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# Loving You Is Complicated: The Aesthetics of Personal and Political Tension in Kendrick Lamar's To Pimp A Butterfly

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**Loving You Is Complicated: The Aesthetics of Personal and Political Tension  
in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly***

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	... 2
Introduction	... 3
Can it be Protest Art? The ‘Critical Preset’ for <i>TPAB</i>	... 5
“Rewind the First Verse:” Misdirection and Obfuscation	... 13
If Mirrors Could Talk: ‘Double-Consciousness’ and Character-Play	... 18
Conclusion	... 27
Works Cited	... 29

### Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetic and lyrical achievements of musician Kendrick Lamar's 2015 *To Pimp A Butterfly*, the political context of these achievements, and the manner in which the critical discourse surrounding the work has handled the artistic and political tensions within the work of Lamar. The paper first frames *To Pimp A Butterfly* beside the criticism that surrounds it, and questions the value and appropriateness in viewing the work as a piece of political protest art. The paper goes on to examine the techniques by which the piece builds a sense of tension and confusion in regards to its artistic and political implications. Lamar's lyrics are given close readings beside theoretical frameworks developed by the Henry Louis Gates Jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois to further articulate the concepts of *misdirection* and *internal tension*. The paper concludes that the aesthetic and thematic clashing of the personal, artistic, and political in *To Pimp A Butterfly* purposefully works as an emotionally affective and politically effective work of art.

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Rapper and songwriter Kendrick Lamar's watershed, *To Pimp A Butterfly*, has been an album of surprise and contradiction since the moment it was released unexpectedly on March 15, 2015, more than a week before its scheduled release date. The work was an immediate commercial and critical success. *To Pimp A Butterfly* debuted atop the record charts and earned a 'Grammy' for 'Best Rap Album,' suggesting wide popular appeal, and also received accolades from critics for its experimentalism, blending of genre, and potent message. While Lamar's established presence in the music industry<sup>1</sup> certainly helped to buoy the work's financial success, it is perhaps still surprising that the album, which opens by sampling Boris Gardiner's 1973 "Every Nigger is A Star<sup>2</sup>" and concludes with a several minute-long spoken word performance, reached the heights of a mega-hit pop album while maintaining an ethos of the *avant garde*.

The contradictions continue thematically and aesthetically within the work itself, as it creates a sense of dissimulation and disorientation for the listener with its dizzying lyricism, mix of genre, and frequent plays on character and perspective. The album's complexity is further compounded by the racial and identity politics of the work. *To Pimp A Butterfly* arrived during the "Ferguson Moment" and the rise to prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The anguish and pride of Lamar's experience as a black American are essential components of the work, tied inextricably to the sense of disorientation that defines it. But many critics have tended to overlook the lyrical and rhetorical achievements in regards to this album of contradiction, in deference to its broad

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<sup>1</sup> Lamar's first major label album, *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City* (2012) itself debuted at Number 2 on the Billboard Top 200 Charts, and earned four Grammy nominations.

<sup>2</sup> The song comes from the soundtrack of the 1973 Jamaican Blaxploitation film by the same name (Campbell 2015).

political and cultural import. *To Pimp A Butterfly*, heralded as capitol “I” Important art, is important, but it does not, in fact, lend itself perfectly to an interpretation as solely a work of protest art. To view the work in this manner leaves unresolved and perhaps irreconcilable the politically problematic aspects of the work. It also understates the major artistic characteristic of the work, in which Lamar purposefully complicates the work’s political signaling by setting into conflict the speaker’s own sense of self and interiority with the work’s social responsibility and message. Lamar develops these moments of conflict by way of two related, but distinct strategies: *misdirection* and *internal tension*. Misdirection, in this case, refers to lyrical moves that lead the listener to expect one thing, only to be given another. It is, in a sense, “playing” with or on the listener. One can better understand this technique using the critical framework and language of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*. Interior tension, conversely, refers to the fracturing of the speaker’s own sense of self, explicated in this paper using the concept of double consciousness developed in W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. The techniques of misdirection and interior tension are inherent to the album’s form and aesthetics, allowing for the album to function affectively and politically in equal measure.

### **Can it be Protest Art? The ‘Critical Preset’ for *TPAB***

In a review written the day of the release of *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Jezebel critic Clover Hope characterized the work as having an “overwhelming blackness.” This phrase and the idea it represented was the framework for her appraisal of the album.

