il lato emotivo in un collettivo di canzoni studiate come delle sessioni aperte di terapia.

CAPITOLO 3

To Pimp A Butterfly è un album che ha profondamente cambiato la scena dell'hip-hop americano durante gli anni 2010, musicalmente e dal punto di vista dei temi trattati. L'album è stato scritto prevalentemente durante e dopo un viaggio in Sud Africa dove Lamar ha ritrovato le sue radici e una riconnessione con la propria fede. Si può dividere in quattro atti principali, ognuno a significare uno stadio del suo viaggio verso la guarigione interiore (fino a "diventare farfalla"). La storia riprende da dove si era interrotto *good kid, m.A.A.d city* nel 2012. Kendrick, il protagonista, dopo aver firmato un contratto con l'etichetta di Dr. Dre, entra nel nuovo mondo della fama, con la promessa

di tornare a Compton come uomo cambiato e modello per la sua comunità. Non essendo preparato ad affrontare un'industria fatta di tentazioni, ricchezze e burocrazia, viene sfruttato da Uncle Sam e successivamente di Lucy (Lucifero), come altri artisti neri prima di lui.

Il primo atto rappresenta l'immaturità di Kendrick, interessato solo a spendere le ricchezze appena guadagnate, noncurante di star cadendo nella trappola di Uncle Sam, apparentemente intenzionato ad aiutarlo a navigare nel nuovo mondo. Il giovane rapper si autoproclama re, "King Kunta", con un riferimento al personaggio schiavo per indicare la sua sottomissione alla stessa industria che gli sta donando un'apparente libertà. Il secondo atto analizza gli ostacoli che formano il suo "bozzolo": il razzismo sistemico ed endemico delle città come Compton la cui mentalità è difficile da cambiare; la lussuria come simbolo di egoismo; e la sua mente, i cui pensieri lo portano ad una crisi depressiva. Nel terzo atto, dopo aver confessato di essere vittima anche di pensieri suicidi, incontra il secondo antagonista della storia: Lucy. Un viaggio decisivo in Sud Africa lo lascerà combattuto con la domanda esistenziale sull'utilizzo della sua fama, che lo farà abbracciare il ruolo di guida per mandare un messaggio positivo, di accettazione e amore. L'album è un capolavoro rappresentativo della comunità nera in tutte le sue forme. Attraverso l'introduzione di elementi jazz, celebra anche la cultura e la musica Afroamericana, confermando le ampie conoscenze di Lamar in ambito musicale. *To Pimp A Butterfly* è un progetto che conferma Lamar come artista a tutto tondo, ma allo stesso modo onorando coloro che gli hanno aperto la strada.

Il disco potrebbe essere punto di partenza per un discorso più ampio sull'evoluzione del rap e il potere di portare cambiamenti in ambito sociale, sfidando gli stereotipi e creando un ambiente inclusivo attraverso il potere della musica.

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Grazie alla mia famiglia, soprattutto a mia sorella senza cui non sarei arrivata qui e che mi ha sempre sostenuto nei momenti difficili.

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