‘Overwhelming blackness’ became a phrase often cited in the ensuing “Kendrick think-piece hour” that Hope had accurately anticipated (Hope 2015). It was the political context of the work that most dominated discussion surrounding it in 2015. Critics are often drawn to the most anthemic of songs on the album, the vindictive “The Blacker the Berry” or the uplifting “Alright” and “i,” as well as the celebratory homages to African-American life and culture laced throughout the work, as reason to anoint the album as one of *the* major political statements of the era. Micah Singleton of The Verge, in his review, writes “To Pimp a Butterfly succeeds D’Angelo’s *Black Messiah* as *the most important album in black culture right now*. In the face of Ferguson, police brutality, and widening economic disparity, Kendrick Lamar tackles social issues through music and does so exceptionally well” (Singleton 2015). These are the social and political issues that dominated the news cycles of 2015, and the references in the album to current events like the murder of Trayvon Martin (as in “The Blacker the Berry”) and the Obama Presidency (“Hood Politics”) helped to draw out clear connections for many listeners from the piece of art to the real political world. One of the most oft-cited examples of this is the adoption of “Alright” by Black Lives Matter protesters as an anthem for the movement, in spite of existing tension between Lamar and members of the movement over controversial comments Lamar made in response to the Ferguson riots (King 2016). This embrace of the album is rooted in the same features that led critics like New York Times’ Joe

Caramanica to write of the album, “at its best, it’s a howling work of black protest art” (Caramanica 2015). And it makes sense to appraise the album in this fashion; there are direct calls to action, direct utterances of pride in black identity and life, and direct addresses of current political issues.

But such discussion of the album in this context is limited and insufficient in two ways: it is reductive in its discussion of the album as a full work of art, and it creates a struggle to reconcile moments of the album that are politically problematic. Of course, it is a generalization to paint all of the criticism of the album as only focusing on its political import, but there exists a certain “urge to defend such artwork on the strength of its social urgency alone,” as Complex writer Justin Charity wrote in his more tempered review of the album. He continues:

I do regret...that we seem to have papered over much of Kendrick's finer, singular turmoil on songs...in favor of reading a hot mess of buzzwords about identity. This is, for better and worse, the foremost concern of online writing and performance in 2015. In this “year (when) we obsessed over identity,” blackness was briefly, modestly profitable as a sort of critical preset—rather like a microwave’s “popcorn” button. (Charity 2015)

It would be impossible to discuss this set of songs without discussion of its exploration of racial politics and identity; it permeates through every beat of the one hour and nineteen minute long album, and is the affective linchpin that holds the work together. But though it is an inherently political album, *To Pimp A Butterfly* is not *only* a political album, and perhaps not even *primarily* a political album. To fall into a “critical preset” is to restrict it



to its moment and to reduce its thematic, lyrical, and aesthetic effect. As Alexis Petridis, of *The Guardian*, observed, “how much of the album was concerned not with current events but gazing inwards understandably tended to be overlooked” (Petridis 2015). Indeed, *To Pimp A Butterfly* is a work that is just as much personal, insular, wrapped up in its own cocoon, to borrow one of its metaphors, as it is far-reaching and prophetic. For every meditation on broad racial life and identity, there is another lyric describing the personal demons of the album’s speaker. Lamar himself, in a 2015 interview expresses the sentiment of the album being a personal, idiosyncratic expression: “This is me pouring out my soul on the record. You’re gonna feel it because you too have pain. *It might not be like mine, but you’re gonna feel it*” (Coscarelli 2015).

The other side effect of a primarily political reading of the album is a pervasive head-butting on the critic’s part with the personal shortcomings of the album’s speaker, and an effective, progressive message. Take for instance the final stanza of the track “The Blacker the Berry.” The song, an explosive invective directed at the second person “you,” is meant to be at first interpreted aimed at some figure of oppression, whether it be a white individual, white America, a white listener, or possibly a nebulous power structure. No matter where the anger is directed, it is clearly powerful, destructive, vindictive, and above all, cathartic. The forceful lyricism and thunderous delivery is an assertion of black power, as a lashing out against exploitation, a rhetorical war-cry on the battle field that is racial relations in the United States. But this reading alone is confronted by what the opening lines—“I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015/Once I finish this, witnesses will convey just what I mean”—allude to, the closing line “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street when gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?”

/Hypocrite! !”(Lamar 2015). In a song that is in the process of being interpreted as an anthem of black power, critics recognize this as a problematic conclusion; it is the lyrical equivalent of shouting “black-on-black crime” in a debate over police killing, what critic Stereo Williams refers to as “the way he turns his gun on himself and his people,” rather than addressing the systemic and institutional policies that contribute to issues in the black community (Williams 2015). This is a valid criticism of a concluding line that is regressive and reductive to a complex issue, but concern over “hypocrisy” also has an artistic effect, and is grounded not in the speaker’s politics, but his personal psyche. The line confuses the song, and hinders Lamar’s own message by way of his insecurities. Lamar is agonized by his own feelings of guilt, so much so that the “you” he addresses with such contempt can shift, imperceptibly, between referring to the enemy and to himself. The speaker in the song is pulled in these different directions, and so too is the listener, unsure where political manifesto and personal reflection separate. Not only is this a feature of the song, it is what the song sets the listener up for from its very first lines.

Another common criticism of the album politically is aimed at the manner in which it handles sex and gender dynamics. Again, these are entirely valid and necessary criticisms that need to be pointed out. The critical listener must at all times contend with the sexual politics in the album as much as he or she cheers beside and commiserates with its racial politics. Medium critic Raquel Willis calls attention to this, voicing the difficulty in using *To Pimp A Butterfly* as a political meeting point for an entire community:

He discusses being a pawn for white capitalism and his desire to see more opportunity and growth for the entire black community, however, for all of his racial “consciousness” there seems to be little room in his conversation for where black women (and other black bodies) stand.

(Willis 2015)

The song “For Free (Interlude)” is an instance in which the personal sexual hang-ups of the speaker hang heavily over an otherwise lyrically impressive social allegory, and in which the figure of the woman and of the black woman is used problematically. The song opens as an ostensible lover’s spat taking place over a jazz track; the quarrel is vitriolic, humorous and packed densely with rapid-fire wit. The “argument” which centers around the male counterpart’s insistence that “This dick ain’t free” moves at a frenetic, frenzied pace, devolving into a stream-of-consciousness rant on his feelings of exploitation, moving so fast and in such a loose syntactical structure (though an impressively complex rhythm and rhyme scheme) that the listener, even in reading the lyrics, struggles to keep pace, gets caught up in the heat of the argument, of the speaker’s indignation, that when in the final lines the metaphor that tracks through the entire song is revealed, it comes as a surprise: “Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked cotton and made you rich /Now my dick ain't free /I'mma get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up /You ain't no king” (Lamar 2015).

While the song remains as a vivid depiction of two individuals, a display of masterful word-smithing and aesthetically of Lamar’s own rapping abilities, a pastiche of a spoken-word jazz poem, and an overt allegory brimming with double entendre and political outrage, the characterization of a nagging female lover as a metaphor for

American exploitation is problematic. The theme of sexual exploitation is central to the metaphor of economic and cultural exploitation of the song (“This dick ain’t free/Matter of fact, it need interest/Matter of fact, it’s nine inches/Matter of fact, see our friendship based on business/Pension, more pension, you’re pinchin’ my percents...”), and for the concept of the album as a whole, the “pimping” of the butterfly. Both “For Free” and the “pimping of the butterfly” suggest a possible reversal of the ‘expected’ power dynamics associated with sexual exploitation, that is, the pimping of a female figure, whether through prostitution or within the confines of a relationship, as in “For Free”. The use of these male figures, of the obstinate lover or the exploited rapper are on one level synecdoche or allegorical. The “I” in “Oh America, you bad bitch,/ I picked cotton and made you rich /Now my dick ain't free” is a representation in part of the African-American community as a whole, spanning generations and state lines. But the sort of sexual anxiety that bubbles to the surface in the album is also literal for the speaker, and muddles its political signaling. The most directly obvious factors in this muddling are the facts that the appropriation of this sort of sexual metaphor, particularly coming from a male artist, is difficult to reconcile; to argue that a rapper’s plight is comparable to being pimped can be trivializing to actual victims of sexual violence and exploitation. There is also of course the presence of explicit misogyny in the album, whether it be crass throwaway lines or relegation of female figures to a small set of one-dimensional tropes: a sexual object (“These Walls”, “Wesley’s Theory”), an Edenic figure of temptation or evil (America in “For Free”, Lucy in “For Sale”, “Alright”), or a mother figure (“Institutionalized”, “You Ain’t Gotta Lie”).

One finds themselves forced to juggle the desire to define *To Pimp A Butterfly* as political, protest art with the shortcomings of its sexual politics in the complex track “These Walls:” all at once an erotic love poem, a moralizing story directed at a rival, an admission of guilt, and an exploration of gang culture and the prison-industrial complex. These different aims do not just coexist in an indeterminate poem; they are at odds with each other and create a feeling of dissonance in the listener. The eponymous “walls” are at first given treatment only as signifiers of Lamar’s sexual and romantic encounters with the woman who is the subject of the track: the walls being representations of his partner’s body while they have sex. But the song, initially so neurotically fixated on sex that the very word “sex” is proclaimed like a title before the first verse, gradually shifts to other implications of walls. Lamar’s mastery of *entendre* is highlighted in lines like “Walls feeling like they ready to close in/I suffocate, then catch my second wind/I resonate in these walls /I don’t know how long I can wait in these walls /I’ve been on the streets too long /Looking at you from the outside in...” (Lamar 2015). In these lines, walls are a metaphorical representation of the physical sensations of sex, but there are also walls between the speaker and lover, a sense of emotional and spiritual enclosure or entrapment, that sense of being “trapped inside of the ghetto” that plagues the entire album, and a very earthly and temporal feeling of spatial suffocation, confirmed when the final verse turns its focus on the incarcerated boyfriend of the lover, and a rival of the speaker’s that killed his “homeboy” and was quickly thereafter indicted on a separate charge.

This kind of “gotcha” revelation at the end of a song is a technique found in several songs on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, and it serves here as in other spots to give a new

gloss to already complex lyrics. Lamar instructs the prisoner: “So when you play this song, rewind the first verse/ About me abusing my power so you can hurt” (Lamar 2015), and if the listener too follows this mandate, the sensuality and the eroticisms of the song take on a nauseating feeling with the knowledge that Lamar is brokering his influence for a kind of sexual-revenge over the murder of his friend. The disturbing implications are numerous: the objectification of the woman in question, the strange tie between grief over a fallen friend and sexual satisfaction. Indeed, the walls surrounding Lamar do talk over the course of the “These Walls,” reminding Lamar and filling in the listener on the subtext behind what is immediately apparent, drawing a complicated picture for both. What “These Walls” presents, then, is the deeply psychological aspect of the album, and its inseparable connection to, and clash with, the album’s political purpose. This does not dismiss or excuse the album’s problematic aspects. The listener should not compartmentalize and hide away these aspects, nor throw out the entire album, but instead recognize that these underlying tensions, which in cases like “These Walls” are even recognized by the speaker himself, are inherent to the album because they are inherent to the mind of the speaker.

### **“Rewind the First Verse:” Misdirection and Obfuscation**

Many of the conflicted or confused feelings the listener may have during the course of *To Pimp A Butterfly* are not the result of problematic aspects of the speaker’s own psyche, but rather the result of lyrical moves that seem to actually aim to throw one off. Songs like the previously discussed “For Free” and “The Blacker the Berry,” pull the rug out from underneath the listener, leading one to interpret the songs one way, only to reveal a new interpretation by the end of the song. These are examples of *misdirection*, one of the two major strategies Lamar uses to place his sense of self in conflict with his art’s social responsibility, giving full life to the notion of being “the biggest hypocrite of 2015.”

Upon first listening to the album, the overarching feeling conveyed is one of messiness, indeterminacy, and confusion. This is true on an aesthetic level, as Lamar weaves a tapestry of different genres and styles, including elements of jazz, funk, spoken-word, hip-hop and soul with a collage of voices, those of others and fluctuations of tone and affect in his own utterances. It is also true on a lyrical level, as the listener is kept off-balance by Lamar’s lyrical misdirection. My conception of misdirection is informed by Henry Louis Gates Jr’s linguistic and anthropological examination of “signifying,” or as he terms it “Signifyin(g)” in African American language and discourse, as presented in his book, *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates explores the concept of signification, a term and concept in the black vernacular homonymic to the linguistic term, particularly through the prism of the troping tales of “the signifying monkey,” a figure in black folkloric tradition that uses dissimulation and language play to trick the lion, always the antagonist of the tale. In his theory, Gates uses the figure and act of Signifyin(g) ( the capital “S”

and parenthetical “(g)” is his demarcation for the word as used in the black vernacular) largely as a way of examining intertextuality in black literature, the “signifying upon” of others’ work. While this kind of intertextuality is present in *To Pimp A Butterfly*, I will aim to use Gates’s language and ideas primarily to further articulate Lamar’s usage of “trickery” in his work, which bears resemblance to the “motivated troping effect of the disruption of the semantic orientation of signification by the black vernacular” (Gates 50). The aspect of Gates’s theory of signification I’d like to draw attention to is the “the free play of language itself” (53), the intentional play on and manipulation of signifiers that Signifyin(g) relies on to displace and obfuscate meaning.

Lamar enacts a similar obfuscation. Some of these instances have already been discussed, such as the subtle confusion of the signified “you” being addressed in “The Blacker the Berry,” and the evolving, unraveling metaphors of “These Walls.” In the former case, when the accusations against the self are introduced by the end of the song, the signifier “you” of lines like “I know you hate me, don't you?” retain the signified meaning of both the speaker himself, and some Other. Similarly, in “These Walls,” the signifier of “walls” carry through all of their various meanings simultaneously. We see, as Gates describes, not “the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given words yield at any given time,” but “the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations” (Gates 49). The listener must interpret the several possible associative interpretations to determine what exactly the speaker is saying, or to whom he is saying it. These songs also call attention to their own use of this misdirection and play with double-meanings: in “The Blacker the Berry” Lamar opens the song with “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015/ Once I finish this, witnesses will convey just what I



mean,” and in “These Walls,” he instructs the listener “So when you play this song, rewind the first verse/About me abusing my power so you can hurt.” These are both explicit admissions that Lamar has intentionally concealed and confused the meaning of his own words. We look to Gates’s conception of Signifyin(g) as represented by the Monkey folk tale: “The Monkey’s trick of Signification has been to convince the hapless Lion that he has spoken literally, when all along he has spoken figuratively” (58). While the listener of Lamar perhaps expects and recognizes figurative language rather than literal, the bending of one perceived understanding of language into another represents a similar strategy.

In the braggadocios track, “King Kunta,” there is again the use of lyrical misdirection and a play on signifiers that purposefully disorients the listener. The song is at face value an example of the combative rap that asserts the rapper as a figure of power and superiority: “King Kunta/Everyone want to cut the legs off him/ Kunta, black man taking no losses... I was gonna kill a couple of rappers but they did it to themselves” (Lamar 2015). But though the song is sung exclusively in the first person, and the speaker is not meant to be a character separate from Kendrick (like the friend figure in “Institutionalized” or Lucy in “For Sale”), Lamar conflates the identity of the speaker with the literary/historical/film figure of Kunta Kinte, the main protagonist of Alex Haley’s *Roots*. There is of course great irony to the commandeering of the name Kunta for the song from the perspective of a “King:” Kunta Kinte, a character kidnapped from his village in Gambia as a young man, was sold into slavery, and remains a slave for the rest of his life.

While the King of “King Kunta” avoids the threat of “everyone wanna cut the legs off him,” the Kunta of *Roots* has half of his foot cut off by slave-catchers after an attempted escape from his plantation. “King Kunta” provides a confused metaphor—Kunta is certainly a powerful and admirable figure to associate one’s own identity with, but he is not a King, and the adversarial theme of the song clashes with the ideals of black solidarity espoused in *Roots*, first in Kunta’s Mandinka home village and later as he must come to terms with a life of enslavement. This contradiction undercuts the strong-willed flexing of masculine power in the song, carrying through the subtext of an unsure and insecure Kendrick. This uncertainty is also evidenced by the mere use of a fictional character at all: Kendrick gives himself a moniker, King Kunta, to describe his ostensible dominace over his domain, rather than proclaiming himself “King Kendrick.” It is another form of play-acting, Kendrick acting as a character from a TV miniseries.

This subtext enlightens what may otherwise be simple brags of power and potency in another song. Kendrick’s assertion of his sexuality and virility (“When you got the yams/whats the yams/ The yams brought it out of Richard Pryor/ Manipulated Bill Clinton with desire”) seem to be simultaneously a cry of black pride and power but also an admission of sexual guilt and insecurity, the likes of which come to fruition more clearly in “These Walls.” Power and success has followed Kendrick (“from a peasant to a prince to a motherfucking king”) but with it have come negative consequences, yes from outside competitors, but more importantly from inside, (“The power that be”). All of this subtext of insecurity is glossed over by the swaggering funk of the song and confidence of its singer, lulling the listener into its feeling of exaltation. This puts the listener in an awkward and insecure position, humming, dancing, or singing along to the closing chant

of “We want the funk,” only to be greeted next by the solitary, solemn line “I remember you was conflicted” (Lamar 2015). Through the use of misdirection and dissimulation, extends this feeling of conflict to the listener. Like the mythical Lion Gates describes, we are signified upon, both by language and by sound.

### **If Mirrors Could Talk: ‘Double-Consciousness’ and Character-Play**

The other major strategy used by Lamar to complicate its message and create an affectively tense setting is his development of internal tension in the identity of the speaker. Rather than the “gotcha” moves of misdirection in which one perceived meaning is replaced or supplemented by another to the listener’s surprise, this technique focuses on rupturing the personal identity of the speaker, allowing the listener to be the witness of confusion, rather than the object that is “signified” upon. Lamar doesn’t subvert our expectations of what the album is saying or should be saying in these instances, but voices the stress and anxiety occurring in his own interiority as he is pulled in different directions. This stressing manifests itself in fraying of the very perspective and identity of the speaker. It is reminiscent of, though distinct from, the idea of “double consciousness” developed by W.E.B DuBois in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

DuBois described double consciousness as the sensation of “always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois 2). The “world that looks on” for DuBois is a world of white supremacy, one that exerts a pressure on the black consciousness to identify first as their race, carrying with it the weight of the entire constellation of racial power structures, institutionalized and otherwise. This pressure extends to the artist, torn in two by what DuBois labels the “double aims” of his or her world as a black person, and as an American person, in a white America:

The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a

race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. *This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people...* (DuBois 3)

The notion of “double aims” and “unreconciled ideas” here refers primarily to the role omnipresent racism takes in one’s conception of the self, how one is always doubly aware of their racial status and the baggage that comes with that awareness. The kind of “double-consciousness” present in the internal strife of *To Pimp A Butterfly* is not necessarily perfectly analogous to DuBois’s concerns of black interaction with a white supremacist world. *Souls*, written over a century ago, is situated in both a similar and different world. Racism and violence targeted at black bodies exist in each, but compared to *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Du Bois seems more concerned with establishing African-American identity within and in relation to white society. Lamar seems less concerned with the outlook and presence of white bodies than he is with total ownership of blackness, ownership of sources of pride and also, sources of anxiety. But the notion that race functions to play a constant part in one’s appraisal of the self is relevant. Just as DuBois writes of the “the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving” (DuBois 3) as a seemingly weakening force derived from the difficulty of reconciling an identity as a person, and as a *black* person, Lamar articulates the stress between his own cultural and racial identity, and his shortcomings as a person in relation to that identity. In “The Blacker the Berry,” he sings the line “I own black, own everything black,” but also “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015” (Lamar 2015).

Lamar tackles these internal stresses in less explicit ways, however, than simply stating his own hypocrisy, as he incessantly plays with shifting perspective, the dissimulation of who or what is speaking in a given moment on the album. Lamar's use of characters and play-acting, supplemented by his own voice and the voices of others, *acts out* Lamar's own versions of a double-consciousness that pulls him in separate directions. In *To Pimp A Butterfly*, the division of voice takes on several forms, and makes identification of the "speaker" intentionally difficult and misleading. There are times when Lamar will be in a full character, often explicitly stating an altered perspective, such as in "For Sale," when he recounts the conversation with 'Lucy:' "My name is Lucy Kendrick,/You introduced me Kendrick/Usually I don't do this/But I see you and me Kendrick" (Lamar 2015). An affected voice will often accompany these 'characters,' as if Lamar were telling a story. At other junctions, the transitions are less drawn out for the reader, as in "Institutionalized," in which two sides of a conversation between Lamar and a friend are divided into two separate verses, but without explicit mentioning of the change to the listener. There are the cases of Lamar interacting with voices that literally belong to another, as in "For Free," and his argument with a lover, or in the final moments of "Mortal Man," in which Lamar repurposes a recording of an interview with deceased rapper Tupac Shakur to enact a "conversation." And in "u," in which Lamar himself is the only character, the entire song is sung in second person, as Lamar bitterly compartmentalizes and debates with his own sense of self. These several types of disassociation of speaker and composer provide for Lamar a way to speak honestly not only of his own personal experience, but also of the political messages, without diminishing either. But it also becomes a source of that same tension: a literal

translation of the internal alienation expressed by DuBois's concept of double consciousness. All of the characters that appear in *To Pimp A Butterfly* are, at their core, manifestations of different sides of one speaker's interior life.

The aforementioned "Institutionalized" is one such instance of Lamar working through an internal struggle under the veneer of play-acting between characters. Structurally, the song is comprised as a conversation between two friends, Lamar, the wunderkind who has 'made it,' and his 'homie,' who remains "trapped inside of the ghetto." These are two distinct perspectives, the proverbial rich and poor, and in a way, two different iterations of Lamar himself, the famous rapper "K Dizzle" and the gangbanging old friend, who Kendrick sees his original, perhaps more authentic self. "You can take your boy out the hood but you can't take the hood out the homie" (Lamar 2015). The tension at the heart of the song, the attempted theft by Lamar's friend at the BET Awards, where the pair is the newest of the *nouveaux riche*, encapsulates Lamar's anxiety over his own ties to his background in a poor black community, and the perceived propensity for crime that accompanies these origins. Though the narrative here pertains to a body outside of Lamar's own, both perspectives have something to say about Lamar's own psyche. The conflicting perspectives serve as a check on the other, however, giving credence to both Lamar's feelings of shame over his roots, and guilt over his disdain for these roots. On the one side, there is Lamar's inflated sense of self-importance and his feelings of having outgrown his home:

I'll tell you my hypothesis, I'm probably just way too loyal/K Dizzle will  
do it for you, my niggas think I'm a god/Truthfully all of 'em spoiled,  
usually you're never charged/But something came over you once I took

you to the fuckin' BET Awards/ You looking at artists like the harvests/  
 So many Rollies around you and you want all of them (Lamar 2015)

The retort to these accusations of childish or thuggish behavior is a heartfelt, if not angry admission of unease and insecurity on the friend's part from the lavish wealth around him: "Fuck am I 'posed to do when I'm lookin' at walkin' licks?/The constant big money talk 'bout the mansion and foreign whips/The private jets and passport, presidential glass for/Gold bottles, gold models, sniffin' up the ass for" (Lamar 2015). The flaws and merits from each speaker's arguments are each given sufficient space to breathe; the embarrassment on Lamar's part, the resentment on his friend's. Lyrically, each verse is structured similarly, with cascading rhymes built within and between separate lines, carrying the sentiment, the pain, and the own sense of self-guilt into each subsequent line, reminiscent of the rushed tempo of an argument in which each side is airing out their grievances. The similar structure and flow imply that there is still some common ground keeping these two figures from being entirely different people, and reminds the listener of the fact that it is truly one mind, Lamar's, elucidating these arguments. The final lines of the second verse point to the main genesis of Lamar's conflict in the song: "Remember steal from the rich and givin' it back to the poor?/Well that's me at these awards/ I guess my grandmamma was warnin' a boy." His new power and status are what grant him the ability to effect change on a political scale, but the trappings of status inhibit that very effort. Can he effect change as a posh millionaire? Is it better to remain "trapped inside of the ghetto?" And how authentic can a leader be when his main concerns are those of someone who is wealthy and famous? These questions are not comprehensively answered by either speaker in "Insitutionalized," but each figure concludes their verse with the



wisdom of their grandmother(s): “Shit don’t change until you get up and wash yo’ ass, nigga.” Lamar seeks to avoid complacency and inertia, to find a place outside of the institutionalization of the social ills of the ghetto and the complicity of the powerful in those ills. Perhaps the cleansing suggested manifests itself in part here, by dissecting his conflicted feelings of current entrapment and survivor’s guilt through this play-acting.

The emotional climax of the album arguably occurs two tracks following “Institutionalized,” in the visceral sixth track, “u.” Nowhere else does *To Pimp A Butterfly* so directly evoke the idea of a double consciousness. The track is the most personal on the album, and the most confined, taking place inside a hotel room, the screed of self-loathing self-contained in the speaker’s mind. The interruption of the Spanish-speaking housekeeper knocking on the door only enhances, to borrow a line from “These Walls,” the feeling that “these walls feeling ready to close in.” Like its physical and metaphysical space, the song is lyrically and aesthetically pared down, its hook only the repetition of the single sentence “Loving you is complicated.” Most lines consist solely of an accusation from the speaker to a second person object; the extended, multi-faceted metaphors are traded in for straightforward reprimands “I fucking tell you, you fucking failure—you ain’t no leader!/I never liked you, forever despise you—I don’t need you!” (Lamar 2015). The effect of such unornamented and emotive lyricism, restricted primarily to couplets or other simpler rhyme schemes, is that the listener feels that they are hearing the speaker at his most bare. It’s a broken speaker, fragmented to the point of conversing with himself by the pressures of the outside world. “Abre la puerta! Abre la puerta tengo que limpiar el cuarto!” the unsuspecting housekeeper, annoyed, intrudes into the physical room and mental state of the suicidal “Lamar”, and into the

auditory space the listener shares with him. Indeed, “u” opens the door to the hotel room. “And if I told your secrets/ the world’ll know money can’t stop a suicidal weakness” the confessional concludes, and that is precisely what Lamar does in this song. The speaker’s guilt arises from primarily personal locus points; his failure to be there for his now pregnant teenage sister, his absence at the death of his best friend following a shooting. Noticeably absent from this song are political statements or direct references to Lamar’s identity as a black person. Aspects of his life in Compton like gang violence are of course related, but “u,” as an ostensible suicide note, is decidedly self-centered. References to a social responsibility on the speaker’s part are concerned with his ineffectuality and hypocrisy: “Where was your antennas?/Where was the influence you speak of? You preached in front of 100,000 but never reached her” (Lamar 2015). Lamar is pulled back from his public role, hamstrung by the personal, and by his difficulty to love himself. The self-hatred expressed is amplified by the confrontational structure set up by the split consciousness of “u.” To say ‘I am guilty of these things’ implies it as an act of penance, something that relinquishes and cleanses. But to say “Yes, I hate you too,” into one’s own reflection, a bodily and spiritual double, and have that same invective bounce back at your own body, gives no room for escape. Lamar concludes in “u”, “And if those mirrors could talk it would say, ‘You gotta go’/And if I told your secrets/ The world'll know money can't stop a suicidal weakness” (Lamar 2015). Internal angst is reproduced physically in a mirror image of the speaker’s own body, and this is a meta-representation of the way in which Lamar’s works, reproductions of his interiority, confront his own shortcomings and tease out his own feelings of guilt.

DuBois writes, “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois 2). In “u” and other songs, Lamar gives glimpses into the warring ideals that tear his speaker asunder: rapper and activist, celebrity and friend, “homeboy” and preacher, and though the “speaker” may vary the focal point of *To Pimp A Butterfly* remains a personal narrative and revolving around interiority. The different perspectives he raps from are often manifestations of this interiority, or revolve around Kendrick’s narrative and interact with him directly. Even in the case of the final minutes of “Mortal Man,” the final track of the album, in which Lamar appropriates words he himself did not compose, the expression of this internal tension continues. In these stanzas, Lamar constructs a question-and-answer conversation out of a recording of an interview with deceased rapper and activist Tupac Shakur. The sound bites Lamar curates from the recording are framed by questions posed by the “Kendrick” persona of the album. He asks for direct answers to some of the questions that harangue the album. “Do you see yourself as somebody that’s rich or somebody that made the best of their own opportunities?” he asks, and “through your different avenues of success, how would you say you managed to keep a level of sanity?” (Lamar 2015). The answers “Kendrick” receives from Shakur, are of course chosen by Lamar himself to best fit his personal struggles and political strivings. The answers, taken from the words of another, are Lamar’s attempt to find neat answers to messy questions going on in his own storming mind. But the quotes can only answer Lamar’s questions obliquely and incompletely. The final words spoken on the album are set to no music, and leave Lamar silent and waiting.

He “shares” with his interlocutor a meditation on the extended metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly: “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*” (Lamar 2015). Lamar speaks of a reconciliation between the caterpillar that is “a prisoner to the streets that conceived it” and the butterfly, “the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar” (Lamar 2015). It seems like this may be a quiet moment of resolution for the album, but this recital is followed by the haunting call for a response, and the silence that follows: “What’s your perspective on that? Pac? Pac? Pac?” The final picture left behind is one reminiscent of the image made by “u,” a single figure left alone, and unsure.

Through creation and art, and the use of character play Lamar has been able to essentially enter into a dialogue with himself, to take the varying sentiments on the interior and map them out, distinctly, onto an exterior plane. The result is not to clear up the internal tension, but to dissect it, and accept that though the “they are one and the same,” the different directions the speaker is pulled in may not ever be fully reconciled. *To Pimp A Butterfly*, on the whole, presents a work pulled in several directions, and beautifully so.

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The effectiveness in *To Pimp A Butterfly*'s status as an "album of contradiction" does not lie in the fact that it speaks of elements of tension and uncertainty, rather than resorting to a neat narrative or a clean, directed message. It does not take a fine parsing of the work's lyrics to glean Lamar's insecurities, the pressures he puts on himself, and the ways in which these pressures interact with his perception of the world around him. What is notable about the album, what creates its riveting effect, is the way in which the entire piece takes on this turmoil. The album is messy, sprawling and dizzying. In comparison to its predecessor, *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City* (2012) and its successor *DAMN* (2017), which each maintain greater aesthetic and narrative consistency, *To Pimp A Butterfly* might be described unorganized or incoherent. But it is precisely this disorganization that gives the album its life and its own form of coherence. As Lamar acts out his own sense of internal fracture, he places the reader in a similar position through play and misdirection. The listener *wants* the work to serve as a rallying cry for social justice and a provoking meditation on racial relations, just as Lamar *wants* to provide these things. The personal strife and baggage that the speaker brings, however, makes any message and any movement messy and complex, like the album itself. *To Pimp A Butterfly* explores this inevitable intersection between our ideal actions and our flaws that can never be fully solved. *To Pimp A Butterfly*'s penultimate track, "i," the mirror song to "u," was released as a single before the album's full release. The radio friendly hook "I love myself," (Lamar 2015), accompanied by an upbeat sampling of the Isley Brother's "That Lady," comes across in a vacuum as a mixture of corny and arrogant, an embodiment of the cocky rapper side of Lamar's demons. In the full context of the album, "I love myself"

reveals itself as not a brag, but as acceptance. Yes, loving is complicated, as Lamar sings in “u” and so is his art. Complication, however, is everything for the politically and personally authentic *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

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